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NAFTA 2.0: 17 years later Canadians continue to emerge as key partners for Mexico

# Canada's **New** World

Our nation's global entrepreneur magazine

Familiarity breeds confidence for Canadians like Sabino Ramos when it comes to doing business in

**México**



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*Photo portrait by Suzanne Sagmeister Photography*

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 Kathryn Engel



# Speaking their Language

For Sabino Ramos,  
embracing culture is the  
key to doing business on  
the international stage

KATHRYN ENGEL

*Sabino Ramos*

When Sabino Ramos committed to taking on all Latin American development for Canadian auditing software giant ACL, he did so cognizant of the magnitude of the task at hand.

The Vancouverite was raised in Veracruz, where he completed his IT and business studies at the University of Veracruz before ascending to the ranks of upper management in his work in audit management with two of the world's largest banks based in Mexico City, Banco Santander (formerly Banca Serfin) and Banorte (formerly Bancrecer Financial Group).

It was while he was working with Banorte in 1993 that Ramos's auditing department started using the Canadian company's software designed to catch tax cheats, find payment irregularities, and generally help auditors and financial executives monitor various taxes by reading and comparing up to 100,000 records per second.

Ramos says he was impressed at the time with the Canadian company and its software and, at the same time, he was becoming increasingly impressed with all things Canada.

"Right around the time I was getting more familiar with ACL, my wife and I were seriously exploring the idea of moving."

Ramos and his wife set out on a journey investigating the pros and cons of immigration, and honed in on what became their top three choices for a variety of reasons – England, Spain and Canada.

"We really thought about it long and hard because, unlike other people wanting to move, we really were blessed with an excellent life in Mexico. I had a great career with a very well-paying job as the corporate director of a bank with 1,000 branches and we loved Mexico, but we were really drawn to the idea of a new adventure and new opportunities and a new culture and lifestyle elsewhere."

In what he calls his 'due diligence' traveling abroad and researching his options, Ramos says it was Canada's great reputation, combined with its strong immigration policy, that swayed the couple. That, plus a visit to Vancouver.

"We really loved the city itself, and it helped that Canada was pretty aggressive for us in terms of its policy of openness to immigrant professionals."

The couple moved to Vancouver in 1997, and immediately Ramos approached, and was hired on by, the same company whose software his department introduced to Banorte Bank.

Eventually, Ramos took on the role of increasing sales across Latin America using his Mexican familiarity in business and culture as his main asset. Now Ramos travels to Mexico and throughout Central and South America as often as once a month establishing 'channel' or distribution partners, along with product and service training.

The company with ACL was established out of its Vancouver base in 1974, and was one of a handful of Canadian companies at the time that had a strong international focus right from the start. The software is used by half of the Global 500, the big four public accounting firms, all levels of government and banks in 130 countries.

*You have to connect with the client not only from the technology point of view but a cultural point of view, including language.*

~ Sabino Ramos, ACL

"As soon as the product was developed the company realized immediately that it had a potential demand in the international market, and that that was going to be a strong focus. Canada is still a tiny, tiny portion of our customer base, and we have many large corporations in Canada as our clients,

including the big banks. But in terms of our largest proportion of potential clients, Canada versus the rest of the world, Canada is one to 100. It's just about numbers."

Mexico remains an enormous market of importance in Latin America for ACL with over 500 clients including the biggest corporations in the country like Cemex, Walmart, BBVA, HSBC, FEMSA, Banamex, Grupo Bimbo, Pemex, Siemens, Telmex, as well as Banco Santander, which began using the ACL software after Ramos's departure.

Ramos says Canadian companies need to start realizing the adaptability of their innovation on a global scale and get more aggressive about those international opportunities.

"When you have a strong product or service and you have business opportunities abroad, you are so drastically cutting your potential revenues by not going after those opportunities."

But to do so successfully, Ramos says, Canadian companies have to do more than dip their toe in the water.



SUZANNE SAGMEISTER



“You have to have a strong vision internationally. One of the projects we have is to try to identify and connect our clients with ACL in a very selective way, including languages. Since the beginning, the first account

manager assigned to

Equally, says Ramos, Canadian companies need to spend more time carefully sculpting an edge in the increasingly competitive global market if they want to make serious inroads. Mexico represents ACL’s longest relationship with an international partner distributor and the company is now serving the entire country out of three distribution and training centres.

“After the U.S., part of the target was to start introducing the product to Europe, Asia and Latin America, almost at the same time. In Latin America, Mexico was the first natural starting place and remains our longest-standing partnership in Latin America.”

But that global growth hasn’t been without competition.

“In high-tech, there is always competition, so you really need to define your scope, your niche. You have to have a really well-defined solution to a particular area of problems, and you have to very clearly determine your potential in the international market, including sizing up the competition in your niche, and what you are going to do to differentiate yourself and offer unique solutions. The recent survey from the International Auditor Association shows in our own niche market, we have captured over 50 per cent of the market. I believe that, along with or focus on cultural sensitivities and familiarity, has been crucial for us.”



Mexico (1992) was fluent in Spanish and knew the local culture, which is one of the main reasons ACL has become known in Mexico. You have to connect with the client not only from the technology point of view but a cultural point of view, including language. In the international market in general, you really need to know the local culture, how you can approach your prospects in the best way, try to engage them and provide the best solutions for you and understand your needs and understand your culture when we communicate with them. To me, I can see in my work every day it is extremely important to make a real connection with my distributors and clients. Running the business for Latin America I need three languages, so part of my corporate strategy was to learn Portuguese. I now have daily communication with my channel partners and clients, including in Brazil. You have to stay that tuned in to be successful.”