



Cover Shots

Conversations with Leading Science and Technology Book Authors

[Home](#)
[Archives](#)
[Links](#)
[About](#)
[Contacts](#)
[Subscribe](#)


● Felipe Korzenny

Author, *Hispanic Marketing: A Cultural Perspective*
Florida State University, USA

May 2006



"Marketing means understanding people in their cultural context. Marketing is the science of making consumers fall in love with your product. You make people fall in love with you by understanding them, there is no other way."

I'd like to start off by finding out how you got started. I read you began your career by earning a BA in Advertising from Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. Were you born and raised in Mexico City?

Yes.

What influenced you to study advertising?

It's a long story. Originally I was going to study physics. I was very good in science and math, and so everyone told me that physics would be a great career for me to pursue. Unfortunately, the way that they used to teach physics in Mexico was very boring [laughter]. I had an interest in writing, so I would write my experiments in a more elaborate way than most people do. One time a professor told me that my writing was poetry and not physics. I walked out that day and never came back.

What university were you attending at the time?

I was at the National University of Mexico. That's where I started. After I left physics, I went on to the School of Journalism and started listening to lectures. That was in the late '60s. I wasn't so much interested in finishing a degree as I was interested in learning. I was very much into the hippie culture at the time. Being a Mexican hippie is probably not what you think it is.

What do you mean?

The hippie movement was almost non-existent in Mexico. We were looking to the US movement as something that was so romantic. Anyway, I started taking classes in journalism and theatre because I thought that was the way for me to go. I told my parents I was going to switch careers and go into theatre, and they said if I was going to do that they would not support me because that was for bums. So I went to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Mexico City and asked for a job. I took all sorts of exams and was very determined to make it on my own. They sent me to the Consulate in Chicago. I began working as an Officer of the Mexican Consulate in Chicago. I didn't like it. I was still very young. One day I went to give a talk at Northern Illinois University and when I finished my talk the professors and everybody else called me "*Licenciado*". In Mexico that refers to someone that has at least a BA. I didn't have a BA in anything, I just had a few months of being at the university in Mexico and then quit. At this point, I felt I really needed to return to Mexico and study because I was not going to make progress without further studies. I wrote back to my parents and asked them if they would support me in my studies and they said yes. I knew I would have a hard time making a living in theatre, so I chose something close to it, advertising and television production. I began to enjoy both, and I was good at it. That's what got me started.

Also In this Issue:

[Bruce A. Arrigo](#)
[Keith Brown](#)
[Jeffrey Aronson](#)

[\(Home\)](#)

How old were you then?

Maybe twenty.

Did you work in advertising while studying advertising and television production?

At the time, the BA in advertising in Mexico was much more elaborate than in the US. It required five years and approximately 260 credits. The first three years are full time at the university. You are studying eight hours a day, and there isn't time to work. The last two years are half time, so I began working in advertising. I actually opened an ad agency with some friends of mine. It was my first experiment as an entrepreneur. Myself and four friends opened an ad agency with \$500.00 each. We were very successful. By the end of the first year we were billing over a half-million dollars. At that time it was a lot of money. We started feeling very powerful [laughter]. Eventually I began to feel that I was not learning enough because the five of us did not know much more than the other. I sold my part in that agency, and bought a small part of another agency that was much bigger.

This is still before you graduated?

Yes. I was the account executive for VolksWagen/InterAmericana. I learned quite a bit. I did a few other things with that company, until a visiting professor of mine from the US asked me if I'd like to get a Ph.D. I told him I didn't understand the implications of getting a Ph.D, but it sounded like a good idea to continue my studies in the United States. The visiting professor also happened to be one of the writers of the show *Bonanza*.

Really?

Yes. His name was Robert Irving. He was the one responsible for my coming to the United States. Michigan State accepted me. At that time many people were getting Ph.D.s to avoid the war in Vietnam. There were thirty people that year starting the Ph.D program in communication. There were about ten international students, including me, and about twenty US students. Only ten of us finished and I was the only international student that finished with the group. It was very hard at the beginning, especially because of language issues.

Although you were fluent in English by then, correct?

I was relatively fluent, but it was difficult to compete in a classroom situation with people who have master's degrees from major universities and who were very sophisticated. The first six months were hell for me, and I wasn't sure if I'd make it. I was very determined, I said, "Either I make it or die, but I'm not going to give up." I did change my priorities a bit as I went through the Ph.D. I started getting very interested in development work, like with the US Agency for International Development. I started doing some work in Latin America during the summers.

What did you do when you finished your Ph.D?

I had a friend and former classmate of mine in physics who was very high up in the Mexican government. One day when I was visiting Mexico I went to see her at the National Palace. At that time I was the first Ph.D in Communication in Mexico. Now there are many. That was impressive to many people, including her, and so she asked me to work with her. I thought that sounded good, but in the United States I was also competing for a position at Michigan State as a professor. There were seventy applications and they eventually chose me. I told my friend in Mexico that I was going stay as a professor at Michigan State. It was an honor for me to be asked to be a professor at a major university. She completely understood, and asked if I could come to Mexico every month for a couple days to work. I did, and they paid me well for going a couple days a month to visit and do some work for them. It was fun because they would pick me up in a black Mercedes at the airport and take me to the National Palace. You can imagine how much fun this was for a young guy.

You were a jet setter!

Right, right! I felt so important [laughter]. It was fun and very interesting.

Did you meet your co-author and wife, Betty Ann, at Michigan State?

Yes. She was a returning student. She had been living in Europe and Africa for some years because her former husband was a famous architect. She was a little like a jet setter of Europe herself. She received a master's degree with Michigan State, while still in Italy. After she divorced she came to Michigan State to get her Ph.D in education. She was a graduate student in one of my classes when I was a teacher there. I thought she was one of the most interesting people I had ever met because she was so internationally minded.

Is she American?

Yes.

Does she speak other languages?

Yes, she used to speak fluently in Italian, French and German. But, you forget if you don't practice. The language that really stuck with her is Italian, because she lived in Rome for 12 years. And she's been to Mexico with me, and has learned Spanish.

You both went to work for Florida State University after leaving Michigan?

Well, much more happened before that. She was my graduate student and then she began helping me with research, and we wound up getting married. We went to Mexico, and came back to the United States. At some point I accepted an offer from San Francisco State University as a professor. I thought it was an interesting area to do the kind of research I was doing. I was one of the first people doing anything with Hispanic marketing in the US. After just a short time in San Francisco, I started to get requests from major companies to do research for them. I had to reject large offers because I had to teach my class. At this point, I decided to start my own company.

Did Betty Ann join you?

During this time, Betty Ann became an executive with Ford Aerospace, and then moved on to an executive position with Seagate Technology, until eventually becoming the head of Communication Training and Development for First Nationwide Bank. This was a \$30 billion bank owned by her former company, Ford. She was very, very good at climbing the career ladder. While she was at the bank the savings and loan crisis hit the US, and she had to lay off her own people. She began to get depressed, until one day she came home and said she was joining my business.

Was that business called Hispanic & Asian Marketing Communication Research?

Yes.

Did you start this company while still working as a professor?

Well, I started the company in my garage as a part-time thing. Eventually, I took a sabbatical from San Francisco State, Betty Ann joined me in the business, and everything exploded. We were nervous at first because we were afraid we wouldn't be able to match the current level of income we were both at.

But you did?

Yes, immediately. In fact, very quickly we started billing one million and then two million dollars; we got to almost six million dollars when we merged with Cheskin.

Are you still involved with Cheskin?

Yes, I'm still a consultant.

But you sold your portion of the company?

Yes, Betty Ann and I sold our portion.

After selling your portion of Cheskin, you moved to teach at Florida State?

Yes. Betty Ann was working in business development with Cheskin. She got tired of working twelve hours a day and told me that she was thinking of slowing down. It was a coincidence that

at the same time I got a call from an old friend who said someone mentioned my name at Florida State. He asked if I was coming to Florida anytime soon and it happened that I was. He asked me to stop by. I had an interest in going back to Academia when I was ready to retire. They offered me a position before I thought about retiring, but Betty Ann was ready to change her pace of life and it seemed like a good time.

At Florida State you are currently a Professor of Advertising and Integrated Marketing Communications, a Director of Graduate Studies at the Department of Communication, and Founder and Director of the Center for Hispanic Marketing Communications?

Yes.

What prompted you to write *Hispanic Marketing: A Cultural Perspective*?

When I came to Florida State I felt like I had to make a contribution. Otherwise, I didn't really need to be here. I thought that the university was going to be more of a place where I could make a contribution of some sort. It was a good forum for doing that. When I came here I announced that I was founding the Center for Hispanic Marketing Communication. They asked me how I was going to do it. I said it was already done. I started it that day. Having been an entrepreneur so many times in my life, I knew that was the way to do it, just announce it and make it happen. And it happened like magic, students came to help at no charge and everyone was very supportive. I started teaching my Hispanic Marketing course, and then started the certificate program for the graduate students in Hispanic Marketing Communication. It was approved by the university, and is the first in the country. We also offer the first undergraduate minor in Hispanic Marketing Communication in the country. Finally, I looked at the outline of my course, and said, I need to add a book! It was just obvious. I wrote an outline for the book, and emailed it to Jane McDonald at Elsevier. She wrote back and said there was interest, so I wrote a forty page prospectus. Of course, by that time my wife announced she was joining me again to work on the book. This is more of a trade/industry book, but it works well for my course, the way I teach it.

I know Hispanics are the largest and fastest growing ethnic group in the US. Do you know what the current Hispanic population is in the US?

Hispanics are now officially are about 43.5 million. The unofficial figure is about 50 million.

Since there are so many sub-groups with different countries of origins, cultures and opinions, what unifies US Hispanics besides language? How do you make a connection?

That's exactly what the book addresses. I got a lot of the ideas for the book from the questions that were being asked by Fortune 500 companies when we had our business. My academic background has helped me explain the psychological and motivational issues involved in Hispanic marketing beyond the language of business. Hispanic ad agencies were some of the first organizations that really made the Hispanic market become what it is now. In the beginning, Hispanic ad agencies were hired as translation companies. They would translate ads to Spanish. They grew and became increasingly sophisticated. The Spanish language was one of the first motivations to start this effort in Hispanic marketing. However, the Spanish language has become less important over time, and the culture has remained one of the main elements.

Among US Hispanics, is Spanish still the preferred language, or is it English?

Right now it's about 50/50, but it's going in the direction of English. Hispanics cling to the Spanish language because of pride, and also because the US has been very accepting of cultural diversity over the last twenty years. There are a complex set of issues that need to be analyzed to understand the Hispanic market. First of all, there is not just one market, as you said before. But not so much because of country of origin. Country of origin does not make as big of a difference as it sounds. What makes Hispanics Hispanic is their heritage from Spain. The Spanish dominated the Spanish speaking portion of Latin America for four hundred years. The Portuguese dominated Brazil for about four hundred years as well. The Portuguese and Spanish are very similar in their culture, except the language is not exactly the same. So the heritage of Latin America is so homogeneous because of the 400 years of cultural control that the Spanish exerted. Of course the

language is also a big part, but it is not the *only* part. Another element is religion. The Catholic religion is so prevalent in Latin America, that it also homogenizes people to a large extent.

So you don't have to market to sub-groups individually, you can market to Hispanics as a whole?

It depends on what you are marketing. For example, you can't market beans the same way, because beans are used, consumed and referred to in different ways throughout Latin America. On the other hand, you can market diapers for children the same way. It depends on the category. Food, in particular, is one of the most difficult categories. Food is more specific to particular countries. Even music has become Pan American.

Do you think that a person can truly understand a culture without being a part of it, either by being Hispanic or living within a Hispanic community?

There are different degrees. The fallacy actually is more common on the opposite side, the notion that if you are Hispanic, you can understand Hispanics. Many marketers think that by placing a Hispanic in a marketing position they are going to sell the products better. That may not be the case. You see, when you are a member of the culture it doesn't mean that you understand your culture. Culture is so pervasive that it's almost like the fish in the water. You don't notice your culture until you analyze it. So you don't have to be Hispanic to understand Hispanic culture and do marketing to Hispanics. However, if you happen to be Hispanic you have an advantage because it will be easier for you to relate to some of the issues. You have to study Hispanic marketing. I have a student, his name is Javier Rosado, and he's getting a Ph.D in education. He's taking my graduate course in Hispanic Marketing Communication. He had to go and give a speech to some colleagues in Jacksonville about Hispanics. He came back and said to me, "You know, I am fascinated. I realized that if I had not had this course, I would have talked to them from my perspective, without understanding that I am not representative of all Hispanics. Now that I am taking the course I can speak to them about Hispanics as a marketer, not as a member of the community." It's more complicated than it sounds. Another example is Rachel Newman, a non-Hispanic owner of a Hispanic ad agency in Los Angeles. She understands the Hispanic culture so much better than most Hispanics I know, but she is not a member of the community. Marketing means understanding people in their cultural context. Marketing is the science of making consumers fall in love with your product. You make people fall in love with you by understanding them, there is no other way.

What is the main contribution of your book?

I get calls from Procter & Gamble, McDonalds, major corporations and small companies, and they say, "I really learned a lot from this book because now I understand that marketing to Hispanics deals with the insights that help you link the culture to your product." That's what the main contribution of this book is. This book is about how to connect. Cultural insights for establishing deep connections with Hispanic consumers.

Who is the intended audience for this book?

It started off being for professionals, but turned out to be valuable for students and professors as well.

Since this book has been so popular, will you do a 2nd edition?

Yes, I think that will happen.

You've had a very successful and interesting career, what has been the most rewarding aspect of your career so far?

Starting and running my own company in the Bay Area of San Francisco. Watching it grow and being successful was very satisfying.

Do you get back to Mexico much?

Yes, often. I was there a couple weeks ago, and I'd like to go more.

What's next for you? Where do you see yourself if three years?

I'm not sure where I'll be. I keep very busy with the students now, and there is a lot of research going on. I'd like to write another book, in addition to a second edition of *Hispanic Marketing*. I would enjoy writing a book dedicated to cultural insights and how to get them. As long as I have energy I will be coming up with ideas. The joy comes from making them work. That is one of the best things you can do; making things happen.

[Click here to email this article to a friend](#)

[Click here for more information on *Hispanic Marketing: A Cultural Perspective*](#)

This article by Jacqui Tavis
j.tavis@elsevier.com