

**2006 Atlas Award Presentation
on International Public Relations**

*Public Relations in Latin America:
From Press Relations to Comprehensive Programs*

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**2006 Recipient
PRSA Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement
in International Public Relations**

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***Public Relations in Latin America:
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2006 Award Winner
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At the beginning of the modern era, public relations was chiefly a printed press process seeking to promote a product or company. It was then thought that the more press clippings one received, the greater success of the PR program. However, as time has passed, international public relations has made great progress in the world. Today, as elsewhere, we find sophisticated PR practices in Latin America.

Now, a PR executive is often at the highest level of management in major companies throughout the world, including Latin America. In addition, the world's largest PR agencies have established offices in Latin America to serve their multinational clients. Many international PR agencies are represented in the larger countries, such as Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, and have local representatives in the smaller markets.

Thus I am pleased that PRSA is taking note of the profession in Latin America. I have been a member of PRSA since 1962. My son, who now directs the Alonso Agency in Mexico City, is also a member. I recall with pleasure attending the PRSA annual conference in Honolulu, Hawaii some years ago, on which occasion I delivered one of the two reports dealing with international public relations. Today, it is my pleasure to share with you some comments on the status of public relations in Latin America and to cite some examples of the kinds of work our agency has been able to perform on behalf of international clients.

A decade ago, the late international PR pioneer in Japan, Taiji Kohara, received the Atlas Award for his outstanding work and I am happy to say that it was through Taiji that our PR agency in Mexico City was awarded the account for Nissan Motor Company. Nissan had barely begun to register as a company in Mexico. It did not yet have an office, employees, dealers, etc. It was our task to assist with every aspect of starting operations for Nissan in Mexico. Our client, the face of Nissan in Mexico, was Mr. Tetsuo Miyamoto, newly appointed president of Nissan Mexico. We assisted him with every aspect of establishing his firm in Mexico, including government relations, recruitment of personnel at all levels, obtaining assorted permits for construction, importation and help in establishing a dealer network for Nissan's new market. Initially, the new market was served by imported vehicles from Japan, but Nissan quickly moved to local manufacturing in Mexico.

Key to establishing a new automobile company in Mexico was public relations at all levels, from employee recruitment and training to government relations. The work went well,

and we assisted with the introduction of the Datsun line's new models, to the welcome of customers, dealers, employees and assorted government entities. At the culmination of introducing this new-to-Mexico manufacturer and its products, we had the pleasure of welcoming to Mexico the Chairman of the Board of Nissan, whereupon he supervised the final campaign details. It was he who had approved our original proposal to handle the process from the beginning with imported vehicles, dealer network establishment, manufacture in Mexico and popularization of their vehicles in this new market. I cite this practical case specifically to call attention to the broader work of public relations and its success.

A similar case was our engagement by the noted farm machinery manufacturer, Deere & Company. However, in this instance, we had the support and expertise of our good friend and colleague, John M. Reed, APR, Fellow PRSA, who at that time was in charge of international public relations at Deere headquarters in Moline, Illinois. The company was planning to establish an agricultural machinery factory in Monterrey, in northern Mexico.

We began by taking a group of Mexican agricultural journalists to Deere headquarters. They met with a number of corporate and engineering officers and with the Chairman of the firm, William Hewitt. They also visited various Deere plants and its research center. The Mexican writers attended special seminars to acquaint them with the nature of Deere's equipment and introduce them to the products that would be produced in Monterrey.

As with Nissan, we assisted with the inauguration ceremony of the factory and contacts with relevant Mexican government offices including the Minister of Industry. Appointments were arranged for Deere executives with various Mexican government officials. The media stories that were generated not only informed potential buyers of available equipment, but also impressed the government officials, who were happy to see Mexico so well portrayed as an investment site. The project has been a success from the beginning and extensions of the public relations activities for Deere were applied in all the countries of Latin America.

Interestingly, one of the journalists invited to Moline, Fausto Zapata, was also a member of the Mexican Congress. He later became prominent in President Echeverría's political campaign, working with the Peasants' Federation. Upon election, the new president appointed Mr. Zapata as Undersecretary of the Presidency, in charge of communications. Within a few months, Mr. Zapata, in turn, appointed me director of public relations for the new presidency, a position in which I remained for the six years of Mr. Echeverría's term. Later, I was asked by President Miguel de la Madrid to be his press secretary, a position in which I served for the six years of his term. Those two positions and experiences allowed me to apply ethical public relations principles at the highest level, an honor and pleasure for me as well as an exciting chapter in my career.

With Nissan, we crossed the Pacific Ocean and learned how to deal with Asian methods and manners of working. With Deere, we stretched from North America to the bottom of South America and countries in between. We also experienced working with Europeans by handling the PR needs of KLM, the Royal Dutch Airline. We held the KLM account

for over 40 years, giving us wide experience across the Atlantic. Our initial assignment was to introduce KLM into the Mexican market, with relations with the Mexican authorities of government and the Mexico City Airport. Over the years, we helped build KLM's reputation in Mexico for excellence and preferred destinations.

We gained a whole new insight when we began working for Columbia Pictures and later, for Paramount and 20th Century Fox. Our efforts in the motion picture field required us to add advertising and other promotions to our menu of services. We handled films from Europe as well as Hollywood, again broadening our experience internationally. As one might imagine, our work in the film industry was exciting and fun, as well as taxing!

I have cited some of our client work chiefly to illustrate the international nature of our profession and how we all need to be alert to the different styles and ways of working that we will always find in other countries and cultures.

Following the hard work and success of our PR agency and my personal experience serving the Mexican government in the office of the presidency, I was asked to serve as consul general at the Mexican Consulate General in New York City. It was exciting to live and work in New York, and I was able to learn a good deal about how sound public relations practices can both expand opportunities in managing such an office, and produce a deeper understanding of life abroad for a PR practitioner. Of course, I ran full-speed into the seemingly intractable problem of immigration flows and the problems as well as opportunities those flows produce. At the Consulate General, we had to help Mexicans solve immigration problems and secure solid footing for their life in the United States. At the time I served in New York City, there was no way of foreseeing the magnitude of the present problem, involving the governments of Mexico and the United States, as well as the lives of hundreds of thousands of Mexican and other immigrant workers and their employers.

During my tenure in New York City as consul general, the massive migration problem that the United States now faces had not yet developed. We spent much time seeking ways to help fellow countrymen regularize their residence by working with governmental authorities, police departments and charitable organizations. My prior work in public relations was of great value in handling some of the problems we faced. We made a major effort to educate American authorities at every level, those who sought to employ them, as well as helping agencies as to the nature of the migrant population.

One of the key elements of which we became aware is that many of the migrants crossing the southern U.S. border are not Mexican nationals. In fact, a substantial number of such illegal border-crossers are from other countries, principally from Central American countries such as Guatemala, Costa Rica, Honduras, etc. A rising number of others come from South America and the Caribbean. A proper understanding and path to a sound solution will require an accurate census of exactly who, and from where, the present tide of illegal immigrants originates.

In the past, the major countries of North America have found solutions to their transborder economic problems via the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA). That

treaty has worked well in the economic field, benefiting Canada, the United States and Mexico. Instead of panic, outcry and anger, what is needed today is for the affected neighboring countries to work out a sensible migration treaty to suit and solve the present dilemma. Clearly, the American economy demands workers for a wide range of jobs that are not filled by American residents. The jobs are especially found in the areas of field work, farms, factories and retail outlets. What is needed is a regularized manner for American society to fill these employment needs and for the countries of worker origin to keep control of the spigot of worker supply. In this troublesome arena, there is need for public relations practitioners on both sides of the question to come to the fore and use their talents of persuasion to ameliorate the situation that now exists.

I have no doubt that the International Section of PRSA, together with like-minded PR professionals in Latin America, can provide an important contribution to the solution to this mega-problem that can be characterized today more by heat than light! Once more, dear friends, PR needs to be ready to help bring harmony where there is now chaos. All sides now need to find a way of working together, with PR professionals helping to clarify the issues, leading to mutually beneficial solutions.

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The Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations

Established in 1995 by the International Section of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations recognizes individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to the practice and profession of public relations on a global scale. Through a substantial body of their work, recipients have demonstrated leadership in international public relations for employees, clients, institutions, governments, agencies or other organizations. Winners are selected by the Executive Committee of the International Section in consultation with colleagues in international practice. The Atlas Award is presented during the annual PRSA International Conference. As part of the Award recognition, each winner is invited to prepare a White Paper on a specific aspect of international public relations practice. This paper is made available to PRSA members at the Conference and via the PRSA Web site.

Atlas Award Recipients:

1995 – **John M. Reed, APR, Fellow PRSA**, United States

1996 – **José Rolim Valença**, Brazil

Taija Kohara, Japan (Special Posthumous Award)

1997 – **Harold Burson, APR, Fellow PRSA**, United States

1998 – **Lawrence G. Foster, APR, Fellow PRSA**, United States

1999 – **Dennis Buckle**, Great Britain

Jacques Coup de Frejac, France

2000 – **Gavin Anderson**, United States

2001 – **Barbara M. Burns, APR, IPRA Fellow**, United States

2002 – **Göran E. Sjöberg**, Sweden

2003 – **Daniel J. Edelman, APR, Fellow PRSA**, United States

2004 – **Sylvan M. Barnet, Jr.**, United States

Arthur Reef, United States

2005 – **Betül Mardin, IPRA Fellow**, Turkey

2006 – **Manuel Alonso M.**, Mexico

Mike Okereke, Nigeria