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Bridging the gap

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Bridging the gap

As the director of the North Carolina Department of Commerce's Mexico Office, David Stamey lives south of the border promoting, selling and educating Mexican consumers and investors about anything with a *hecho en Carolina Del Norte* label.

For the Tar Heel state, the country's 10th-leading exporter, the list is a long one and includes furniture from High Point, textile goods from Greensboro, even Winston-Salem-based Krispy Kreme franchises.

And Stamey, who earned a degree in economics from Furman in 1992, is a one-man marketing machine.

Pressing the flesh with the country's leading businesspeople, collecting and distributing calling cards, he moves in circles to which few have access. The former Furman basketball player also does the marketing grunt work — designing trade show displays and proofing and developing advertisements for newspapers and magazines.

Stamey's job is to help North Carolina businesses bridge the cultural and language divide in Mexico. He provides contacts, brokers deals and helps companies avoid legal and cultural pitfalls.

"It's very important to understand the culture," says Stamey. "Things move slower here. You must be able to perceive nuance. Living in the United States is a science, but in Mexico, it's more of an art."

By any measure, Mexico is a large market. Mexico City alone has a population of 20 million — more than five times that of the state of South Carolina. But there are economic hurdles. The gap between rich and poor is tremendous, and much of the country's wealth is controlled by a small portion of the population.

Describing the Mexican socio-economic environment metaphorically, Stamey says, "In Mexico, you either have a Rolex, a Casio, or you don't have a watch."

But the business climate is improving. Although most Mexicans have little disposable income, some are very wealthy and furnish their homes with

Stamey cultivates Mexican markets for N.C. businesses



RALEIGH NEWS & OBSERVER

David Stamey's success depends in large part on his listening and networking skills.

furniture made in North Carolina. In general, the buying power of most Mexican consumers is increasing thanks to a growing industrial base and lower interest rates.

Last year, North Carolina exported more than \$1.7 billion in goods to Mexico, compared to \$1.4 billion in 2003. Stamey recently brokered a deal that brought a Drexel Heritage furniture store to Mexico City's leading shopping area. But although furniture is a high-profile export from North Carolina, Stamey says that about half of the state's exports to Mexico are textile-related.

Twenty-eight other states operate trade offices in Mexico. Some include divisions that represent a single city, such as San Antonio. North Carolina operates additional trade offices in Frankfurt, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Seoul and Toronto.

Before moving to Mexico City, Stamey worked for four years as an international trade specialist for the North Carolina Department of Agriculture. The job, marketing the state's food and agricultural products in Latin America and Europe, was a good fit for

Stamey, who grew up on a 500-acre dairy farm outside Statesville, N.C.

In addition to marketing and producing milk, the family bred and sold prized dairy cattle. Stamey recalls how cattle buyers traveled from Asia, Latin America and other areas of the world to select and purchase the cows. The Stamey family hosted the international visitors and, in doing so, learned a great deal about different cultures.

A three-sport standout at West Iredell High School, Stamey earned a basketball scholarship to Furman, where he started his senior year as a shooting guard. After completing his basketball eligibility, he played one year as a receiver on the Paladin football team. He says one of the biggest highlights of his college athletic career came when he caught a pass in Kenan Memorial Stadium against the University of North Carolina, a team he grew up following.

After his Furman days ended, the 6-3 Stamey played a year of semi-professional basketball in Zaragoza, Spain, before joining the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and launching his career in international trade. Since that time he's visited more than 35 countries.

Stamey, who recently married Devon Oliver, says, "When I returned from Spain, the job with the Department of Agriculture was ideal. I spoke Spanish, I was familiar with European culture, I grew up in North Carolina agricultural exports, and I was an economics major."

No matter the language, though, Stamey says that the keys to cultivating successful business relationships are believing in your product and knowing how to listen and network. And he takes pride in his home state and in his ability to connect with and understand potential customers from different cultures.

"My lifeline is my database of contacts. The key is developing that database every day — not just having it but keeping in personal contact with people," he says. "I really love what I do. It's not just a job. It's an honor."

— John Roberts