



Gonzalez Calvillo Mexico's leading law firm with a global outlook

With the IBA shortly to descend on Mexico City, **Neasa MacErlean** speaks to **Hugo Peña**, Director of Business Development, Marketing and Communications at Gonzalez Calvillo.

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When the International Bar Association meets in Mexico City this September, a particular welcome will be given to marketing and business development specialists. Until the Paris meeting last year, there were no IBA events targeted at them but, says Hugo Peña Zorrilla, the Director of Business Development at Gonzalez Calvillo, one of Mexico's largest independent law firms, there are good reasons for that to change.

"A big number are attending because a lot more of them are client-facing." Some 120 marketing and business development professionals went to a session put on for them in the French capital, 20 more than expected. A similar one is planned this year. It is impossible to predict attendance levels in Mexico, but Peña and his team will be at its heart.

But if it has taken 30 years for marketing and business development to go from near zero to a mature presence in North America and Europe, the period could be much shorter in Latin America where that process is now in full sway. And, in Mexico, the timing could be further telescoped. The bridge between the North and South Americas, the country is benefiting from rising foreign investment levels. And, says Peña, "Mexico takes part in both the IBA North American and Latin American forums."

Peña joined Gonzalez Calvillo three years ago, back in the country after working as a lawyer and marketer in the US and UK. Looking at the world market for legal services from this country of 131 million people, he believes that the rest of

the world will start to catch up with the North Americans and Europeans.

“Other regions tend to be overlooked,” he says. “It is so easy to move around in Europe, or North America.” Staging the prestigious annual IBA conference outside those areas is part of its organisers’ plans to raise the profile of legal services elsewhere.

Gonzalez Calvillo, based in the capital and now expanding into Monterrey, transmits a Magic Circle feel from its website, talking about helping ‘clients solve their most complex and challenging legal issues’. It communicates that first rank confidence by saying that it has ‘challenged the standards and rewritten the full-service firm model with a solution-oriented approach, evolving the practice of law in Mexico’.

With its 20 partners, 80 other fee-earners and 100 more personnel, it has been classed as one of the top six in the country – “the Magic Circle equivalent”, according to Peña. Established 37 years ago, it rates as relatively long-standing, having celebrated its 35th birthday in 2022.

Its 35th anniversary, a project Peña called ‘GC35’, was the first major campaign for the business. “Over the year different practice areas and sectors had their own events - webinars, written content and social media. Then we had ‘GC Day’ in November 2022 - a hybrid event with 500 people attending from 25 countries, and with speakers from the largest firms in the world.”

Much of the firm’s marketing is business-to-business, developing profile with its largest, international counterparts elsewhere. Until recently, the US market was the main priority.

So, for instance, when Gonzalez Calvillo staged a diversity and inclusion hybrid webinar in November 2021, that took place in New York, a frequent location for its events. Some 100 people attended online and in person from 45 countries. Events have also been held in Houston, Chicago, Florida and California.

Watchers of the Mexican economy might wonder how a law firm could have stable relationships with its clients given the recent political changes of direction in that economy and its US neighbour.

Both facing presidential elections in 2024, the two territories are on roller coaster rides, with Mexico’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador due to be replaced at the end of his mandate in October, and Donald Trump likely to shake up international relations if he wins in November.

But Gonzalez Calvillo sees that both continuity and change provide opportunity. For instance, after President AMLO (as he is known) unexpectedly shook up the energy market by introducing a greater role for the state, clients across the sector suddenly began seeking ideas for contingency plans. The law firm regularly runs meetings for affected businesses.

“All the big players came,” says Peña. And, working with one of the sector associations, over the last three years it has been seeing its workload



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switch from private finance to litigation. This could happen in other areas as well, particularly if Trump returns to the White House in January.

Since volatility looks set to stay, Gonzalez Calvillo tends not to market itself on the basis of one of its departments alone: instead it demonstrates its ability to respond flexibly to its clients.

“We say ‘let us review your needs’,” explains Peña. “You will get a good blend of experts here.” This is a live issue in the anti-trust area now, for example, as the government moves to reduce the role of regulators and, not surprisingly, the firm recently ran a webinar on this subject, attended by 100 people.

Instability used to act as a barrier to investment, but activity is growing in Mexico to the extent that Peña identifies five areas of focus of international work – the UK, Europe, especially Spain, South America and its booming Fintech industries, Asia, and the US and Canada. The opportunities are vast.

The firm’s presence in Asia, particularly South Korea and Japan, are well-established having recently acted for the 12th largest bank in the world, Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation. The newer player on the block is China, which, says Peña, is “coming here now on a scale never seen before”. Going in the other direction, Gonzalez Calvillo is helping Mexican firms as they expand to other continents.

With a headcount of almost 200, Gonzalez Calvillo’s five-strong marketing and business development team is a measure of the importance the firm places in the growth strategies Peña and his team are delivering.

But, says Peña, our success also depends on the reputation of the Latin American professional sector as a whole – and it looks in good health.

One indication will be the numbers attending the Mexico City IBA annual conference in Mexico. How will they compare to the total of 6,000 attendees in Paris last autumn? And how many marketing and business development specialists will join the event that Peña is helping organise for them?

“We want to make sure that they feel part of the IBA world,” he says. “We want them to feel comfortable there.” Being at ease in these new marketplaces will be the first step for some firms in unlocking a new world of opportunities. ■

Hugo Peña is part of the IBA’s Business Development and Marketing Sub Committee running The High Tide event for marketing and business development professionals on 15 September. Registration and further information is available at www.linkedin.com/company/the-high-tide. Additionally, Hugo and his colleagues at Gonzalez Calvillo are organising a schedule of events throughout the IBA’s annual conference in Mexico.