

# **Mexico hires firm to change its negative image in U.S.; GOAL IS TO SUPPORT GUEST WORKER PROPOSAL**

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## **Body**

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Fed up with the drumbeat of news stories about drug wars, police corruption, border mayhem and illegal immigration, the government of **Mexico** has followed a time-honored course for anyone seeking an **image** makeover: It's **hired** a PR **firm**.

Rob Allyn, a prominent Dallas public-relations craftsman who helped shape Mexican President Vicente Fox's stunning election victory in 2000, now shoulders the burden of pushing aside a largely **negative U.S.** perception of **Mexico** as a land of drug lords and economic hardship.

Allyn's objective -- and that of his client -- is to display **Mexico** as a nation on the move, with a flourishing democracy and growth-oriented economy, indelibly linked to its neighbor to the north. In Allyn's words, to focus on "the good things that are happening in **Mexico**" and "correct some of the myths and misperceptions that are out there."

It's a daunting assignment.

### **Troubled borders**

The presence of nearly 11 million illegal immigrants in the **United States** -- more than half from **Mexico** -- has left many **U.S.** residents with the impression that **Mexico** is an impoverished, economically troubled land that can't hold on to its own people.

Turf battles between vicious drug cartels have turned a portion of the Texas-**Mexico** border into a war zone, prompting the **U.S.** government to warn against travel to the Mexican border town of Nuevo Laredo, center stage for the violence.

Last week, the sheriff of Hudspeth County in Texas reported that men dressed in Mexican army uniforms crossed the border to protect a drug shipment, and **U.S.** customs officials displayed a sophisticated tunnel dug under the border near San Diego and packed with tons of marijuana.

Carlos García de Alba, **Mexico's** consul general in Dallas, said **Mexico** turned to Allyn, who will receive \$720,000 for the one-year contract, to tell a more uplifting story. "We want to be recognized as a reliable good neighbor,

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partner and friend," he said. "And when you focus on just very specific facts . . . you're missing a lot. You're not looking at the whole picture."

The PR offensive will remind U.S. residents that Mexico is the United States' second largest trading partner after Canada, buying \$111 billion of U.S. exports every year. Mexico will also stress that its government is aggressively fighting corruption, promoting democracy and fostering greater economic opportunities for its 105 million citizens.

The campaign's over-arching goal is to strengthen U.S.-Mexican relations at a time when President Bush is pressuring Congress to enact a guest worker program for foreign workers, a top priority of the Fox administration.

The outlook for passage is uncertain, with a strong cadre of Republican conservatives vowing to resist any immigration overhaul that includes a guest worker program.

### Damaging incidents

The incident in Hudspeth County -- in far West Texas -- also created an uproar in Washington, prompting calls for an international investigation and inflaming suspicions that rogue members of the Mexican military are escorting drug shipments into the United States, an assertion the Mexican government emphatically denies.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, chairman of the Senate subcommittee on immigration, called the incident "a thumb in the eye to the United States" that hurts prospects for enactment of a guest worker plan. Repairing Mexico's image from a steady "drip, drip, drip of bad news," he said, "is going to take more than hiring a public relations consultant."

Nevertheless, Allyn's admirers in both the United States and Mexico believe that the Dallas executive is up to the challenge, pointing to scores of earlier successes, often against formidable odds.

Allyn, 46, is often described as a Republican strategist but he has increasingly displayed an international reach by helping candidates, political parties and corporations in other countries. Perhaps his most celebrated triumph was Fox's upset victory in 2000 over the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had held the presidency for 71 years.

After meeting Fox on a trip to Mexico, Allyn, whose 23-year-old Allyn & Co. merged into the Fleishman-Hillard public relations group in 2002, became a central figure in the campaign but kept his role secret to avoid the appearance of U.S. meddling. He taught himself Spanish and traveled in and out of the country for three years, using three different pseudonyms.

Allyn has made no attempt to hide his current role, but he prefers to keep the focus on his client rather than himself. That strategy hasn't always been successful. A small group of protesters aligned with anti-immigrant groups protested outside his office last week, complaining that his alliance with the Mexican government constituted an affront to "national sovereignty."

Allyn also drew limited criticism from U.S. Latinos, who felt that Mexico should have recruited a Latino firm to trumpet its message in the United States. "They should give Latinos a good shot at filling those positions," said Brent Wilkes, executive director of League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

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