

Diligence required to maintain vital Latin American ties

By RISA POLANSKY

As the "Gateway to Latin America" and the home to multitudes of Hispanic residents and businesses, Miami is rife with ties to Latin American countries.

And these ties often pack an economic punch.

"Latin America is our No. 1 trading partner," said J.A. "Tony" Ojeda, executive director of the Jay Malina International Trade Consortium. "Of the \$79 billion that we do in trade with the world, \$55 billion of it in the year 2007 was with Latin America."

Trade creates 105,000 jobs in Miami, he said, many of them thanks to Latin American relationships.

To maintain and bolster those numbers, the consortium hosts missions to other countries to promote Miami as a trade destination.

Officials choose countries that they believe offer increased opportunities for trade, he said.

The trips allow local business representatives to meet with high-level foreign executives in hopes of eventually forging deals.

"In the long run, that's going to produce results," Mr. Ojeda said.

The consortium cannot quantify the amount of trade that results from each outbound mission, he said, but he noted that trade continues to increase here.

"We look at the tangible results as we look at the end of each year at the increase of trade."

Though the impact of the missions cannot be directly

tracked, Mr. Ojeda said it's crucial that Miamians continue to travel to other countries to promote doing business here.

"If Miami were not out there doing it, other cities are out there doing it, and they're doing it aggressively," he said. "If we intend to remain a gateway community, if we intend to continue to be the leader in exports to Latin American countries... we must also ensure that our community is together and that we have the presence in these nations to continue to promote us as a trade destination."

The Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce also hosts trade missions designed to forge economic ties.

The program has had an economic impact of about \$40 million since the program began in 1999.

The trips help foster relationships between local businesses and businesses in other countries, often resulting in new deals, said Olga Ramudo, chair of the Global Linkage Initiatives Committee.

"It's a very cost-effective way of taking their business abroad," she said. "It's just a win-win situation for everybody."

Miami's large consular corps also contributes to economic growth here, players say.

Most Hispanic countries have consular posts here, said Nabil J. Achkar, secretary of the Consular Corps of Miami.

"The fact that they send ambassadors to be consul generals in Miami shows the importance that the countries are giving to Miami," he said.

Over the years, not only has



Photo by Maxine Uddan

Miami's importance is shown in countries establishing consul posts here, says Nabil J. Achkar, secretary of the Consular Corps of Miami.

the number of countries with consulates here grown, he said, but also, "consulates do not function solely as they used to function in the past in giving passports and visas... principally, they're economic promoters for their countries."

And with that change, Miami's business landscape has evolved, as well, Mr. Achkar said.

"You can sense it - just look at Miami International Airport."

With a consular posting often comes businesses from that country, airlines from that country and other economic gains, he said.

"It really is limitless what the consulates can do in promoting business between their countries and Miami. Look at the consulates, look at the airlines,

look at the banks."

Claudio Riedi, chair of the chamber of commerce's Consular Corps Committee, said "the chamber has recognized a long time ago that an important asset here in the community is the Consular Corps. These are the people who report home what's going on with trade and commerce in Miami" and bring business here.

The committee's "main goals are of an economic nature," he said, in that the aim is to build relationships from which economic ties can grow.

Many chamber members are "interested in interfacing with the Consular Corps," Mr. Riedi said, and "you will also find that the Consular Corps is interested

in interfacing with our members... it lets them connect with the trade community here in a very effective manner, so it goes both ways."

Some consulates offer also specific economic arms, such as ProChile, part of the Chilean Consulate here.

"What we do is help our companies, the Chilean companies, to get into the American market," said Cecilia Arroyo, trade commissioner of Chile in Miami. "When they come in trade missions, we do the agenda, we reach out to the importers or companies that might be interested, like retailers or distributors."

Having an office in Miami helps attract businesses here, she said, as does the Hispanic flavor of the community.

"The fact that there's a large Latin community here, and among this Latin community, there are a lot of Chileans... of course it's an incentive for Chilean companies to come here because probably they feel comfortable doing business here."

Miami-Dade also boasts an active "Sister Cities" program, through which cities here link with others abroad that have similar attributes such as climate, population and infrastructure.

"It means that you have cultural exchanges, trade mission exchanges, humanitarian exchanges," said Shelly Fano, chair of Miami-Dade's Sister Cities Coordinating Council.

The program "plants the seed" for economic connections, she said.

"When you have the incoming missions, obviously that helps the local economy, the hospitality industry."