

# Saying "sí" to business opportunities

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Manny and Vicky Gonzalez are reminded each day that it isn't only Spanish speaking people who stop to purchase Mexican ("tortas") sandwiches at their two restaurants in Minneapolis.

"A lot of Minnesotans have learned that there is more to Mexican food than tacos," said Manny, who with his wife started Manny's Tortas along Lake Street in 1999.

In the past century, long-time Minnesota families learned there was more to Italian cuisine than pizza, and that Chinese food is regional and far more complex than chow mein. Now, Minnesotans with newly acquired tastes for the Gonzalez's Mexican sandwiches drive from throughout the Twin Cities metro area to their two shops in Minneapolis' Mercado Central and Midtown Global Market.

U.S. Census data from 2010, anecdotal evidence about immigrant entrepreneurship, and a recently released study from the Immigration Policy Center show Minnesota is rapidly changing. Days of sputtering along and resisting change should be behind us. New Minnesotans are changing the demographic portrait of the state and communities. New ethnic entrepreneurs are changing the mix of businesses and the products and services being offered in commerce.

Hector Garcia, executive director of the Chicano Latino Affairs Council (CLAC), refers to the benefits of this commerce as "cultural complementarities." The long established Minnesota society learns from immigrants and refugees entering the state in search of opportunities, he said, and new arrivals learn from established businesses, groups and people.

What's more, new Census data show that immigrants now comprise 8.3 percent of the Minnesota workforce. From them, Garcia said, existing Minnesota businesses and its large corporations gain knowledge for opening even more trade and business relationships with countries and businesses abroad, paving the way for even more economic activity.

The never-ending task for CLAC and other government agencies, nonprofit organizations and community leaders is to educate people to see new arrivals to the state and to business activity as "assets," and not "liabilities" that need services, he said.

This year, 2012, is the next scheduled survey of business owners in America by the U.S. Census Bureau. Its findings should reveal explosive growth by ethnic entrepreneurs since the last survey in 2007.

Data on this growth is mostly anecdotal but was examined in a Minnesota 2020 November report. It showed the Hispanic/Latino community is reviving business activity in Willmar, Worthington and various other rural Minnesota communities, as are ethnic entrepreneurs throughout neighborhoods in the Twin Cities metro area.

Tom Webb, writing in Sunday's Pioneer Press, observed that the combined Hmong Village and Hmongtown Marketplace in St. Paul have more merchants and service providers on site than the Mall of America, for instance. Garcia said the 2012 survey of business owners should provide similar information for Hispanic/Latino owners. The 2007 survey showed Latino-owned businesses had \$1.6 billion in revenue and employed 5,970 people. Both figures are expected to swell in the coming study.

From anecdotal evidence, business startups from the ethnic communities are believed to be young and within the five-year range from the last business owner survey. That makes Manny's Tortas, now entering its 13th year, a long established enterprise both by restaurant standards and by ethnic

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ownership experience.

That baker's dozen of years experience in Minneapolis gives Manny Gonzalez a perspective on how economic activity builds and how markets change. When the Gonzalez family first opened shop in Mercado Central (1515 East Lake Street), most of the customers were fellow Hispanics, he said. Now, the customer base is "a good mix of everyone who wants a good, different sandwich."

This mix of customers spills over on Minnesota and Minneapolis economies. Manny and Vicky Gonzalez now employ 12 people.

Much of the Immigration Policy Center report for Minnesota is gathered from earlier government and academic studies referenced here before. New findings, however, include:

The 2010 purchasing power of the Latino community in Minnesota was pegged at \$5.1 billion, a 909.5 percent increase since 1990, according to research by the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia. The Asian community in Minnesota had purchasing power of \$5.9 billion in 2010.

Roughly one in 11 Minnesotans are Latino or Asian, the IPC center said. The Latino share of Minnesota's population grew from 1.2 percent in 1990, to 2.9 percent in 2000, to 4.7 percent (249,587 people) in the 2010 Census. The Asian share of the population grew from 1.8 percent in 1990, to 2.9 percent in 2000, to 4.0 percent (212,423 people) in 2010.

The IPC findings show the future for Minnesota is even brighter. It cited 2009 data where 86.3 percent of immigrant children in Minnesota are U.S. citizens, including 90.3 percent of Latino families' children. And it showed 79.1 percent of all immigrant children were "English proficient" that year, including 84.8 percent of Latino children.

That strengthens Garcia's argument that our new Minnesotans are assets, not liabilities. In basic business terminology, we must assure that our education system and our other institutions do not waste our assets.

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