

An Interview with Peter Guzman

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Peter Guzman, President and CEO of Latin Chamber of Commerce, and was conducted on 1/14/22 by Magdalena Martinez and John Hudak. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Peter Guzman

SPEAKERS

Peter Guzman, Magdalena Martinez, John Hudak

Magdalena Martinez 00:05

Okay. So let me just reaffirm that, because I just started the recording that Peter Guzman agrees to opt in to have his identity in quotes included. Okay, is that correct? Peter?

Peter Guzman 00:18

That is correct.

Magdalena Martinez 00:19

All right. Thanks so much, Peter. So let's just kick this off. And I'm going to take the first half, and then John is going to pick up the other half, if you can just describe to us your position within your organization.

Peter Guzman 00:32

Yes, I am president and CEO of the Latin Chamber of Commerce Nevada. And I have been for now, January 1st - my sixth year.

Magdalena Martinez 00:43

That's right. Time flies. And during the pandemic, how do you see your role and the role of the Latin Chamber?

Peter Guzman 00:51

Well, I see our role. Well, my role is to lead the organization, and to make sure that it is staying relevant and staying to its core mission, the organization during the pandemic, was a source of resource a resource for small business, a resource for the community, to make sure that the small business community is staying in touch with opportunities, and knowledge, and the community at large. Because, you know, we do serve, we are a chamber of commerce, and our focus is small business, but of course, we emphasize caring about our community. So we're also a resource for vaccines, masks and everything else.

Magdalena Martinez 01:49

And along the same lines, Peter, can you describe the biggest challenges that you have faced and the people that you represent have been posed by the COVID recession?

Peter Guzman 02:02

Well, let me ask you, I mean, do you want me to speak about the Chamber? Or about the people we represent?

Magdalena Martinez 02:10

Both.

Peter Guzman 02:11

Okay. So the challenge from an organization from the Latin Chamber is that, you know, we thrive with in person, contacts, events, and that nature, and very quickly, literally from, I believe it was from Monday to Thursday, I told the staff, we're going all virtual. And so we had to pivot and go virtual, and to be honest with you, not to minimize the pandemic, because it's been a disaster.

But from a chamber standpoint, doing that pivot, and staying relevant, and still growing during the pandemic, has been something that we were able to do. So I'm very proud of that. From the community standpoint, from the small business community, it's been a disaster, or at least part of it definitely was a disaster.

Closing the economy was obviously a disaster. If you're a small business, and you can't open your doors, then you can't earn revenue, and you can't sell products. And you know, that's a disaster. And so we did all we could to help those businesses get access to capital that became available, to be able to stay open and, you know, keep the doors going, keep people employed. So from that standpoint, you know, that that really affected, the pandemic affected us in that matter.

Magdalena Martinez 03:51

Now, from your perspective, Peter, which groups do you think were hardest hit by the COVID recession? And in what ways did the Latin chamber have to pivot? In terms of its goals to accommodate these groups that were hardest hit?

Peter Guzman 04:07

Well, that's a you know, that's an interesting question. So from a pandemic COVID standpoint, I think the minority communities were hit hardest. And were, quite frankly, last to be served or late to be served. And there's a lot of reasons behind that. And no fault, I think intentionally.

But, you know, there are things that exist in the Hispanic community that don't exist in other communities, fear - immigration fears, you know, being the leading one, and so that created problems. And so, for example, when masks came out, you know, the Latin Chamber received over 25,000 masks before because, you know, I said to those in leadership roles that, my community, they're not getting masks, you know? And so we went deep into the community and delivered masks and then over a couple of weekends, you know, we're able to deliver over 25,000 masks. So that was a pandemic problem that's unique, somewhat unique.

But definitely, the minority groups definitely got hit hardest, especially in the beginning. From a business standpoint, it's interesting. The Hispanic community, although hit hard, I believe that they weren't because of their ability to pivot. Because they come from, listen, pivoting is essential in business. And a lot of our immigrants, a lot of Hispanic immigrants, entrepreneurs, come from chaotic places already. So they were used to pivoting if they came from, you know, Central America, Mexico, where, you know, the structure is different from America.

And so that they were able to pivot quickly during the pandemic, the time they weren't able to pivot was when we closed the economy, that hurt everybody. That hurt everybody. But once we were able to open doors, I saw, we saw Hispanic businesses bounce back very quickly. Why? Because they know how to pivot. They have an incredible work ethic, family members had to jump in, and maybe do the work that employees did that no longer work there. But they pivoted, and they found a way to do it.

Magdalena Martinez 06:45

That's really helpful. And along those same lines, Peter, were there collaborative efforts across institutions or agencies as you saw many of your member organizations pivoted? You talked a little bit about helping them to access equity, and loans. Can you talk a little bit more about those types of collaborative efforts and or initiatives?

John Hudak 07:11

Peter, can I jump in quickly, just with a follow up there? Did, obviously there was a lot of that type of collaboration happening in Southern Nevada. I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about what type of assistance might have happened with some of the national level chambers to assist local affiliates?

Peter Guzman 07:11

I think one of the shining, bright lights of the pandemic is the way groups did come together and collaborate and do a pivot. You know, the other chambers, we all got together, we went after grant dollars to be able to give out to businesses, we collaborated in providing information to all the small business community and the communities at large, who needed access to capital access to vaccines, access to masks. So the collaboration, I think, is one of the shining bright lights of the pandemic.

Well, we have a tremendous relationship with the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. So yes, we work together. On a national level, we collaborated, and they were able to bring us Wells Fargo, for example, to provide funding for some very important programming during the pandemic. So that's really an example of a national type of collaboration.

John Hudak 08:42

Nice, thank you.

Magdalena Martinez 08:45

And so here, along the same lines at the federal level and local levels, from your perspective, what did the different levels of the government do well, and not do well, during the pandemic? And during the COVID recession?

Peter Guzman 09:01

Can you repeat that?

Magdalena Martinez 09:02

Yeah, sure. In your opinion, what did different levels of the government do well, and not do well, during the pandemic?

Peter Guzman 09:16

I mean, I almost hate to criticize, because none of us knew this was coming. None of us have ever gone through it. And so, the criticisms, you know, I'm not much of a, I'm not much of a criticizer, I'm more of a solutions guy.

I think, let me start with some bright, bright parts. I think that from the state level, communicating fairly quickly with the chambers, and ground level, grassroots organizations, I think, I think they did a good job, certainly locally. The county did an amazing job. Counting, you know, Commissioner Kirkpatrick really jumped in and worked really, really hard. And I think the county worked very, very hard and getting dollars to small businesses to get policies passed through quickly, so that they can get to small businesses quickly.

Because everything was happening so fast. So, uh, and I know, the City also did a grant program, and, and, you know, jumped in quickly to help businesses. You know, listen, looking back. There is room to question whether a closure helped or hurt more. So I think that and I'm not criticizing because I wasn't in a position to have to make those decisions. But I think that looking back, that's something that we could probably look at, and for future, you know, whether that really did any good or not, or did it do more harm?

And certainly, the small business community feels like there came a point where they were competing with the government for employees, because the federal government was giving a lot of money out for unemployment, giving an extra amount of money. And there was a pivotal moment there where, okay, maybe that should have been pulled off. And people needed to get back to work in order to help the recovery happen quicker.

Magdalena Martinez 11:28

John, do you have any follow up questions?

John Hudak 11:30

I did not, Magda. Thank you.

Magdalena Martinez 11:33

The next question, and I'm going to post it here in the discussion. Are there groups in the community or otherwise, that helped the Latin Chamber during the pandemic? I think you've touched a little bit on that, right? And maybe if you could talk a little bit more about that. You mentioned the Clark County Commissioners, the other local chambers. Anything else that comes to mind?

Peter Guzman 11:59

Well, I think that certainly the LVGEA. Just, you know, certainly jumped in all the chambers. I think that was mostly the collaborations.

Magdalena Martinez 12:23

And then in thinking about...

Peter Guzman 12:25

Certainly should say, Immunize Nevada, they certainly helped us with a lot of immediate immunization programs, vaccine programs.

John Hudak 12:36

Peter, if I can follow up on that you had mentioned earlier, about some of the hesitance particularly in specific parts of the community. I assume undocumented individuals would fall into that around a variety of issues interfacing with the government. I assume that was true with vaccinations as well. Was there a group that really led the way to help break down some of that hesitancy or some of those concerns for those communities?

Peter Guzman 13:09

Well, I would say Casa de Inmigrante, which is an extension of the Latin Chamber of Commerce, by the way, they did an amazing job and continue to do an amazing job. Luz Marina over there is amazing. And she does incredible work, especially with the undocumented community. And so Cassidy Megan, is one that comes right up to the top.

Magdalena Martinez 13:39

Peter, I don't recall if you were at the Chamber, you were not the chamber president during the Great Recession.

Peter Guzman

I was a board member then.

Magdalena Martinez 13:57

Good, very good. Okay. So if you can just talk a little bit about the differences in your line of work or with your engagement with the Latin chamber between the Great Recession and the COVID Recession?

Peter Guzman 14:07

Yeah, I think the Great Recession was, you know, certainly more man-made. I mean, it was bad policies that led to the Great Recession. Especially in the lending, and Wall Street sectors. You know, I'm in real estate, I have been all my life. And so a lot of that was driven by just sheer bad policies, bad lending policies. This was the COVID recession, obviously, this is a pandemic, it's a virus, nobody saw it coming.

You can't really, you can't really attack it by, you know, federal policies. So it's a little different in that manner. Certainly. They're hurting small businesses, you know, they can't distinguish the differences. You know, if your doors are shut or shut. If there's no money, if there's no people spending money, you know, that affects. So in that regard, they're the same.

Magdalena Martinez 15:18

Now thinking about the Great Recession, were there any policies that you think could have helped during the COVID? Recession? Were there any policies, federal or otherwise, that you think these were helpful? That we could have learned from that for the COVID? Recession? And if so, what? What might those be?

Peter Guzman 15:44

Yeah, I'm not really positive that there was a policy. Are you saying, are you asking if there were policies in the Great Recession? That could help now?

Magdalena Martinez 15:53

Yes, that could inform today?

Peter Guzman 15:57

Listen, access to capital has always been and continues to be the key to, to everything to all small business and entrepreneurship, you know. Look, there has to be thriving lending policies for the entrepreneurs and small businesses to thrive.

John Hudak 16:22

Peter, a quick follow up there. And I certainly don't want to put words into your mouth. But do you think that because the source of the Great Recession started in capital markets, that that made it a little bit more challenging in terms of coming out of it, particularly for communities of color, business owners of

color, than it did in this recession? Or do you think there were similar effects in both recessions that resulted in similar outcomes?

Peter Guzman 16:52

I think there's some similar effects and outcomes, but I certainly agree with your first statement.

John Hudak 17:00

Thanks.

Magdalena Martinez 17:02

John, I'm going to hand it over to you now, if you want to pick up the remaining questions?

John Hudak 17:07

Sure, no, absolutely. You had mentioned earlier, Peter, that the Hispanic community, at least in Southern Nevada, but I assume it's true in other areas of the country as well. We're pretty effective at pivoting, based on where they come from the type of life experience a lot of business owners have had. But we know that the recession hit some places in some communities in some sectors harder than others. Among your membership, can you talk a little bit about how the recession might have been harder or easier for certain sectors, certain occupations, or even perhaps certain geographic areas within southern Nevada?

Peter Guzman 17:55

Well, certainly the recession hit my restaurant members, it seems to be the hardest. And continues to hit them hard. The restaurant sector. But again, and I am very hesitant when I talk about this, because I in no way want to minimize the devastation. But the truth is, my members recover quickly, quickly, and continue to to recover. And I think a lot of that goes back to work ethic, work ethic and ability to pivot ability to identify the needs. Certainly our grocery stores are still doing well. And, you know, a lot of that is because there was money in the economy, you know, federal money. I don't think anybody can deny that. That the resources in terms of capital that were divided out into the communities across this country, it certainly helped, I mean, kept the economy you know, going.

John Hudak 19:14

One of the parts of this project, I'm going to follow up quickly on that answer, Peter, one of the real takeaways that we want from this project is to essentially understand best and worst practices. What went well, what went poorly? It sounds like the agility of the Hispanic community is probably part of a bigger story to tell about how to do things right, when essentially the world is just going to hell.

Peter Guzman 19:45

I think you're spot on. In the end, it is a story to tell and the agility is real. Again, not to minimize the devastation, I mean, of course, we had our own set of unique problems. Many people living in the same

household not vaccinated, no masks, you know, that's certainly created challenges. But in terms of agility, pivoting, rebounding, yeah, that's a story to be told they're pretty awesome.

John Hudak 20:19

Thank you, thank you for that, one of the things that we saw in different areas of the country. And I know it was true in Southern Nevada as well. There were certain larger businesses that were trying to set a tone to help other workers, workers within their industry, workers in other industries. Were there some specific businesses or groups of businesses that really jumped out to you, as really successfully focusing on helping workers, while COVID was really at its worst and the recession as well?

Peter Guzman 20:54

Okay, I need you to repeat that. I'm sorry.

John Hudak 20:56

Sure. Sorry about that. Um, are there certain businesses or groups of businesses in Southern Nevada that you think or you saw really standing out in terms of helping their workers and helping workers across the region during the depths of COVID? And the recession?

Peter Guzman 21:14

Well, I think nonprofits and chambers did that. But I, you know, I think our gaming industry, certainly, you know, tried as quickly as they can, this is something that nobody knew about, nobody understood. But I think that the gaming industry, you know, between getting masks right away, and testing. I think they, you know, responded as well as they possibly could. I think smaller businesses just didn't know what they were dealing with.

John Hudak 21:49

Sure. On that point, in particular, how well recognizing and being sympathetic to the fact that small businesses were, in some ways flying by the seat of their pants it at some points, how well do you think small businesses were advocating for themselves, whether it was to government, or whether it was to your organization, so you were better aware of just what those community needs were?

Peter Guzman 22:16

Oh, I think they were advocating tremendously. I think they were. Yes, absolutely. We heard from them right away. And we heard from the restaurant association, retail association, we developed a huge group that would meet weekly by phone to talk about all of this and share information. So yeah, I think that was a strong point.

John Hudak 22:41

With that, that information flow, was it well received in state and local government, from your organization and from the businesses themselves?

Peter Guzman 22:52

I think it was, I think it was very appreciated.

John Hudak 22:56

I'm pivoting a little bit to sort of the numbers. And if you have specific numbers, great, but if even if you have estimates, how has the COVID 19 pandemic affected small business closure rates across the community, and then specifically in the community that you represent?

Peter Guzman 23:18

Again, in my community, I haven't seen a whole lot of closures. Okay. I haven't seen a whole lot of closures. But remember, I'm dealing with a very, you know, large sector, a lot. A large sector of my membership is very small businesses, and they're able to pivot and get through. So we didn't see a lot of closures to be honest with you.

John Hudak 23:39

One of the of...I mean, we're in a period of recovery now, although Omicron is making things a little bit different, difficult, at times, one of the things that we are seeing across the country are businesses, particularly small businesses, just struggling to hire people, as they try to get back to normal. Can you talk a little bit about what that experience has been like? For members of the chamber?

Peter Guzman 24:06

Yeah, and so there's an area where, because of the work ethic, and I think because of maybe the DNA, you know, Hispanic businesses get family members and start working. And so that's their pivot. Their pivot was, you know, what, everybody in the households got to work this business now. And so we saw a lot of that in landscaping and small shops and things of that nature.

But my non-Hispanic membership, which by the way, 32% of my growth over the last four years has been non-Hispanic. That's been a real challenge and restaurants are a real challenge. Some people don't want to go back to work because of, you know, fear of COVID. Some don't want to go back because of you know, the pay doesn't, you know, doesn't equal the risk. And then there's childcare issues. And then there was, like I said, you know, unemployment plus an extra \$400 a week, that just, you know, that really killed a lot of small businesses, to be honest with you.

John Hudak 25:17

Sorry, I'm jotting some notes down as we talk. I'm gonna circle back a bit to a bigger picture issue. What do you think were three to four big things that have happened, that have really changed within your organization, since the onset of the pandemic, that you think is going to help the organization be successful in the future and to deal with future crises?

Peter Guzman 25:46

Yeah, I would say one that just stands out immediately is the hybrid, the hybrid situation; that is virtual life hybrid, that's here to stay with me now. Because the one thing I learned from the pandemic is, I like virtual, and so do a lot of other people. And the ability to be able to send out a message quicker than setting up an appointment for next Tuesday at 8:30. When I can do it right now on Zoom, now has to be part of your business plan as a business person. That's what we're teaching at the Latin Chamber. And I profoundly believe that.

So that's a big ticket item that to me stands right out, again, understanding the access to capital, and understanding even more now, how difficult it is for small businesses, especially small businesses, and entrepreneurs of color, to get small loans is a big challenge. And that's something we could really learn from there. You know, I understand the big banks, it doesn't really make a whole lot of sense from them, from a profitability standpoint, to do these smaller loans. But, you know, in terms of the big picture, um, I think it's, I think that we have to find a way to have funding and loans for small businesses.

I know we have the SBA, that takes too long. We got to get capital out there. Otherwise, we're gonna continue to see, you know, other sources of capital out there, and that means payday loan companies and things of that nature. Because people, small businesses, entrepreneurs need access to capital.

John Hudak 27:43

Magda, did you have any follow ups?

Magdalena Martinez 27:47

Peter, anyone else that you suggest we talk to, to gain a better understanding of the role that small businesses are playing, or how they've been affected by the pandemic and the recession? And with a specific guide toward what worked, what didn't in terms of policy tools.

Peter Guzman 28:08

I think you should probably talk to Saul at the SBA, who was really on the grassroots working, and I need to include the SBA. And Saul in that partnership, collaboration, because he was amazing. And he could give you a lot of information on a lot of things that we talked about.

Magdalena Martinez 28:27

What's his last name?

Peter Guzman 28:27

Do you need a number for him?

Magdalena Martinez 28:29

That'd be great. And his last name, I could probably look him up, Ramos. Okay. Very helpful! Peter, any Chamber members that you think might be helpful to chat with, from a small business perspective or Latino, small business perspective?

Peter Guzman 29:04

Does it have to be a Latino owned?

Magdalena Martinez 29:07

Not necessarily. No.

Peter Guzman 29:09

Okay, so let me give you Saul's number 702-XXX-XXXX. And then there's a great perspective that I think you could get. Not Latino, you know, and that's okay. Member of my chamber, but I think he can give you a great perspective because he really, really was deeply involved in all of this, and deeply involved in a lot of our programs that help them survive. So his name is Hans and his phone number is 702-XXX-XXXX. Feel free to use my name. But he'll be able to tell you a lot about the programs that really helped him survive; the grant programs that we did and the education that we did. He's key to that.

John Hudak 30:15

Last name?

Peter Guzman 30:18

Hans.

Magdalena Martinez 30:22

Or the name of his business?

Peter Guzman 30:24

JoJo's

Magdalena Martinez 30:25

Okay.

Peter Guzman 30:29

I think it's Hibbert, but I could be wrong on that.

John Hudak 30:34

And we can find that. Hunt that down.

Magdalena Martinez 30:37

That's a restaurant? That's a restaurant Peter?

Peter Guzman 30:40

It's a Jojo's beef jerky and, and butchery meat.

Magdalena Martinez 30:50

Okay.

John Hudak 30:53

Great.

Magdalena Martinez 30:55

Very helpful. Thank you, Peter.

Peter Guzman 30:56

Yeah, of course, sort of here.

John Hudak 30:59

Those are all of the questions I had. This was extremely efficient, which I always appreciate, especially on a Friday, Peter.

Peter Guzman 31:07

And I was gonna say something in the beginning about this. I mean, I didn't want you to take it wrong, that I'm direct, short and right to the point.

John Hudak 31:15

I appreciate it.

Peter Guzman 31:16

That's just my nature. It's my DNA.

John Hudak 31:18

Yeah, you're talking to a guy who grew up in the northeast, so short and to the point is, is how I was raised. So I appreciate it.

Peter Guzman 31:25

I mean, if you need more, I give you more. But you know, I just like to give you the meat potatoes of the life, you know, we're going through right now.

John Hudak 31:32

Now this has been great. And if, as we go along, if we do have some follow ups, I hope we can feel free to reach back out.

Peter Guzman 31:39

Man. You guys probably all have my cell phone numbers. If you don't. I'm happy to give it to you. You have my emails. You call me anytime and I will be there for you.

John Hudak 31:49

Great. Appreciate that, Peter.

Magdalena Martinez 31:50

Thanks so much, Peter. Have a great weekend.

Peter Guzman 31:53

Say hello to the family for me.

Magdalena Martinez 31:55

You bet Peter.

Peter Guzman 31:56

Bye bye

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