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# Neon signs point the way inside Laredo bank

Branch targets Hispanics and blue-collar workers with fun atmosphere, small loans

By Tara Copp  
Caller-Times

Laredo National Bank president Lupe Gomez rarely wears a coat and tie to work - and neither do his clients. His bright bank lobby is filled with yellow and blue neon signs that hang above the tellers' heads, making the room feel more like a fun fast-food restaurant than a bank.



George Gongora/Caller-Times

And that's the idea.

"My target market is small businesses with revenues under \$5 million, and customers with low to moderate income," Gomez said. "At our bank here, we want to make it comfortable so blue-collar workers can come in right after work without worrying about what they're wearing."

By aligning with blue-collar workers and Nueces County's fast-growing Hispanic community, Gomez's bank is growing, too.

Lupe Gomez, president of Laredo National Bank, has tried to create a relaxed atmosphere inside the bank, which opened in March 1999. Signs are in Spanish and in English and neon ones point the way to bank services. It is owned by Laredo National Bancshares Inc. of Laredo.

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Laredo National Bank, South Padre Island Drive and Ayers Street, opened in March 1999 as an expansion branch of the more traditional Corpus Christi Bank & Trust, located downtown. Both are owned by Laredo National Bancshares Inc. of Laredo.

The Southwestern-styled branch is an active participant in the Hispanic business community that surrounds it. Signs outside and inside the bank are printed in Spanish and English, and at 6:30 p.m. Friday the bank will co-sponsor a large Cinco de Mayo festival with KUNO, KSAB and Univision in the bank's parking lot. The party is headlined by Pete Astudillo.

"A lot of it is who we are," Gomez said. "That is our culture."

And a lot of the bank's personality comes from Gomez himself, said Luis Nuño, vice president of operations for Texas Hispanic Business Journal.

"He's definitely a guy who's got the charisma to make a bank feel like a place where you go to have a good time," Nuño said.

Gomez is more likely to be setting up booths for the Cinco de Mayo party and mingling late afterward than be behind his desk, Nuño said. "He really gets involved in the community," Nuño said. "And he stays afterward and socializes. He really wants to be part of the success."

## Big growth

Although the bank is tiny compared with the mega-merged national institutions throughout the city, its strategy of being small and focusing on small business is leading to big growth in South Texas, he said.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Nueces County had the 28th-largest Hispanic population in the United States. From 1990 to 1997, the Hispanic population grew 21.5 percent in the Corpus Christi area to 184,869, about 58 percent of the county's population.

Edward Rincon, president of Rincon & Associates, a Dallas-based market research firm that specializes in ethnic consumer research, said the Hispanic population boom has increased that segment's buying power.

"The population growth continues to be very high," Rincon said. "Hispanics represent about 6 million people in the state of Texas, their income is also increasing. And they are increasing their purchasing power just because of the sheer numbers."

## Starting small

Gomez said the size and potential of new customers spurred his bank's expansion.

"We felt this income market was being underserved," Gomez said. "We'll make a \$500 loan here if we have to help someone, and a lot of the bigger banks don't because they don't make money off of it."

In its first year of business, the Corpus Christi Laredo National Bank branch recorded \$12.5 million in loans and \$8 million in deposits, Gomez said. "There's more disposable income here than I have seen in the past," he said. "I think they are becoming savers, some of them. They are more aware of the importance of saving money, providing for their kids, getting their kids to

college."

Laredo National Bancshares has opened similar branches in San Antonio, "right in the heart of the low to moderate income areas," Gomez said.

### Niche bank

Araceli De Leon, general manager of Univision's KORO in Corpus Christi, who is also a customer, is originally from San Antonio. "All on the south and west side of San Antonio, they haven't had a bank over there because they don't have banks in those areas," De Leon said. "That's a great niche. The old money that's established with banks probably won't move, but the little guy who lives week to week also needs a bank to go to. Not only are they right there, but they make it so comfortable."

The chain's philosophy evolved around close ties to northern Mexico's economy, through the evolution of the maquiladoras at the Laredo border, the company said on its Web site.

### Right at home

"The recent industrial development and a strong Mexican economy have brought economic expansion, diversification, and a greater opportunity to the region and to the Laredo National Bank," the site said. "LNB is an early pioneer in minority banking for the border's Mexican-American community."

The bank has also expanded into McAllen and Houston, and has offices in Mexico City, Monterrey and Guadalajara, Mexico.

The heritage and size of Laredo National Bank matters to Ruben Casas, owner of Ruben's Fleet Service, a mechanic service for company cars and vans.

"It is important," said Casas, who banks at the new branch. "We're 50-something percent Hispanic already."

With Laredo National Bank, "even though it's a branch, it's an independent. It's not like half of these banks where a loan officer can't do anything for you before you talk to so-and-so. It makes you feel at home."

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