



## New U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce CEO to Fight for Small Businesses

Nov. 16, 2009

Rob Kuznia--HispanicBusiness.com

Javier Palomarez, the new CEO and President of the [U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce](#), readily admits that he is a "corporate animal," having worked as an executive at companies such as Allstate Insurance, Sprint, and, most recently, ING Financial.

But his incredible up-by-the-bootstraps story has kept him in touch with the little guy, and, he says, it is the little guy -- namely, small businesses -- he intends to fight for.

"Small businesses represent something on the order of 75 percent of new jobs," he told HispanicBusiness.com. "We tend to pay a lot of attention to the big, huge corporations of the world, but at the end of the day, the engine is the small business sector, and in that (group), the fastest-growing segment is the Latino-owned small business."

Born in the Rio Grande Valley on the southern tip of Texas, Palomarez is the youngest of 10 children, all raised by a single mother. She died when Palomarez was just 15, forcing him to drop out of high school and find work as a ranch hand.

However, through hard work, determination, and, he admits with a chuckle, a desire not to be outdone by his college-educated girlfriend -- who's now his wife -- Palomarez wound up getting his GED, and then graduating with a degree in finance from the University of Texas at Pan American. There, he received the Wall Street Journal Student Achievement Award.

These days, Palomarez is known in corporate circles as a pioneer in multicultural marketing. Most recently, he served as Vice President of Multicultural Marketing at ING Financial Services, where he was recruited to lead diversity outreach programs.

Palomarez attributes his success to how his mother instilled in him the value of an education.

"The common thread in the American-Hispanic community is we recognize education is crucial -- it is the means for us to get ahead," he said. "Of all the wonderful gifts we have as Americans, that is one of them. And that was never lost on me."

As President and CEO of the chamber, Palomarez serves at the pleasure of the 24-member board of directors, headed by board chairman David C. Lizarraga.

Based in Washington, D.C., the U.S. Hispanic Chamber is an umbrella group to some 200 regional Hispanic chamber organizations around the nation, and lobbies Washington officials on their behalf.

Palomarez, 48, comes to the flagship chamber at a crucial time for the organization. The chamber, he says, is poised for unprecedented access to the White House, as the Obama administration appears more attentive to its needs than perhaps any administration before it. The key, he added, is for the chamber's 200 member organizations to come together and form a single, unified voice.

"We have to make sure the voice of the Hispanic entrepreneur is heard very clearly and loudly," he said.

It's a task that could be complicated by some of the chamber's recent well-publicized [squabbles](#).

In September, for instance, the Denver Post reported that Palomarez's predecessor, Augustine Martinez, [abruptly left the organization's annual convention](#) in that city due to a disagreement with chairman Lizarraga.

The specific nature of the purported dustup reported in the article was murky, and longtime chamber officials, speaking to HispanicBusiness.com privately, insist that no such dispute occurred, and that Martinez left the organization on good terms. Martinez, who held the CEO post on an interim basis, did not return calls from HispanicBusiness.com seeking comment. Attempts to reach Lizarraga for this story were also unsuccessful.

In any case, Palomarez has the benefit of a fresh start with the agency, and has been much more focused on looking forward.

### A Stronger Stance For Small Businesses

Palomarez, whose first day on the job was October 1, said part of his mission will involve working to improve the government's treatment of small businesses.

Despite the ubiquity of small businesses in the United States, "small businesses continue to plod along with very little assistance from

the government or anyone else," he said.

So far, the chamber, with Palomarez as CEO, has proven unafraid to confront the federal government publicly and assertively.

Late last month, the chamber issued a press release criticizing the federal Small Business Administration's recent efforts to loosen up bank lending to small businesses.

The statement said that on the one hand, Congress's allocation of \$730 million to the SBA for the purpose of providing better guarantees to banks that make small business loans is a step in the right direction. But on the other, it said, SBA lending in the recently completed 2009 fiscal year still fell 36 percent from the year before.

"The Small Business Administration provides emergency loans to small businesses after a natural disaster ... and this economy is looking a lot like a disaster for too many small businesses," Palomarez said in the statement.

Speaking to HispanicBusiness.com, Palomarez said the U.S. Hispanic Chamber -- and Hispanic-owned businesses in general -- now have a golden opportunity to be heard by the Obama administration.

"It isn't too often an administration is this willing to work with an organization such as ours," he said. "Now we just need our own community to kick into action." Palomarez declined to state his political party affiliation, explaining that the chamber is a nonpartisan organization.

"My responsibility is to act in best interest of my constituency," he said. "To that end, I have to check (party affiliation) at the door."

Lizarraga, meanwhile, is a regular personal contributor to the Democratic Party, according to NewsMeat.com. In 2004, though, he also contributed to the Bush-Cheney re-election campaign, as well as to Bush's challenger, Sen. John Kerry . But he, too, has taken pains to stress that the organization is non-partisan. During the presidential campaign, for instance, Lizarraga [blasted the McCain-Palin ticket](#) for its claim that a majority of the chamber's board had endorsed the GOP camp.. Lizarraga said the claim gave the false impression that the chamber takes a partisan stance.

Palomarez said he hopes regional member chambers take note of how the U.S. Hispanic Chamber is gearing up for its annual legislative summit, from March 22-24. Last year's event drew President Obama as the keynote speaker.

Palomarez advises members to email suggestions and thoughts to chamber staff, which can be found by visiting the chamber's Web site at [www.usbcc.com](http://www.usbcc.com).

"The current administration and the White House are willing to embrace us," he said. "On the other side, we need our own community to understand we've got a conduit -- a voice. It's important to get our community to really take an active part in all of this."

**Source:** HispanicBusiness.com (c) 2009. All rights reserved