



Powerhouse Marketer Ana Valdéz on Using Media to Create Change

The marketing and business consultant on realizing and harnessing the power that marketing and media have to influence people's behavior. And how she drew on those skills to be authentically herself.

Alicia Menendez:

Ana Valdéz managed to weave everything she loves into her career in ways that are surprising, sometimes even to her. Ana's passion for marketing, politics, and the Latino community, has taken her from Nielsen, the global marketing research firm, to the U.N.'s Human Rights Commission, to the White House, and it inspired her to launch her own production companies, and now to serve as the executive director of the Latino Donor Collaborative, where she works to reframe the story of Latinos in this country. When we talked, Ana offered invaluable advice about everything from launching a business, to securing a seat on a corporate board, and learning when to step up and when to step back.

Ana, you were 10 years old, growing up in Mexico City the first time you witnessed the power of marketing. Take me back to that moment.

Ana Valdéz: Yes. I would remember perfectly. I was driving with my mom and we knew that there was a huge problem in Mexico with water, and we traditionally, unfortunately at that time, didn't have a lot of good experiences with efforts from the government, and suddenly I hear on the radio this campaign that was called "Ciérrale." And "ciérrale" in English means... Actually, it doesn't have a real great translation, but it means turn it off, right? And it meant that people when they are watering, or when they are brushing their teeth, or whatever, just turn it off. You don't need to keep it open all the time.

And I remember thinking, "This ad just changed the way I do everything. I cannot even imagine what it's doing for the rest of the country." And exactly that happened. Two years later we were out of the crisis and through the power of media, people have changed the way Mexico was meant to suffer and avoided that huge drought. At least some of the consequences of the drought. So, I said, "You know what? For me, this is it. I'm using media to create change. Whatever happens in my life, that's what I'm gonna do."

Menendez: When did you actually realize that marketing could be a career?

Valdéz: So, in Mexico, marketing as a career didn't exist, and I actually begged my dad to let me go to this specific school, the Tech de Monterrey, because it was the only place where I could find marketing as a career. And I did go, and I loved it, and I was lucky enough to get amazing professors. The people that were developing marketing at that point in Mexico

were my professors, and they gave me internships, I worked for them every summer, and that's how I ended up being a fanatic.

Menendez: Your first job, you worked for Nielsen, a global marketing research firm, for four years in Mexico, and you were one of the first women that they had hired. How did being a woman and among the first show up in your experience there?

Valdéz: I come from a family of men that love strong women, so I always loved being a strong woman, even though I had to pay a price as you know, being a strong woman, but I loved it. And so, when I asked for this job, I remember thinking it doesn't matter who was before me or who they want, I'm going to show them how much I'm good for them. And the process was very, very rigorous, and you had to interview with each one of the managing directors, and the partners, and you had to interview with every one of the heads of the teams, and I remember thinking every time, using my marketing skills, right? Who's my audience? What do they want? What do I need to get them?

And I remember at the end of the process, when I was lucky enough to get in, one of the people interviewing me told me, "For me, there was no difference that you were a woman." And that's exactly what I wanted to hear.

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Menendez: I speak with a lot of Latinas who immigrated to the United States as children or in their teens. You were 30 when you came to the U.S., and you were single. That's a big leap.

Valdéz: It is a huge leap. You know, in a lot of different ways, Mexico became small for me in the sense that when we opened up, I realized that there was so much more out there. So, my Master's took me to Spain. My PhD took me to the United States. And it allowed me to be myself. It allowed me to be exactly who I wanted, the way I wanted. Another thing that was very crucial and I didn't mention it before was the Latino movement. In Mexico, philanthropy and social movements are not easy to happen. And over here, I just saw immediately what was happening. I saw people at the White House, at very high levels, that in countries like my original country, Mexico, could have never had that upward mobility.

I saw literally the American dream and being here for the first six months changed the perspective of my life.

Menendez: You worked at the White House in the Office of Presidential Personnel. You received a presidential appointment from President Clinton to act as a special assistant for Latin America at the U.S. Department of Energy. How do you go from that world to building your own production company?

Valdéz: So, my husband comes in there. I meet my husband at the Hispanic Heritage Awards when Vice President Gore was a special guest, and as you know, in politics I work there, I'm Latina, it's a Latino event, do you want to come? So, I actually went to the event and my husband right now was the MC of the event. And so, there was an after party, I met him, we started dating long distance, and we also realized that what I wanted to do in politics, he wanted to do in media. Which is bring all the Latino amazing elements into mainstream. In my case, mainstream politics, and in his case, mainstream media.

Additionally, he was doing exactly what I wanted to do, which is use media to create change. At that point, I was using politics to create change, but the truth is media was my expertise. So, two years later we get married. I leave my job. It was really hard, by the way. But I leave my job and move to California and then we started working together with my contacts in Washington D.C. and all his production companies that already existed when I got married and doing shows and other things.

Menendez: What actually went into building that production company? Walk us through it.

Valdéz: First of all, the passion. You know, the passion of knowing that there was a treasure that was a blind spot for America, that was waiting to happen and that could make so much money for all these corporations, and studios, and content producers that were in the business to make money. We could make money by transforming the community and transforming the way the community looked in the United States.

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Menendez: You're building your company at the same time that you were building your family, which is true for a lot of us, and you hit a crisis point. What happened?

Valdéz: Yeah. You know, what we have right now we're so proud of, but it took us lots of efforts, several crisis, but talking about the kids, there was a point where not only I was building this with my husband, and I was also raising my kids, but I decided to join all these boards of nonprofits that are very relevant, and I wanted to make a change. And every invitation was a temptation. And the truth is at that point I was so young, I had so much energy, that I didn't know how to say no. And I loved it. That was also the big temptation.

So, at a certain point I realized one day I woke up and I was completely tired. I stood up from bed and I fell down, because I was dizzy of how tired I was. I stayed in bed one day. I stayed in bed a second, then a third day, and I was still not feeling well. Long story short, I realized that I was completely burned, and while I was getting better, while I was finding out what I had, because of course I did all kinds of tests, et cetera, I realized that the people that were missing me more were my kids. And for me, and this is a matter of priorities more than values, for me my kids were first, and I didn't realize that I was actually not being smart in my priorities.

So, I quit a bunch of boards. I quit a bunch of other responsibilities that I had. And since then, I've been prioritizing my kids. Which, of course, now that my kids are going to college means a huge revamp of what I am doing. We have so many more nuances to take in

account when we plan our lives. Professional women are limited, but at the same time, that's what makes us incredible. Because we can do it. And yes, we get to turning points that are hard to face. In my case, I was lucky that it was nothing that couldn't be changed with a different way of organizing my priorities, but it is hard.

Menendez: And I think a lot of women are dealing with that, especially now in the middle of this pandemic, and an absence of childcare, or a need for remote schooling, that our hand has been forced. I do want to talk to you about being on corporate and nonprofit board of directors, because I don't know that we've actually ever had a guest who has done that, and you have been on... I don't even have the time to list all the boards that you have been on, but you've been on SiTV's cable channel, The Trust for Public Land, LA Mayor's Small Business Board, American Public Media, so many others. I'm hoping that you can demystify that experience for us. What does being on a board entail?

Valdéz: It is really not a big deal. My recommendation, first start with nonprofits, because nonprofit boards teach you the same as a for-profit board, but people are much more patient, they have the budget to get you on board, and educate you if you may on the subject, and so if you learn to be on the board that supervises the functioning of an organization/company/nonprofit, it's basically the same job. So, you have the experience, you know how to show up, you know you have to do your homework, you know how to read the reports. It's the best training you can have.

One of the problems of getting board ready is that Latinos don't usually volunteer in nonprofit boards, which trains them for for profits. And a person recruiting somebody for a for-profit board feels much more comfortable when somebody has been part of a nonprofit board. They can also call the organizations and find out what kind of board member you are. You know, there's references. When you start from zero, even if you're a very successful corporate executive, it's different. You haven't been a board member.

Ad: *I want to recommend a podcast that offers big ideas and surprising stories. It's called Pindrop from TED. You'll journey across the globe with filmmaker Saleem Reshamwala in search of the most imaginative ideas from each place. This season, hear from a handful of musicians, like Renata Flores, who are bringing pride back to Quechua, Peru's native language, with their music. And listen to locals from Rapa Nui, AKA Easter Island, to find out what happens to the tourism paradise when people stop showing up. Be sure to check out Pindrop wherever you listen.*

Menendez: Latino Donor Collaborative's mission is to frame the U.S. Latino story as an integral part of the American story, to advance an accurate portrayal and perception of the Latino community in America. What's the thinking behind that mission?

Valdéz: So, in 2010, Arizona faced a humongously racist law, the SBC70 bill. All these Latino leaders got together in Dana Point in March of 2010 and said, "What are we doing wrong? Why would people think that they can just racially target us? What is happening?" The conclusion was that we're stereotyped, and if you don't take care of your brand, somebody else will. If you don't create a narrative of who you are, somebody else will. And so, we decided to create a narrative to build a brand, to create a realistic impression and create the facts that show who we are for real in this country.

So, that's how the Latino Donor Collaborative started. And one of the things that this group of people decided was that it was going to be self-funded. We started creating data that

right now seems so obvious and that people would think already existed, but it didn't. Data such as the growth in demographics by region, by state. Data like how much wealth are we building? What's the percentage of new businesses created by Latinos? That by the way is 83% of all the new businesses are created by Latinos. All these numbers that now we've been lucky enough to make mainstream didn't exist. People were not talking about it, so this was another opportunity to use media and to use corporate power to create a real image of who we are.

We are loyal. We're patriotic. We're entrepreneurs. The upward mobility of Latinos is comparable to the Asian upward mobility. People don't know this. These things are surprising even for many Latinos that are very educated and very proud. So, we're using Univision, we're using all the media. One of the reports that is very well known from the LDC is the Latino GDP. Before, nobody had actually extracted all the productivity of Latinos from that total GDP of the country. And so, every year now we actually report how much money we're pouring into this economy, and how much would the country suffer if we weren't here?

So, for example, last year if Latinos were an economy independently, we would be the eighth largest GDP in the world. We would be only third to Japan, India, and the Latino community in the United States would be third. We actually also would be the third fastest growing. The first one being China, the second one being India, and the third one being Latinos in America.

Menendez: Do those numbers matter, though, if what you are up against is not a lack of knowledge about our community, but just straight up racism?

Valdéz: Racism is based on ideas, right? And we have made actually an approximation. We have a poll that we do every three years, and we ask perception of Latinos, et cetera. From our experience with the polls, there is 10 to 20%, depending on the poll, of people that are racist and will never change. We actually gave up on them. We don't ever go to them. There are 40% of people that are actually confused. They think that Latinos, they heard one day one of them was a gang member, and one of their cousins say that... You know, that's 40%. And then there's the 40% that are what we call illuminated. They know who we are, they have no problem with us, and they want to help.

Our research goes to the 40% that are just ignorant and that are actually convertible. It's very possible to change the perception of that 40% with facts, but we need media. We have created advertising. We have done PSAs. We have done campaigns online. But we don't have the money to create a powerful campaign of \$200 million, right? So, what we do is we partner with media companies. We partner with corporations and we just spread the word.

But we decided to go to the CEOs. Our budget allows only a certain amount of people and we concentrated on the CEOs. So, we have private convenings for CEOs by invitation only. We pay for everything. They last two days. We bring experts, academics, and we present this data to them, and we angle every piece of data to the kind of bottom line they could have if they included Latinos at all levels. That is the best way of transformation. Some of the best shows that you've seen lately... You know, Magnum P.I., Station 19, all those shows that have been very successful in ratings in broadcast and Netflix come from those meetings. The CEOs come to us and they say, "How can we do it?"

Menendez: What do we as Latinas need to understand about our power as consumers?

Valdéz: In our community we are the decision makers of almost every buy. Men won't like what I'm going to say, but we have decision making even in their own cars, in their clothing, vacations for the family. We have all the power to use that purchase that we're going to do to demand that we're included. That we're included to start with in the advertising. We, as women, should use our purchasing power to write letters, to buy or not buy if we're being included, to request colors, to request sizes, to demand that we're included in programming that is sponsored by the brand, to see the percentage of Latinos that are part of their executive team, to demand board members in the companies that we're giving all that money for.

Let's unite into a voice that demands the change. My husband says this phrase and I love it. Why am I good to give you my green money, but I'm not good enough to be in your picture? Because you see the beautiful advertising of a lot of brands that I'm not gonna mention here, because I don't want to single out anybody, but you don't see one single Latino face. And we need to work on that. Our kids don't see themselves reflected in programming, in boards. We've advanced a lot in elected officials, but we haven't advanced enough. There's so many Latinas out there running that don't get their fair share of exposure.

So, we should do this for our kids, and we should do this for ourselves, too.

Menendez: Ana, thank you so much.

Valdéz: Of course!

Menendez: Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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