

Wooing the chewing consumer

INTERVIEW WITH MANUEL ALDRETE

MANAGING DIRECTOR, CONSORCIO CHICLERO



MANUEL ALDRETE

was raised in Sinaloa, north-east Mexico and studied Sociology at the National University in Mexico City. He worked with many southern communities before joining the chicleros in Chetumal, then in a deep socio-economic crisis, in 1992. Mr Aldrete created the first chiclero plan and, in 1998, formed the Consorcio Chiclero with 46 co-operatives. In 2003, finances were raised for product development, followed by Chicza's pilot industrial programme. Chicza organic rainforest chewing gum was launched in the UK in March 2009.

How did the Consorcio Chiclero (chewing gum farmers' consortium) come into being and what were the circumstances that led to the creation of Chicza chewing gum?

The consortium is made up of 46 co-operatives and around 2,000 chicleros (chewing gum farmers) are part of the consortium. They farm 1.3 million hectares of the Mexican portion of the Grand Petén rainforest, as their predecessors have for over 100 years.

The co-operatives have traditionally supplied chewing gum manufacturers worldwide with chicle as a raw material, which has been incorporated into the manufacturers' branded chewing gum products. As the years have gone by, the proportion of natural gum used in chewing gum manufacture has fallen and so the co-operatives' sales figures have dropped.

We realised that it was important to protect our livelihoods, which can only be achieved by preserving the environmental, social and economic value of our homeland, the rainforests, and so five years ago we started a research and development programme aimed at creating a new brand of chewing gum – our own. We had limitless resources in the form of the natural gum base in the rainforests of Grand Petén, and we knew



A 'chiclero' harvests chewing gum in the Gran Petén rainforest

that the march of the 'green consumer' was becoming more powerful worldwide. Our decision, therefore, was to create a new product that was right for the 21st century consumer – a biodegradable chewing gum made out of 100 per cent organic, natural ingredients.

We're all very proud indeed to be launching Chicza, our brand-new chewing gum, in the UK at the end of March 2009. It will showcase Mexico and Mexican companies as forward thinking enterprises and it is a product that, while rooted in our Mayan history, is absolutely right for the 21st century and which responds to consumers' keen interest in environmental issues. We believe it will lead the way for all chewing gum manufacturers worldwide in the next few years.

The consortium is an interesting concept – it is a social enterprise, offering professional assistance to its members across a wide range of services. Whether it's administrative and accounting support or training, management of forest resources, quality control, commercial promotion services, product support, development and distribution services, we look at what the individual co-operatives need and then seek to supply it to them cost-effectively.

Our co-operative structure is not the same as a private company, with its profit/loss balance sheet. We have income and expenditure, of course, but our expenditure is channelled into social as well as corporate issues. For example, we fund health care, including life insurance, education, including scholarships for the chicleros' children, housing, retirement pensions and savings. On the corporate side, there's capitalisation of the company and long-term investment projects, like Chicza, among other evolving and dynamic issues.

It is fascinating to see how 2,000 people across 46 co-operatives have pulled together for the common good as we have developed our new product and moved towards commercial promotion of it in the UK market. It's been an amazing journey for us all, and we don't plan to rest on our laurels; we will be actively considering other rainforest products that we can bring to the market in the future.

What are the environmental benefits of biodegradable chewing gum?

One of the biggest problems in societies worldwide is litter. Chewing gum is particularly difficult litter

to manage because regular gum, made out of petrochemical polymers, bonds very strongly to pavements and roads – not to mention to clothes and seats on public transport.

In London's Oxford Street, for example, research reveals that it takes 17 weeks for the local Council to clean this premier shopping area's pavements – but only 10 days for it to be covered with chewing gum debris again. This is not only costly to handle but off-putting for visitors and locals alike.

Biodegradable Chicza chewing gum, made only from natural ingredients, does not bond with or stick to any surface. The ideal way to dispose of it is to pop it into a handbag or pocket and to take it home to add to bio-waste or garden compost. In such ideal conditions, it will biodegrade (literally vanish into dust) in six weeks. If it is thrown on to a road or pavement, it will take longer to biodegrade but will still become small crumbs of dust in around three months. This compares very favourably with regular gum, which can take five years or more to biodegrade.

Biodegradable chewing gum is the way forward – it will save local authorities many millions of pounds over the years and will make the environment much more pleasant for consumers.

How does intensive production of chicle affect the rainforest of the Gran Petén in the long term?

The Gran Petén rainforest – the second largest rainforest in America after Amazonia – is in fact protected by sustainable farming practices, as used by the chicleros (chewing gum farmers) now for over a century. Unlike other regions of Mexico, where up to 80 per cent of the original jungles have been lost due to logging, cattle ranching and agriculture, the Gran Petén survives and thrives.

The rainforest consists of 1.3 million hectares certified for organic production, with around eight million productive trees. This potentially provides chicle production capacity far superior to the manpower of the chicleros – only 30 per cent of the productive capacity of the forest is currently being utilised. Chicle extraction is, by nature, a completely renewable and sustainable activity. After tapping, each tree is allowed to rest for around 6/7 years to renew itself; trees produce chicle for up to 120 years, and many live for 300 years or more.

By protecting the rainforest in this way, we are also safeguarding the lungs of the world.

It's the ultimate marriage of nature and mankind, and – with the biodegradable aspect of Chicza chewing gum – we are eventually feeding back into the earth that which we have taken from it. It also, interestingly, follows Mayan traditions – they chewed the gum from

the trees, too, to clean their teeth and ease digestion – so is very much part of the culture and history of Mexico.

Sustainable management of the rainforests is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, and each batch of chewing gum can be traced back to the individual chewing gum farmer and to the individual tree. Few products offer such perfect traceability.

Why did you choose the UK to introduce the product on to the international stage?

The UK is the most demanding market in Europe, it is strategically placed as a platform for the rest of Europe and it has businesses such as Waitrose, which understand the co-operative structure and fair-trade-plus principles with which we work.

The green consumer is a key force in the UK, and many UK consumers believe in fairness to suppliers; we believe that this attitude gives us a great opportunity in a challenging marketplace that's dominated by the big chewing gum players.

What would your advice be to other producers looking at moving to a global level?

It will take longer than you think! Be prepared for this in your budgets, do your research well and make sure you can deliver what you promise.

To have your workforce on side – as with our co-operatives – is obviously vital, too.

Knowing the end goal – in our case, redistribution of wealth in an equitable way, affording a respectable way of life to the rural chicleros – is obviously important too, as is delivering what's been promised to the team. 

Biodegradable chewing gum will save local authorities many millions of pounds and will make the environment much more pleasant for consumers

Chicza organic rainforest gum: coming soon to a supermarket near you



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