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The strategic orientation of communications consulting firms in Colombia[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the results of a research conducted among a group of 55 CEOs of public relations and communication consulting agencies in Colombia. It aims at determining if strategic orientation predominates in the services for which these agencies are hired. As it has been found, some of them focus their business on this perspective. Nevertheless, there is a higher volume of technical services, such as free press and journalistic media relations. The increase in services in recent years has been due, among other reasons, to the good moment of Colombian economy. The reasons for hiring an agency are its prestige and reputation. However, this result contrasts with the argument presented by the interviewed executives as the main impediment to their practice as consultants: the lack of knowledge of their work on the part of clients.

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1. Introduction

A better economic performance (1), the increase of foreign investment (2) and the fact that today many organizations have the certainty that it is necessary to manage the reputation and trust with their stakeholders, are reasons that have influenced the growth of the sector that brings together public relations agencies in Colombia, also known as communication or public relations consulting agencies. In 2013, the 15 firms of this area that presented the highest turnovers, reported operational income (3) of \$49,586,407 million Colombian pesos (4) (Publicidad & Mercadeo, 2014). Despite the fact that it is not a market of the size and maturity of its equivalent in countries of the region such as Brazil (5), the local industry is becoming attractive for firms that want to compete in it (Parker, 2008).

According to Icco (2014) and Holmes Report (2014), communications and public relations consulting business grew 11% worldwide in 2013, and there is optimism about its evolution in Latin America. Some local sources (Dinero.com, 2012; Portafolio.com, 2013) have been reporting that the sector is gaining strength in the Colombian economic sphere.

As shown in studies carried out on the social, political and economic contexts that favor the practice of this profession in Latin America (Moreno, Molleda & Suárez, 2006; Molleda & Moreno, 2008), the country's current political and economic

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environment has an impact on the evolution and practice of the profession. The arrival of multinational companies in Colombia, product of the signing of free trade agreements, as well as the interest of local companies to open business in other countries or trade with them, have spurred the adoption of international business practices which, within their management models, include strategic relationships with their environments and a more planned communication. These researchs found that in recent years important efforts have been made to improve the living conditions of citizens in Colombia. There has been an increase of campaigns that advocate for the country's peace and construction, which have required contests and active participation of public relations professionals of the private, public and non-governmental sectors (Molleda & Moreno, 2008).

The analysis on the practice of public relations in Colombia must give an account of the level achieved by the agencies that integrate the sector and the competitiveness of the services they provide. To establish if the growth that they have had in number, services and turnover matches the increase in the quality of the services, a research focusing on knowing if a strategic approach is applied to this effort has been carried out.

2. Communication and public relations consulting

Traditionally, those who have been engaged in communication consulting have moved in the public relations and strategic communication business. In general, their work have consisted in helping clients to build their corporate brands and to generate a favorable image from campaigns, media activities and special events, as well as to “measure, improve, and protect the value of their reputations” (Fombrun & Nevins, 2004, p. 346).

Ideas and initiatives are part of what they commercialize, and although they can be materialized in communication supports, they can also be transmitted in face-to-face interactions with audiences. It is agreed that these entities offer services rather than products, because the value of what they do has a significant intangible component, which obliges to associate the service with the person who offers it and, its quality, to the talent and experience of those who are being hired. Hence, it can be said that, as in other professions associated to communication, talent goods are also commercialized in the case of public relations consulting (Arrese-Reca, 2004).

As reported by Fombrun & Nevins (2004), many consulting firms have developed practices in areas aimed at helping companies to define, measure, and exploit their intellectual capital. With regard to reputational capital consulting, they point out that this has had a slower development in comparison to others in the business, in part because reputation is an aspect that, in contrast to knowledge, is not under direct control of senior members of companies or their employees, but that depends on customers, investors, journalists, financial analysts or communities. In other words, it depends on their stakeholders. I.e., the public relations agencies service, as it is designed, is destined to be strategic, because these firms are focused on helping organizations to improve in the performance of their duties, to anticipate the future and to respond in a timely manner and successfully to the demands of the environment (Meintjes & Grobler, 2014).

In addition to mastering this knowledge, a consultant with strategic capacity is focused on advising the organization on how to communicate, in what kind of situations, and what activities and procedures are the most recommendable. Consultants integrate communication knowledge in decision-making on the company's strategic issues and seek that the challenges and strategies of a corporate plan always take into account the effects that these programs, projects or policies, can generate among stakeholders or the public in general (Caicedo, 2012). As a counterpart of this strategic profile of the communicator, we have that of the technician, who occupies his/her time in producing media and who follows instructions from the directors of the company or others who have previously designed the strategy (Dozier, 1992; Dozier & Broom, 1995). Being a press agent is a compatible denomination with the functions performed by the technician (Nieman-Stuweg, Meintjes, & Grobler, 2007; Beurer-Zullig, Fieseler, & Meckel, 2009).

Taking into account this series of considerations, the consultant in strategic communication is defined here as the person who is able to recommend and advise the organization, set goals and define communication approaches within a competitive environment. As a result, the public relations and communications consulting agency is understood in this paper as one that is dedicated to advise, recommend solutions and best practices, research, design and create programs, strategies, and communication plans from a conception related to the purposes of the organization that hired it, with the purpose of achieving results agreed in advance.

3. Strategic communication

In Latin America, in general, the expression “organizational communication” is used to refer to the field that brings together the knowledge and practice of communication in organizations. However, in countries like Colombia, this denomination coexists with others such as corporate communication, public relations, and in recent years, the concept of strategic communication has gained strength and has begun to be understood as a way of managing different forms of communication, including public relations (Preciado-Hoyos & Guzmán-Ramírez, 2012).

In Grunig's excellence model (1992), public relations are strategic when communication is guided by objectives, which, in turn, accompany the achievement of the entity's objectives; the head of communications is part of the group that runs the organization and advises the CEO on the implications that organizational decisions can have in the relationship with stakeholders. In the European approach of strategic communication, the organization should be a reflection of what society

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