

University Communication Departments. Analysis of the Situation in Spain

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Abstract

Although public relations has grown considerably in the last years, communication officers in Spain still focus on one-way models and adopt a technician role. That is to say, they behave more like journalists in residence than communication managers. Nevertheless, this research shows that several positive aspects of public relations (such as having a communication plan, evaluating publics' actions and behaviors or making a bigger effort on research, planning and evaluation) relate to other beneficial public relations aspects. These actions involve, among others, the likeliness of defining concrete goals and linking them to the organization's overall objectives and taking part or, at least, being consulted by the strategic planning team.

Keywords: public relations, communication departments, Spanish universities, mass media relations, strategic publics.

Los departamentos de comunicación en las universidades. Análisis de la situación en España

Resumen

A pesar de que las relaciones públicas han experimentado un enorme crecimiento en los últimos años, las universidades españolas siguen ejerciendo la comunicación de manera unidireccional y de manera técnica. Es decir, sus miembros se comportan más como periodistas internos que como verdaderos gestores de la comunicación. Pese a todo, se ha comprobado que ciertos aspectos positivos de las relaciones públicas, como el seguimiento de un plan concreto de comunicación, un mayor hincapié en las acciones y comportamientos del público y una extensiva investigación, planificación y evaluación, se relacionan con otros comportamientos beneficios, tales como definir una serie de objetivos concretos y vincularlos a los del centro en general o gozar de una mayor presencia en los planes estratégicos de la universidad, entre otras cosas.

Palabras clave: relaciones públicas, departamentos de comunicación, universidades de España, relaciones con los medios, públicos estratégicos.

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Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Methodology. 3. Development; 3.1. Dominance of one-way models; 3.2. Dominance of the technician role; 3.3. Communication plan and strategic planning; 3.4. Strategic publics; 3.5. Importance of social relations; 3.6. High relevance of the communication process; 3.7. Research actions; 3.8. Planning actions; 3.9. Communication actions; 3.10. Evaluation actions; 3.11. Little preparation for crisis; 3.12. Level of satisfaction; 3.13. Correlations. 4. Conclusions. 5. References.

1. Introduction

Public relations is defined by Scott and Center (1964) as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends". Universities, like any or-

ganization willing to obtain these benefits, introduced public relations to their daily activities a long time ago.

In effect, these education centers have seen in public relations the opportunity to communicate with different publics and adopt behaviors that benefit both parts, with some countries making a very extensive use of it, such as United Kingdom or the United States (Ayeni and Adedeji, 1992: 16). Public relations in universities began, according to these authors, “out of the need to publicize activities of institutions; to explore the needs of the various members of the public ranging from students, staff, parents, taxpayers and the general public in order to make courses of study relevant to their needs; to know what the various groups expect”.

Public relations in universities should follow the common characteristics of public relations in general. To start with, from the four models conceptualized by Grunig and Hunt in 1984 (press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical), practitioners should adopt the two way models and, preferably, the symmetrical one. The essence of this last model is that “both the organization and a public must be willing to accommodate the interests of the other” (L. A. Grunig, Grunig and Dozier, 2002: 315).

They should also maintain good relationships with publics. This is the key element of a potential fifth public relations model (the personal influence model) introduced in the early 1990s by Sriramesh extending the original four models proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984). According to this model, interpersonal trust is a key dimension of societal culture and has a great influence on public relations practice.

José Luis Arceo Vacas (2006) provides another public relations model that consists of a mixture of the third and fourth Grunig and Hunt’s models. This one, called “bidireccional simétrico persuasivo” (two-way symmetric persuasive model) assumes that the penultimate objective of public relations is to obtain good relations with the public, but the ultimate goal is the final persuasion based on the kindness achieved by the relation.

University public relations departments should have technicians but also managers, because it is the only way to make a strategic use of communication (J. E. Grunig and Grunig, 1991). The first group “conceptualizes and directs public relations programs” (Grunig, 1992: 19) and the second one provides services such as “writing, editing, photography, media contacts, or production of publications” (Grunig, 1992: 19). An important aspect of strategic management is linking public relations goals to organizational objectives (Hon, 1998) and to the expectations of its strategic constituencies (L. A. Grunig, Grunig and Ehling, 1992: 86). In addition, practitioners should identify and segment publics (J. E. Grunig and Grunig, 1991).

Most researchers encourage a four-phase process for a strategic public relations campaign. The first known model was proposed by John Marston in 1963 under the acronym RACE (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation) (cited in Smith, 2011: 9). Nevertheless, nowadays one of the most common processes, which is very similar to the John Marston’s model, is the version of Hainsworth and Wilson (1992) and Guth and Marsh (2011): research, planning, communication and evaluation.

No matter how sophisticated an organization’s issues management can be, there is no way to anticipate or avoid all negative events (Springston and Weaver Lariscy,

2005). That's why, universities must be proactive, not reactive, and focus on the public, not on the organization's reputation (Barnett, 2008: 195). It is desirable to have a team crisis and a crisis plan (Springston and Weaver-Lariscy, 2007) and to test it and update it regularly (Shelton, 1993).

2. Methodology

The main objective of this research is to observe the use of public relations in Spanish universities, both private and public, according to the aforementioned questions. To reach this aim, an extensive questionnaire has been designed and dispatched via e-mail in May 2012 to the heads of communication departments of the 78 universities of the country. The following month, a reminding e-mail was sent to the universities that are still to be answered. In short, the following aspects of university public relations were studied:

1. Composition and characteristics of the communication offices.
2. Use of public relations models.
3. Public relations roles adopted.
4. Participation in strategic planning.
5. Definition and achievement of objectives.
6. Personal influence model.
7. Main publics and communication tools.
8. Importance and tools of the public relations stages.
9. Crisis plan.
10. Level of satisfaction.

A total of 32 high-learning centers participated (40.13% response rate). 71.9% (23) of them are public, whereas 28.1% (9) are private. The answers were introduced in the statistics program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and afterwards several tests were carried out, such as frequencies, descriptives and cross tabulation. In addition, different statistical analysis –like ANOVA, t-test, correlation or means, with a significance level of 0.05– have been used to check if there are significant differences between public and private universities.

3. Development

3.1. Dominance of one-way models

The public information model is the most common among university communication departments. On a scale of 1 to 5, it obtained 4.49. The two-way persuasive symmetric model, proposed by José Luis Arceo Vacas, stands in second place, with 4.09. The press agency model also seems to be quite important, as it has 3.68. In contrast, the symmetric models are the least employed. The two-way symmetric obtains 2.89 in a 1 to 5 scale, and the two-way asymmetric, 2.70. To obtain these data from public relations models, and also from the roles, the method used by Gordon and Kelly (1999) and Xifra (2008) has been properly conditioned and employed.

The sentence with which the respondents agree most is “one of our main goals is to maintain a good relation with the public” (4.66) and “prepare news stories that re-

porters will use" (4.59). In contrast, they agree the least with the ideas "manipulate publics scientifically" (1.72) and "negotiate with lobbying groups" (2.25).

3.2. Dominance of the technician role

The most employed role in Spanish university communication offices is the technician. On a scale of 1 to 5, the respondents give this role 4.00, whereas the manager role obtains 3.63. "Take photographs or coordinate photography" (4.63) and "coordinate a press conference or arrange media coverage of an event" (4.53), both from the technician role, are the ideas with which the respondents agree most. On the other hand, "conduct evaluation research" (2.44) and "create and manage speakers bureau" (3.06) are the least employed.

3.3. Communication plan and strategic planning

On a scale of 1 to 5, the respondents assure they have a communication plan in 3.50 and they have concrete and defined goals in 3.94. Although this last figure is not very high, it can be assumed that the communication offices that have concrete goals link them with the objectives of the whole university, as this last question has obtained 4.44. Nevertheless, the grade is significantly lower when the communication officers are asked to answer to what extent the goals are usually accomplished: on a scale of 1 to 5, the respondents gave this idea 3.56.

The strategic planning team sometimes consults the communication office, as the participants have conceded 3.31 to this element. In any case, almost half of the departments are part of the strategic planning team (46.9%), whereas 6.3% is not sure about the existence of it.

3.4. Strategic publics

The most important public for the communication departments of the Spanish universities is the mass media. On a scale of 1 to 5, this group obtained 4.91, whereas the second most important group, professors and researchers, obtained 4.81. Prospective students are the third most important group for the respondents, with 4.75. They are even more important than current students, who obtained 0.10 less. Administration and service staff and the population in general have almost the same level of importance, 4.53 and 4.50, respectively. Government and institutional agents and, above all, investors and stockholders (in those cases that apply) are the least important groups for university communication officers, 4.16 and 3.16, respectively.

3.5. Importance of social relations

On a scale of 1 to 5, communication departments claim they have good relations with other employees in 4.53, the same quantity as with people outside the organization. In fact, they consider social relations an important part of their daily activities (4.09), although they do not use benefits (such as presents or invitation to have lunch) in order to gain influence with personal contacts (1.59 on the scale).

3.6. High relevance of the communication process

Out of the four different stages in a public relations campaign (research, planning, communication and evaluation), the communication process is the most relevant for the respondents, seeing that it has received the highest grade: 4.66. With less than half a point difference, the second and third most important stages are evaluation and planning (4.06 and 4.03, respectively), whereas research seems to be the least developed stage (3.66). As a whole, the different communication stages obtain, in a 1 to 5 scale, 4.10.

3.7. Research actions

The most common research action is the analysis of the organization news coverage. 84.4% of the respondents claim to use this tactic, even more than general searching through the Internet (81.3%), own organization materials (81.3%), interviews (62.5%), communication audits (40.5%), bibliography and other researches (40.5%) and surveys (37.5%). On the contrary, few people use test messages, high voice reflection techniques or two-version messages (3.1% each). Perception analysis (6.3%), experiments (12.5%), pilot tests (15.6%), and discussion groups (18.8%) have not obtained very high percentages either.

3.8. Planning actions

The most important elements when planning a public relations campaign are objectives (84.3%), followed by determination of publics (71.8%) and strategies (68.7%). Budget is the fourth most common planning ingredient (62.5%) and current situation (50%) the fifth. Timing (40.6%), tactics (31.2%) and evaluation techniques (31.2%) are less often studied.

3.9. Communication actions

The web page is the most common tool used by communication members to be in touch with their different publics: 96.8% use it with employees of the university, current students and with the mass media and 87.5% with the population in general. Social media is also a highly used communication technique with students (93.7%), employees (87.5%), the population in general (84.3%) and the mass media (78.1%).

With employees, public relations practitioners also use email (78.1%), news media coverage dossier (78.1%), telephone (71.8%), videos (65.6%), and intranet (62.5%). Other new communication technologies, however, are not widely used. For example, none of the universities analyzed make use of wikis or augmented or virtual reality. Only one university (3.1%) has an online bulletin board or use Bluetooth. Forums (6.2%), podcasts (9.3%), blogs (15.6%), SMS (21.8%) and instant messages (37%) are slightly more employed. Practitioners make more use of suggestion boxes with students than with employees (31.2% with students and 18.7% with employees), as well as podcasts (12.5% with students and 9.3% with employees).

Almost all the communication departments of the universities interviewed use the telephone (96.8%) and the press release (96.8%) to inform the mass media. The press conference is the third most employed tool, being used by 9 out of 10 universities. Photography (87.5%), dossiers (78.1%), and interviews (78.1%) are other important

tools for communication officers. One out of four universities send audio and 53.1% send videos to the mass media. Half of the centers maintain a virtual press site and 59.3% broadcast events through the internet. However, very few people (6.1%) use blogs to communicate with the media.

With the population in general, Spanish press officers use brochures (71.8%), advertising (71.8%) and open days (68.7%), as well as participation in fairs or exhibitions (65.6%) and informative sessions and awards and grants (59.3%). On the other hand, only two universities offer social contracts, only one negotiates with lobbying groups and none of them make use of wikis or automatic telephone numbers.

3.10. Evaluation actions

Publics' opinions and attitudes and publics' actions and behaviors are the least employed actions when evaluating a public relations program (on a scale of 1 to 5, 3.78 for the first one and 3.81 for the second). Paradoxically, the most important tool for the communication departments of the Spanish universities is message production (4.00), which is thought to be the least effective method. Message exposure (3.94) is situated in second place.

The most common evaluation tool is the impact on the media (96.8%). With almost 20% less, universities make use of the visits to the web page (78.1%) as a way to measure the effectiveness of public relations. The rest of the tools are significantly less used: counting public assistance (50%), the presence of employees at meetings and events (43.7%), communication materials produced (34.3%) and systematic monitoring of communication (31.2%). Only one out of ten use the process "cost per person" and almost two out of ten (18.7%) use advertising equivalence. Communication audits are employed by one out of four universities.

3.11. Little preparation for crisis

More than half of the education centers analyzed (65.63%) do not have a crisis plan. 28.13% of the universities that have one (6.25% are not sure about its existence) usually revise it between a year and year and a half (37.5%) although it is not normally put into practice (50%) or, otherwise, between one year and one and a half (25%). The number of universities that have a prefixed crisis team is the same as those that do not have it: 46.9% (6.3% are not sure about it).

3.12. Level of satisfaction

The members of the communication departments think the presence of their departments is very important to the overall function of the university. On a scale of 1 to 5, the respondents give 4.63 to its importance. Nevertheless, it appears they are not so satisfied with the communication tasks. On the same scale, they have granted 3.81 to their satisfaction level.

3.13. Correlations

Different statistic analyses have been used in order to verify if there are some correlations among certain aspects and actions of public relations. For example, the com-

munication office is considered to be more important when the third and the fourth Grunig and Hunt's models are given more relevance. There is also a correlation between the self importance of the communication office and the importance given to social relations. Indeed, as the importance of the research stage increase, the importance of the communication department also grows.

The presence of a communication plan is related with several aspects that are considered to be desirable in any public relations campaign. It correlates, for example, with the potential of having concrete goals and of linking them with the organization's general objectives, with the possibility that the strategic planning team consults the communication office and with the importance of evaluative research.

As seen earlier, the most developed stage by Spanish university public relations departments is communication. However, results show that it is the other stages (research, planning and evaluation) that have a positive influence on the communication department. To start with, there is a correlation among the three; in other words, the more research is conducted, the more planning and evaluation takes place, and vice versa. In addition, the more emphasis an organization puts on research, planning and evaluation, the less importance it places on the press agency model. The university communication offices that research, plan and evaluate extensively are more likely to be consulted by the strategic planning team.

The communication members feel more satisfied when the department's goals are frequently accomplished and when they are less worried about keeping bad publicity out of the media. A high number of employees in the communication department, on the other hand, has a correlation with a higher capacity to manage people (a manager role premise) and a higher possibility to follow a concrete communication plan.

There is a correlation among the different types of public relations measures (message production, message exposure, publics' opinions and attitudes and publics' actions and behaviors). That is to say, a high importance given to one of these methods relates to a high level of relevance in the others. Additionally, universities that extensively employ the last measure (publics' actions and behaviors) seems to conduct better public relations, as its use relates to a higher emphasis on research, with better social relations and with a more extensive planning (especially on current situation and strategies). It also has a correlation with the possibilities that the strategic planning team consults the communication department and that a higher emphasis is given to the population in general and government and institutional agents as publics.

4. Conclusions

Public relations in Spanish universities are in need of improvement. Results show that these departments interact with the public in a one-way direction and work more as a journalist in residence than as a conciliator or manager between the interests of the organization and its audience. Although they are likely to link the objectives of the communication department with the organization's goals, they follow only occasionally a communication plan.

The public relations departments are especially worried about communication, leaving evaluation, planning and, especially, research in second place. The web page

and social media outlets are the most common tools for communicating with the different publics, although they hardly make use of other new communication technologies, such as podcasts, wikis, forums, Bluetooth or blogs. Research is not extensively taken into account, but when it is, Spanish university communication departments employ more traditional research methods than experimental ones. They are more concerned about the message that is projected and its exposure than with the publics' opinions and attitudes or actions and behaviors.

Very few universities are prepared for conflictive situations, seeing as less than three out of ten universities have a crisis plan and they do not normally put it into action. In addition, only half of the centers have a crisis team.

Nevertheless, results show that several positive actions of public relations relate to other effective behaviors of public relations. For instance, having a communication plan is associated with the potential of having concrete goals and of linking them with the organization's general objectives. Organizations that research, plan, and evaluate extensively are more likely to be consulted by the strategic planning team. Finally, the communication office is considered to be more important when the third and the fourth Grunig and Hunt's models are also considered highly relevant.

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