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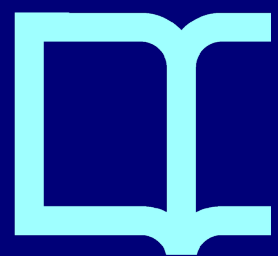
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Which public relations and communications agency should I choose? A new competency model for a smarter supplier selection

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Abstract. The purpose of this article is to develop an innovative model for the selection of public relations and communication agencies, or agencies that provide public relations services. Within the framework of final decision models and building on the matrix model of a competency assessment rubric, our proposed model is designed upon the analysed perceptions of communication directors who work for Spanish organizations with the highest turnover. An *ad hoc* questionnaire was designed and delivered to the targeted respondents. Factorial analysis as well as content analysis of the collected data were conducted in order to explore and classify the attributes more commonly used when selecting a public relations and communication agency. Results indicate that communication departments apply the following criteria: experience, sectorial specialization and client portfolio; professionalism, reliability and quality of the service; and the economic proposal. Surprisingly, technological and digital competency has not emerged as a prominent attribute in this model, despite the capital role that is played by applied technologies in any kind of organization. Nor the capacity of innovation has been considered relevant to be part of the rubric. This study has practical implications since it provides communication professionals with objective criteria for the selection a public relations and communication agency, within the framework of final decision models.

Keyword. Competencies, Management, Public Relations and Communication Agencies, Rubric, Supplier Selection.

1. Introduction

One of the crucial management activities and key to the competitiveness of organizations is the selection of suppliers. At the end of the 1980s, companies realized that the volume of their supply represented an average of 70% of the final cost of the product or service they offered to their customers. One of the services that companies occasionally hire is that of a public relations and communication agency and they do so in order to meet different needs: to complement their current staff, to help in a specific project, provide specialized experience, or an external perspective and additional resources [1]. Thus, the identification of attributes and selection criteria, and the application of approximation and optimization models to evaluate agencies are not alien to this industry.

Harris [2] defined the attributes applied in the selection of a public relations and communication agency in the United States, and Hsu [3] proposed a combined selection, prequalification and final decision model of a public relations and communication agency for the information technology industry. Even with this contribution, Hsu [3] clarifies that there is neither a consensual list of selection attributes, nor specific models of any kind to select a public relations and communication agency.

The Dircom, ADECEC and AERCE manual [4] states that the usual procedure to select a public relations and communication agency, within the framework of a competition, is to call various agencies from which information has been previously collected, RFI (Request For Information), and subsequently invite them to participate in the contest, RFP (Request For Proposal). Another extended practice is the personalized presentations or Chemistry Meetings. This procedure is line with the prequalification models and consists in deciding what the evaluation attributes will be and then shortlisting public relations and communication agencies. Then a selection team is appointed to make a final decision that will come after a series of meetings during which the invited agencies have had the opportunity to present and assess themselves.

With this paper we propose an *ex novo* selection model within the framework of final decision models and inspired by the matrix model of a competency assessment rubric used in the field of education [5]. Our suggested model seeks to update and enrich the extant literature on agency-client relationships as well as to provide a consensus on the selection attributes of a public relations and communication agency who had no previous working relationships with the organizations searching for such services.

The present study pursues three main goals: (a) to explore the selection attributes of a public relations and communication agency, (b) to determine the most representative selection attributes that will finally configure the new model and, (c) to assign a quantitative measure for each attribute.

The purpose of the present research is to propose an *ex novo* selection model, inspired by the matrix model of a learning evaluation rubric, which lists a series of attributes, specific for the selection of an agency of public relations and

communication and which have been defined through an evaluation scale. To achieve this aim, the study is based on three research questions:

RQ1. Do the main attributes applied in the selection of a public relations and communication agency differ from the attributes of any other provider?

RQ2. What are the three main attributes applied in the selection of a public relations and communication agency?

RQ3. What are the prevailing types of attributes in the selection of a public relations and communication agency?

2. Methodology

First, the specialized management literature on supplier selection was reviewed. In addition, the matrix model of the evaluation rubric in the field of education was consulted, since the selection design proposed at the end of the text is inspired by this reference pattern in the field of competency learning. The matrix model of a rubric was chosen because it reduces the subjectivity of the evaluation and guarantees the homogeneity of the used criteria [6].

A questionnaire was prepared in Spanish and sent by email to the electronic addresses of $N=1,067$ recipients in two consecutive weekly waves between November 9 and 22, 2020. The targeted respondents were functional communication managers with more than 5 years of experience in Spanish companies with the highest turnover. They were all members of the Association of Communication Directors-Dircom. The contact information for this sample was obtained from the last public directory Dircom [7], and the electronic addresses were obtained from various sources and manually registered one by one.

The analysis was carried out based on the responses of $n=169$ professionals who answered all the questions, representing 15,83% of the population size (error ± 7 and confidence level 0.95).

The questionnaire consisted of 12 open-ended questions which requested from respondents the following information in this order: 3 selection attributes of a public relations and communication agency; a definition of each attribute according to 3 quality levels exemplary, competent or deficient [8].

Factorial analysis was conducted in order to reduce the collected data and systematize the information that corresponded to the 3 attributes were requested in the first 3 questions answered by $n=169$ participants.

31 selection attributes were identified, labeled and grouped into the 3 categories identified by the experts: (a) 10 attributes related to the structure and work processes; (b) 12 attributes related to the service; and (c) 9 attributes related to the agency's human capital profile. The reliability of the analysis (agreement on the entire category system) was Cohen's $\kappa = 0.75$. Attributes were then classified according to the quantitative (c) and qualitative (k) coding [9]. Then absolute and relative frequencies were calculated with the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS).

Content analysis was performed [10] resulting in refined definitions of the three quality levels for each of the 31 attributes. Subsequently, a set of the most representative attributes was elaborated [11], according to the three quality levels:

exemplary, competent or deficient [8]. Finally, this set was used to design the evaluation rubric [5] to facilitate the selection of a public relations and communication agency.

3. Results

Our main results are detailed in Table 1 below. The 1st column displays the obtained attributes, labelled and enumerated in descending order according to repeated mentions in each of the three (3) categories. The 2nd column shows the answers to the first three questions regarding the three main attributes of selection of a public relations and communication agency. These attributes are grouped by categories and presented with a brief semantic explanation. Absolute or observed frequencies of each attribute are displayed in the 2nd column and relative frequencies in the 4th column as the percentage that each attribute represents out of the total of the 507 answers collected for these first three questions. The 5th and last column contains the attribute typologies, namely: quantitative (c) or qualitative (k), according to De Boer, Labro and Morlacchi [9].

Table 1. Categorization of the selection attributes of a PR & Communication agency

507 (responses) of n=169 organizations, 95% CI.

Category 1 (agency): Attributes related to the agency's structure and work processes

| No. | Attribute label and meaning | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency | Attribute type |
|-----|---|--------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| 1 | REPUTATION (Prestige, image, consideration) | 34 | 6,7% | K |
| 2 | INFLUENCE (Capacity to influence: network of contacts, relationship with the media and influencers) | 15 | 3,0% | C |
| 3 | COVERAGE (Scope and commercial coverage) | 11 | 2,2% | C |
| 4 | VALUES (Values and style of the agency aligned with the organization) | 7 | 1,4% | K |
| 5 | RESOURCES (Facilities, resources and adequate size) | 6 | 1,2% | C |
| 6 | LOCATION (Geographic location) | 6 | 1,2% | C |
| 7 | TRANSPARENCY (Quality of being clear and evident) | 4 | 0,8% | K |
| 8 | METHODOLOGY (Organizational structure, processes and methodological rigor) | 3 | 0,6% | C |
| 9 | GUARANTEE (Compliance with deadlines) | 3 | 0,6% | c |
| 10 | FINANCE (Financial solvency) | 2 | 0,4% | c |
| | Subtotal: Observed frequency and relative frequency of category 1 attributes | 91 | 17,9% | |
| | Category 2 (service): Attributes related with the service | | | |
| 11 | EXPERIENCE (Success stories, specialization in the sector and client portfolio) | 103 | 20,3% | c |
| 12 | QUALITY (Professionalism, reliability and quality of the presentation of the service) | 92 | 18,1% | k |
| 13 | PRICE (Economic proposal) | 68 | 13,4% | c |
| 14 | CREATIVITY (Creative and original proposal, new ideas, transgressive vision) | 23 | 4,5% | k |
| 15 | PERSONALIZATION (Tailor-made proposal) | 15 | 3,0% | k |
| 16 | PORTFOLIO (Service catalog) | 8 | 1,6% | c |
| 17 | ROI (Orientation to results and return on investment) | 6 | 1,2% | c |
| 18 | PUBLICS (Knowledge of the publics) | 4 | 0,8% | k |
| 19 | CRISIS MANAGEMENT (Ability to solve problems and crisis management) | 3 | 0,6% | k |
| 20 | AGILITY (Quick response) | 3 | 0,6% | k |
| 21 | SERVICE (Comprehensive offer) | 3 | 0,6% | c |
| 22 | NEGOTIATION (Negotiation capacity) | 2 | 0,4% | c |
| | Subtotal: Observed frequency and relative frequency of category 2 attributes | 330 | 65,1% | |

Category 3 (people): Attributes related to staff

Category 3 (people): Attributes related to staff

| No. | Attribute label and meaning | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency | Attribute type |
|---|---|--------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| 23 | RESILIENCE (Ability to adapt and flexibility) | 24 | 4,7% | K |
| 24 | EMPATHY (Interlocution, close relationship, availability and human quality of the team) | 19 | 3,7% | K |
| 25 | DIGITAL (Technological and digital competency) | 10 | 2,0% | k |
| 26 | CONFIDENCE (Hope given to any action proposal) | 9 | 1,8% | k |
| 27 | PROACTIVITY (Initiative) | 8 | 1,6% | k |
| 28 | COMMITMENT (Involvement) | 7 | 1,4% | k |
| 29 | STRATEGIC THINKING (Ability to optimize resources) | 7 | 1,4% | k |
| 30 | EXCLUSIVITY (Exclusive dedication) | 1 | 0,2% | c |
| 31 | PROFESSIONAL ETHICS (Moral values) | 1 | 0,2% | k |
| Subtotal: Observed frequency and relative frequency of category 3 attributes | | 86 | 17,0% | |
| Total | | 507 | 100% | |

responses

65.1% of the respondents (subtotal of the relative frequency of category 2), refer to the 12 attributes related to the service offered by a public relations and communication agency. On the other hand, the subtotals of the relative frequencies of category 1 about the business structure and work processes (17.9%), with 10 attributes, and of category 3 about people (17.0%), with 9 attributes, both appear as minor categories, since they are far from category 2.

Reputation (6.7%) stands out amongst the attributes included in category 1 regarding company structure and work processes. Other attributes worth considering in this category are influence (3.0%) and its commercial coverage (2.2%).

Category 2 related to service contains the three most frequently mentioned attributes: experience (20.3%), quality of provided service (18.1%), and final price (13.4%). Creativity (4.5%) or personalization of the service (3.0%) fall far behind.

Agency's staff are mostly valued for being flexible and resilient (4.7%) as it can be seen in the last category 3. Other attributes that could be considered are empathy or the human quality of the team (3.7%), as well as technological and digital competency (2.0%) required from the agency's staff.

The rest of the attributes appear highly polarized with very discrete proportions in the three (3) categories. As it can even be seen, two attributes have been mentioned only once. In sum, the finding throw a total of 17 qualitative attributes and 14 quantitative attributes.

It should be noted that the three most frequently mentioned attributes of category 2 –experience, quality of service, and price– form a first block of attributes. And when the relative frequencies are added, they proportionally represent account for more than half of the final decision in a selection (51.8%). Two of these attributes are quantitative and one qualitative.

A second block that could be considered contains a mix of attributes from all three categories: reputation; resilience or flexibility; and a creative proposal. Yet, this set is very far from the first block, with the sum of their relative frequencies only reaching 15.9%. The three attributes of this second block are qualitative.

Table 2 lists the six (6) attributes that make up the two blocks of most frequently mentioned attributes for the sample $n=169$. In the 1st column, we have renumbered each of the attributes. In the 2nd column, the attributes appear in descending order of most-least frequently mentioned. The 3rd column shows the absolute frequencies of each of the attributes and the 4th, the relative frequencies. The typology of attributes, either quantitative (c) or qualitative (k) is displayed in the 5th column. Finally, categories assigned to the most relevant attributes can be seen in the 6th column.

Table 2. The most representative selection attributes of a PR & communication agency

| | Attributes | Absolute frequency | Relative frequency | Typology | Category |
|---|---|--------------------|--------------------|----------|----------------------|
| 1 | EXPERIENCE (Success stories, specialization in the sector and client portfolio) | 103 | 20,3% | c | Category 2 (service) |
| 2 | QUALITY (Professionalism, reliability and quality of the presentation of the service) | 92 | 18,1% | k | Category 2 (service) |
| 3 | PRICE (Economic proposal) | 68 | 13,4% | c | Category 2 (service) |
| 4 | REPUTATION (Prestige, image and consideration) | 34 | 6,7% | k | Category 1 (agency) |
| 5 | RESILIENCE (Ability to adapt and flexibility) | 24 | 4,7% | k | Category 3 (people) |
| 6 | CREATIVITY (Creative and original proposal, new ideas, transgressive vision) | 23 | 4,5% | k | Category 2 (service) |
| | Total | 344 | 67,7% | | |

With a weight of more than two thirds (67.7%), this list of six (6) attributes guides the final decision in the selection of a public relations and communication agency. It can be observed that only one attribute out of this list belongs to category 1 (structure and work processes of the agency): reputation, constituting 6.7% of the weight of the selection process. In this same set, four attributes of category 2 (service provided by the agency) together with their relative frequencies, represent 56.3% of the final decision: experience; quality of service; final price; creativity of proposal. Finally, a single attribute from category 3 is also identified in relation to agency's staff, with 4.7% of the weight of the selection allocated to the qualities of flexibility and resilience.

Additionally, four (4) attributes of a qualitative nature have won a place on this list representing the symbolic or intangible dimensions of a decision with a total of

k=34% in their relative frequencies. Two (2) quantitative attributes represent the factual or tangible dimension of a decision with a sum of c=33.7%.

Table 3 provides answers about the properties that define the attributes. The collected definitions of the six (6) most representative attributes for the selection of an agency have been arranged following Parke's performance assessment score scale [8]: exemplary, competent and deficient. This scale allows the attributes to be converted into evaluation criteria. A numerical value has been assigned to each level of the scale [11]: 3, 2, 1, which facilitates the final computation (Σ) of a selection by offering a scoring interval between 18 and 6, where 18 would be the highest grade and 6 the lowest. Each level describes what the public relations and communication agency has to accomplish to match the required degree of perfection specified by an evaluation attribute [12].

The 1st column displays the attributes, which once the rubric is assigned, become evaluation criteria. They are shown ranked by their absolute and relative frequencies (see Table 2). The following columns, 2nd, 3rd and 4th, provide detailed definitions of each attribute in relation to a quality level.

Table 3. Selection rubric for a PR & communication agency

| Attributes / Evaluation criteria | Quality levels | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| | Exemplary (3) | Proficient (2) | Poor (1) |
| EXPERIENCE (Success stories, specialization in the sector and client portfolio) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge of the sector - More than 5 years of experience - Management of leading and/or recognized brands in the sector and other sectors - Experience in the sector/product and also in similar ones | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Basic knowledge of the sector - Between 3 and 5 years of experience - Management of some leading and/or recognized brands in the sector and other sectors - Basic experience in the sector/product and also in similar ones | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of (or poor) knowledge of the sector - Less than 2 years of experience - Lack of (or poor) management of leading and/or recognized brands in the sector and in other sectors - Lack of (or poor) experience in the sector/product or in similar ones |
| QUALITY (Professionalism, reliability and quality of the presentation of the service) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proposals reflect maximum understanding of and involvement with the values and business portfolio of the client - Contribution of more information and proposals beyond those required in the brief - Delivery times perfectly match the organization requirements - Result-oriented - Rigorous methodology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proposals reflect basic understanding of and involvement with the values and business portfolio of the client - Basic contribution of information and proposals as required in the brief - Delivery times relatively match the organization requirements - Basic orientation to results - Basic methodology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of (or poor) understanding of and involvement with values and businesses portfolio of the client - Lack of (or poor) contribution of information and proposals required in the brief - Delivery times do not match the organization requirements - Lack of (or poor) orientation to results - Lack of (or poor) methodology |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| PRICE (Economic proposal) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cost below the allocated budget line · High or added 'value for money' · Transparency of associated costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cost adjusted to the allocated budget line · Average or economy reward value · Transparency of some associated costs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Cost above the allocated budget line · Excessive margin service, deceitful budget' · Lack of (or poor) transparency of some associated costs |
| REPUTATION (Prestige, image and reputation) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · High/ Positive reputation for outstanding professionalism · References · Perception of innovation · Awards in the sector · High level of activity and membership in professional associations · High level of engagement in social issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Some degree of professional performance · Some references · Certain perception of innovation · Some awards in the sector · Certain activity and limited membership in professional associations · Some level of engagement in social issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of (or little) professionalism · Lack of (or few) references. · Lack of (or little) perception of innovation · Lack of (or few) awards in the sector · Lack of (or little) of activity and membership in professional associations · Lack of (or little) engagement in social issues |
| RESILIENCE (and flexibility) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Alert mechanisms and swift reaction and adjustments in response to new opportunities and potential risks · Agile adaptation mechanisms in case of unforeseen events | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Basic alert mechanisms and some reaction and adjustments in response to new opportunities and potential risks · Basic adaptation mechanisms in case of unforeseen events | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of (or scarce) alert mechanisms and low or no reaction and adjustments in response to new opportunities and potential risks · Lack of (or scarce) adaptation mechanisms in case of unforeseen events |
| CREATIVITY (Creative and original proposal, new ideas, transgressive vision) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Innovative ideas, out-of-the-box solutions, surprising, feasible and customized for the organization and its target audiences · Contributions that go beyond the brief | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Partially innovative ideas, some original solutions feasible and customized for the organization and its target audiences · Contributions according to the brief | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Basic and/or standardized ideas · Lack of (or few) contributions according to the brief |

Σ

4. Discussion and conclusions

When an organization needs to hire the services of a public relations and communication agency, the first concern has to do with the range of services an agency can offer. Especially important is the experience and specialization in the sector where the organization operates, something long ago envisioned and explored by the European Communication Monitor [13] and the Latin American Communication Monitor [14], among other international studies. Another relevant

aspect is the quality of the service [15, 16], and the price to be paid, the very first lessons learnt about management.

These three attributes are the first to be found in the rubric put forward in the present study. Based on the foregoing, it seems agencies with a longer history would have a greater chance of being hired than those with less experience, or new players in the market. In any case, given the inexperience, the rubric also proposes to evaluate the provision of a quality service and the price, two competitive attributes that could threaten the more consolidated agencies and help to balance the initial disadvantage. The quality of the service is difficult to demonstrate. However, impeccable credentials can help to build trust through a promising content, endorsement or advice of third parties or the candidate agency's own success stories, should it have any to share. The price can be adjusted, which plays in favor of new agencies, since price does not include the intangible asset of a long-term reputation or accumulated experience. An agency with a relatively short itinerary and limited experience may have performed well in a specific sector that coincides with the demanded by an organization in search of such service. Together with quality and price, this asset could become a determining factor and increase the prospects of landing a new client.

After the question of service, the next concern presented in the rubric presents is getting to know the agency itself and building a working relationship with the agency staff. At this stage, all agencies may seem to be playing by the same rules in a neutral territory, as there is no evidence of previous collaboration or any type of antecedents. Therefore, making acquaintances with the team offers the opportunity to showcase the character, talent and individual experiences of each professional. These aspects could compensate the lack of expertise when compared to very well-settled and well-known competitors.

The most significant attributes out of these last two categories, are the perception of prestige, image and reputation that the organization may have (long ago mentioned by Dickson [15]) and the mechanisms of flexibility and resilience displayed by the agency staff (the latter features incorporated in the 1980s). Certainly, the popularity that an agency professes gives more credibility, trust and guarantees to the organization that must hire it. This credit is binding on the final decision, but given the current volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment (VUCA), communication departments of contemporary organizations also need to rely on very flexible and resilient external collaborators, capable of adapting quickly to the widest variety of changes and alert and ready to weather all sorts of eventualities.

Organizations also appreciate creative and original proposals that reveal a certain degree of transgressive vision. The European Communication Monitor [13] and the Latin American Communication Monitor [14] already anticipated that creativity is one of the attributes mostly valued by organizations.

Curiously, strategic thinking and knowledge of trends appear as main attributes in the European Communication Monitor [13] and in the Latin American Communication Monitor [14] and, on the other hand, they have not been considered the most important in this research. And, at a time when many organizations have sustainability in mind in many of their processes, it would not appear as a relevant aspect to consider social and environmental responsibility as a distinctive value.

Other attributes such as punctuality in delivery [15], reliability [17], service and innovation [18] have also been omitted in this rubric.

The contribution of technological and digital competency is considered as another aspect of innovation [13, 14]. Notwithstanding the high level of awareness and predisposition in organizations to use technology and invest resources in it to be more competitive [19], technological and digital competency has not emerged as a prominent attribute in this research.

Public relations and communication agencies provide very different services, thus the importance of individual selection criteria varies depending on the services sought [4]. However, the research has made it possible to determine that all potential criteria are included in the rubric, thus avoiding arbitrariness in the selection of attributes in a selection process. Eventually, it is up to each organization whether to apply all or some of the suggested selected criteria in the search for a suitable agency. Precisely this last piece of information makes the selection easier for the evaluator (the organization) and may ultimately determine the decision of the agency whether to take part in the assessment process.

Finally, it has been observed that the main attributes considered in the selection of a public relations and communication agency bear no significant differences found in the literature related to the selection of suppliers in general. That is, they are not specific attributes of this sector, but rather applicable to any type of selection. The three attributes that stand out in the selection of a public relations and communication agency are: experience, quality and price of the service. The attribute of knowledge of trends is also relevant, but it is not present in the main trio.

We also note that the number of qualitative attributes (4) doubles that of the quantitative attributes (2), but, curiously, the sum of the observed frequencies (171) and the relative frequencies ($c=33.7\%$) of the two quantitative attributes maintain a significant correlation with the sum of the observed frequencies (173) and the relative frequencies ($k=34\%$) of the four qualitative attributes.

The complexity of the selection process proves that strategic partnership with suppliers may bring about significant transformations, trends and new horizons for the best fit.

Despite the obtained results, this study has certain limitations. In the first place, data were collected during the peaks of the Covid-19 pandemic and this may have partly affected some of the responses of the sampled informants. Besides, neither the selected universe nor the analysis sample are representative of all the Spanish companies or communication directors who exercise their functional responsibility in Spain. However, the number of respondents provides an adequate basis for analyzing patterns in their responses corresponding to the selection practice of a public relations and communication agency, and allows considering the research results as general trends.

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