

IROCAMM.

INTERNATIONAL	REVIEW
OF	COMMUNICATION
AND	MARKETING MIX

*the mainstream review on
communication*

N. 4, VOL. 1

institucional.us.es/irocamm

<https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/IROCAMM>

VOL 1

N.4



Editorial Universidad de Sevilla



PUBLISHERS

University of Seville

PUBLISHING LOCATION

Seville – Spain

E-MAIL AND WEBSITE

irocamm@us.es

<http://institucional.us.es/irocamm>

<https://editorial.us.es/es/revistas/irocamm-international-review-communication-and-marketing-mix>

ORIGINAL DESIGN

LA HUERTA

www.lahuertaagencia.com

ISSN

2605-0447

DOI

<https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/IROCAMM>



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The importance of the communication strategy in tourism micro-enterprises in Seville

La importancia de la estrategia de comunicación en las microempresas turísticas de Sevilla

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Abstract

In the context of excess information that we live in the XXI century, institutional communication becomes essential. Big enterprises and institutions clearly see the need to invest in this aspect, however small and micro-enterprises do not have it so assumed. The aim of this paper is to analyze the role of institutional communication in tourist micro-enterprises in Seville. It is carried out from the interview with 6 managers of micro-enterprises and is complemented by 2 interviews with experts. From the results, it is possible to verify that the organizations that implement communication elements manage to position themselves better.

Keywords

Hostels; institutional communication; micro-enterprises; Seville; tourism.

Resumen

En el contexto de exceso de información que vivimos en el siglo XXI, la comunicación institucional se vuelve esencial. Las grandes empresas e instituciones ven claramente la necesidad de invertir en este aspecto, sin embargo las pequeñas y microempresas no lo tienen tan asumido. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar el papel de la comunicación institucional en las microempresas turísticas de Sevilla. Se realiza a partir de la entrevista a 6 directivos de microempresas y se complementa con 2 entrevistas a expertos. A partir de los resultados se puede comprobar que las organizaciones que implementan elementos de comunicación logran posicionarse mejor.

Palabras clave

Albergues; comunicación institucional; microempresas; Sevilla; turismo..

1. Introduction

Seville had 688.592 inhabitants in 2019, according to the National Institute of Statistics. This takes it to occupy the fourth place among the most populated cities in Spain, below Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia.

It is a city that has been consolidating in recent years as a tourism powerhouse. According to the Statistical Yearbook of the province of Seville, in 2018 there were 4.003 enterprises dedicated to the hospitality industry in the capital of Seville (being the municipality of the province of Seville that has the largest number of entities dedicated to this economic activity).

The main indicators of tourist activity in the province of Seville in 2019 registered almost four million travelers. There are different types of hostel establishments, in this research we will address hostels, which according to the definition of the Statistical Yearbook of the province of Seville for the year 2019:

They are those establishments that offer accommodation, with or without others services of a complementary nature, and which, both due to the size of the establishment and the structure, type or characteristics of the services they offer, are exempted by regulations from certain requirements demanded of hotels.

In this context, when we talk about tourism micro-enterprises in Seville, we refer to those that offer accommodation services, but due to their size and characteristics, they will be considered hostels, rather than hotels.

Micro-enterprises have characteristics own of its nature, among them we can mention that they have a traditional production, little technical division of labor, a little industrialized organizational structure and a low technological level due to the limited capital they have (Álvarez, 2018).

The European Commission's User Guide (2015, p.11) proposes as a definition of micro-enterprise "those companies that employ less than 10 people and whose annual balance sheet does not exceed two million euros".

According to Philip Resnik (1992, p. 21) the main disadvantages of micro-enterprises are:

1. The little financial information available.
2. The easy accounting manipulation since the figures of owner and manager usually coincide in the same person.
3. His family character, which decisively influences his performance.

Since its inception, the development of micro-enterprises has been threatened by certain limitations and uncertainty. The structure is fragile due to its size and nature, which implies an even greater need for a communication strategy for its proper functioning (Corona-León, 2018, p. 16).

In this sense, the main aim of this research is to determine the importance of the implementation of a communication strategy that includes elements of institutional communication in tourism micro-enterprises dedicated to the hostelry industry in the province of Seville.

This paper aims to elaborate precisely on this relevance of elements of institutional communication in tourism micro-enterprises in Seville.

For this, it is intended to know the internal and external communication strategies carried out by tourism micro-enterprises in Seville. Know -in addition- which support programs offered by the Spanish government and institutions are used by these micro-enterprises. And finally discover the communication tools they use.

This research is framed in a difficult time for the tourism industry, when the world is shaking under the

ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic and one of the most affected sectors is precisely tourism. In this sense, the implementation of an institutional communication strategy will be more necessary than ever before because the effort for positioning must be greater.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical concepts that serve as the basis for this research are communication, micro-enterprises and institutional communication. Starting with the most basis, communication means reaching out the recipient of the message with empathy and efficiency, according to the journalism dictionary (Muñoz, 2000, p. 59). Any communication strategy that is implemented has to start from this base (Jiménez-Marín, 2011), which seems obvious, but in practice it is not (López, Jiménez-Marín, Torres, Giesecke & Morales, 2019).

At the enterprise level, what is communicated and how it is communicated is part of strategic planning and becomes increasingly important in a context of excess information. The micro-enterprise is not exempt from this process, although its resources are limited, the communication strategy should be considered as a basis investment for a long-term growth and development.

According to Caro (2003, p. 3), the transfer of information is the result of communication in enterprises and it is what helps their connection and cohesion, creating an integrated system. In addition, it also proposes the objectives that motivate communication in an enterprise:

1. To improve productivity
2. For coexistence
3. Mechanism of power
4. The cult of culture
5. Sell the company inside
6. The right to information
7. Encourage the attitude change (Caro, 2000, p. 5)

We start from the quote of Philip Resnik (1992, p. 21) "running a small business is the art of the essential. It is making the most of the minimum". Resources are scarce, labor, time, money, machinery and technology must be used efficiently to obtain better results.

On the other hand, the definition of institutional communication is approached, whose studies have been developed especially under the Anglo-Saxon influence. The term institution refers to any human organization made up of several people, which works from some shaping principles and under a specific structure, necessary to coordinate many activities in order to achieve certain objectives (Scott, 1989, p. 2).

Some authors refer to organizational communication (Armirola, García & Romero, 2020), in this article the term institutional communication will be used, because it is an expression that refers to the communication carried out from the institutional culture, that is, according to Deal & Kennedy (1982), the set of shared values, beliefs, habits, characters and ideas that guide the activity and behavior of the members of an institution.

These are a series of basic elements implicit in the concept of institutional communication. According to Mancinas-Chávez & Rodríguez (2010), the main ones are:

1. Structure and organized activity.
2. To create and establish communicative relationships.
3. In the communication market
4. With people and entities
5. On the identity and institutional mission.

In this sense, this work addresses institutional communication market about identity and institutional mission with people and identities.

3. Methodology

The research technique that will be used for this study will be qualitative, as mentioned by Howard Schwartz and Jerry Jacobs (1984), this type of data collection is based on interpretive methodology, that is, it aims to collect the meaning of the action of the subjects. Bertaux (1981) shares that the objective of this technique is to interpret social actions, through the analysis of language, which occurs simultaneously with data collection, always being close to reflection and feedback between the actor and researcher.

The semi-directed interview will be the qualitative technique that will be used in this research. This type of interview is characterized by fostering free interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewer has a list of items that he wants to analyse (Azar and Silar, 2006) and must have the ability to delve into areas that he considers most important for the study and analyze the subjectivity of the interviewee, his feelings, attitudes, thoughts and actual motivations (Bailey, 1987, p. 191).

In this case, an instrument formulated by Héctor Corona (2013, p. 1298) will be used, from which a series of questions will be asked to the managers of the hostels selected as case studies, six hostels in Seville, which were chosen through a simple random sampling among enterprises that met two requirements: belong to the two-star category and be micro-enterprises as defined above. In order to complement the information obtained in the interviews with the managers of the selected hostels, two experts will be interviewed on the subject of micro-enterprises and tourism, such is the case of Nuria Ramos, in charge of the Press Office of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports of the Junta de Andalucía and José Córdoba Leiva, Director of the Center for Tourism Innovation of Andalusia, Andalucía Lab.

4. Results

This section reflects the most important ideas collected in the six interviews carried out with the managers of the hostels, first, and they are complemented with the vision of the experts. The first data is the absence of a communicative strategy in the entire sample.

None of the enterprises has a specialized communication area, they do not have a strategic communication plan and the communication activities that are carried out are very basic and are usually led by the managers of the hostels, most of whom do not have specialized training in this area.

On the other hand, only four companies have a logo. In five of the six cases studied, university internships can be carried out, which are a platform for students to learn about one of the job opportunities that their university career may have.

Half of the enterprises have support from the Junta de Andalucía: one of the cases studied has a grant agreement to improve the Wi-Fi connection and another two have support for the training contract of young people who carry out their internships in the hostel. However, there is a lack of knowledge about courses, programs and other support that the government provides especially to his economic sector. Of the six cases studied, almost none use the traditional media (radio, television, newspaper and magazine) to promote their hostel, except for one of them, in which the manager comments that a few years ago, they interviewed her about the services offered by her hostel, for a local channel in Seville and helped her to promote her hostel for free.

All enterprises have an email address and are present in the digital environment to varying degrees, as will be seen in table 1. The following elements have been considered for the research: website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp.

In four cases, the managers are the one who upload content to these networks. One of them hires the external services of a communication consultancy, which is dedicated to managing the activity of the website and in its words expresses: "it is not an institutional page", basically it is in charge of being a platform for clients' reserve room. In the other case, the person in charge affirms that one of the receptionists is the one who makes publications in her free time for the Facebook account (which are not updated) and the website and the Twitter account have not had activity since 2015. So, table 1 shows the last time publications were made on the digital platforms used by hostels (last reviewed on November 6, 2020):

Table 1. Latest publications of digital content

Case	Website	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
1	March 20, 2020	August 20,2020	February 15, 2017	October 5, 2020
2	November 6, 2020	None	None	None
3	June 2, 2015	June 8, 2018	February 7, 2015	None
4	None	May 23, 2015	None	None
5	Site under maintenance	September 17, 2018	January 18, 2018	March 20, 2020
6	November 6, 2020	September 24, 2020	November 23, 2018	December 8, 2019

Source: Own elaboration from the data provided, 2020

We can observe that one of the hostels does not have a website and the others do, but one of them is undergoing maintenance. Five hostels have a Facebook page, of which two have published this year. Four micro-enterprises have Twitter, but none have published in 2020. Three hostels have Instagram, of which two published during the current year.

All the hostels analyzed are registered on Tripadvisor, a travel review platform that has a very important role in the entire accommodation process. In the first place, it serves as a link when the user surfs the net and performs an exploration of the lodging options, since he reads the opinions and scores that the clients of the hostels have left, a trust is created in the disinterested recommendation that other users have written, so could say that it would be a "word of mouth" communication technique in the digital age, with a high degree of influence on users when choosing and buying the hostel service. Also, there is the reverse exercise, when the users has already made their stay in the hostel and has the freedom to write their opinion, it helps to generate content and publicity for the micro-enterprise.

Within this platform, we find that sections that are key for potential clients are shown, for example, the location of the hostel is appreciated on a satellite map, the opinions and scores of users, photographs, as well as the items included in the accommodation: cleaning service, breakfast, air conditioning, internet, multilingual staff, among others.

There is a range of scores, where 0 is "terrible" and 5 is "excellent", we analyzed what the users wrote about the case studies and found the following (November 6, 2020):

Table 2. Score and number of reviews on Tripadvisor

Case	Score	Opinions
1	4.5	742
2	3	242
3	4.5	783
4	2.5	158
5	4.0	373
6	4.5	319

Source: Own elaboration from the data provided, 2020

Four of the hostels are in the “very good-excellent” range, while two are in the “normal” rating. It is worth mentioning that the most recent opinions of cases 4 and 5 were written in September and October 2019, while in cases 1 and 3 they were made in January 2020 and in cases 2 and 6 in September and February 2020. This platform is a tool that serves as a guide to know the quality and attention that clients receive and to have feedback on their experience in the hostel. Thus, table 3 analyzes the channels where users make their reservation at the hostel involved.

Table 3. Means by which reservations are made at hostels

Case	Means by which reservations are made
1	Facebook´s messenger, Website and by a telephone call
2	Website and Booking
3	Booking
4	Booking, Hostel World and Hostel Club
5	Booking
6	Hostel World and Expedia

Source: Own elaboration from the data provided, 2020

We observe that digital platforms are widely used as a means of booking in hostels and to a lesser extent the hostel´s website is used and only in one case a traditional means such as the telephone. In the technological era, traditional media are still being used, but there are more digital users, in this vein, José Luis Córdoba Leiva, Director of the Center for Tourism Innovation of Andalusia (Andalucía Lab), in the interview comments that:

Micro-enterprises have problems to ride the wave of modernization and above all, they need to have criteria when making decisions to know in which technology to invest. One of the difficulties that exists for the enterprise is that, given all the diverse technology that exists, it must find the one that is suitable for its needs and know how to use it, for this it must have a diagnosis of the enterprise.

If the micro-enterprise wants to have technological resources, it is not enough to buy them, it is necessary to plan according to the requirements and taking into account the actions planned to be carried out with them. Above all, it is essential to have a person who has the right digital knowledge according to the level of the results or scope that the organization wants to have.

On the other hand, half of the managers share having given some training and education to their employees. Case 1, 2 and 6 on customer service; as well as case 2 regarding to occupational risks and case 6 regarding to the social part and the integration of the guests.

Only two hostels have a mission, vision and values of the company, case 1 and case 6. The person in charge of the latter case commented that “it is not so important to have a sign with the mission, vision or values of the company, which nourishes are the activities that reflect that content, as our hostel seeks to unify a group and, above all, create a family”. Within the internal information systems of the analyzes cases, there is WhatsApp, which is present in all the hostels and through which the person in charge communicates with the receptionists, as well as, in case 1, they have a document in calendar form on Google Drive, where workers write their schedules so everyone is aware. Cases 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 hold business meetings at the following time intervals:

Table 4. Frequency with which work meetings are held

Case	Frequency
1	Every 2 months
2	Every 6 months
3	None
4	Every 3 months
5	Every 3 or 4 months
6	Once a week

Source: Own elaboration from the data provided, 2020

The person in charge of case 1 comments that previously the meeting were held every Friday, but found that holding them every Friday, but found that holding them every two months was more productive. In case 6, the person in charge said that "the work meetings serve to listen to the workers and generate greater coexistence and deal with them". The enterprise is like a person, also communicates and emits an image that is perceived by costumers. The sources of information available to know what is happening in the enterprise is through what users write on the internet about the hostel and what employees say, therefore it is advisable to hold work meetings where they talk about the experiences the workers have had; the comments, requests and suggestions that the clients have mad and which actions have been positive and which must be changed. In this way, a roadmap can be displayed and the recommendations and steps to be taken to improve the quality of the micro-enterprise can be formulated.

Five of the studied cases have a welcome guide for new workers, but none have an employee guide. In all cases, there is no sporting or cultural practice within the company. Regarding the follow-up that is given to the guests, once their stay at the hostel I over, case 1 shared that when the guest checks out, a form is sent to their email to write their comments and experience in the hostel.

Case 2 commented that on its website there is a comments section where users can write their opinion, issue a score and rate the following items: quality-price, comfort, location, staff and cleanliness.

Cases 3 and 4 do not have a physical or digital suggestion box.

Case 5 has a suggestion box on its website where cleanliness, location, staff, rooms and prices are evaluated.

Case 6 comments that, when the client finishes their stay, the hostel contacts them to find out what their experience was like, if something was missing, how they felt and based on those comments, it designs the guidelines and shapes the necessary actions to provide better service and quality to future customers.

On the other hand, it is necessary to foster a closeness between the government, the media and micro-enterprises. When interviewing Nuria Ramos, in charge of the Press Office of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports of the Junta de Andalucía, she explains in her words the link that exists between micro-enterprises dedicated to tourism and media:

They are badly related, it is a failure in general, micro-enterprises do not value the importance of communication in the development of a company. A very low percentage carry out planned communication activities. Enterprises do not have communication managers, there is no such awareness of communication in the enterprise if they do not talk about you.

Being present in a hypercompetitive world and with a great exposure of knowledge and also disinformation, micro-enterprises have to take on the task of approaching the media; knowing the menu of options that exists to make themselves known and create content of interest for the public that requires the hosting service. Also, it is convenient to approach government programs, tourism forums, business associations, to have

more information about what is happening and learn about the situation in the field. All these activities are recommended to be carried out by a person specialized in communication, who needs to be in contact with the manager and workers of the micro-enterprise, to establish the guidelines and the action plan that will be carried out.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The first deficit that we find in the micro-enterprises studied is the absolute absence of a communication strategy and the figure of a communication professional (dircom), an essential figure, according to Martin (2003, p. 65), since it is who defines the communication policy (objectives), establishes a necessary communication plan or strategy (creates, coordinates, analyzes, develops, disseminates and controls the emission of internal and external messages) for each case and assumes responsibility for the institutional image of the organization before its internal and external audiences, through the media. An alternative for micro-enterprises, whose human capital is scarce, would be to opt for hiring an external communication service, as one of the cases studied does.

Only four of the cases studied have a logo. It is necessary to point out the importance of this element in terms of communication, it is a basic element to begin to form an institutional image and issue a message, it is essential to capture an emblem that represents -through a design, institutional colors and a slogan- the values and image that the company wishes to convey.

Regarding the part of social responsibility, no micro-enterprise carries out activities in favor of this very important section and that in recent years we have seen that the trend of caring about the environment and social causes is increasing. Now users have a greater awareness and observe the environment that exists inside and outside the enterprise; the way in which the company obtains its inputs and what happens to waste, the values that the brand manages, its impact on the environment, to mention a few examples.

We are faced with a scenario in which there is no structure, organization and much less communication strategies to reach users online, which is alarming in this sector of hostels, because based on the interviews carried out, the profiles of the clients are young people between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, who get to know the hostels through internet research engines, as well as digital hostels platforms. Therefore, it must have an updated and striking content to the client's expectations, so, among a range of hostel possibilities, the services of the hostel in question will be acquired.

Now more than ever, a close relationship is needed between micro-enterprises and the media. Faced with the total monopolization of news on the covid issue, it is also good to know how these types of enterprises have reacted, which obtained their profits thanks to one of the activities that was most affected and restricted in this pandemic, tourism.

We consider it essential, that in tourism micro-enterprises, a strategic, structured and above all conscious and specialized communication is carried out. As mentioned by the authors we have reviewed, the characteristics and nature of micro-enterprises make their processes traditional, without a clear structure and often based on intuition or assumptions.

With the data collected, we observe that the age range of the people who stay in the hostels has the constant use of the internet as a characteristic, therefore it is important to know the most appropriate social network according to their profile and above all, to know what content to publish in each of them. Carla García Mairena, communication director of the Minerva Program Technology-Based Business Accelerator, mentions that to choose a company's social network, one must start from two premises: knowing the type of business model of the company and knowing the communication strategy, Minerva Program (September 12, 2019).

Finally, within this necessary communication strategy, the need for micro-enterprises to have a style guide that serves as a basis for knowing what type of content should be published on each social network has its purpose and its design and functions allow different types of publications to be made, focused for example, on reading (Facebook), visualizing graphic pieces (Instagram), generating debate (Twitter), representing audiovisual capsules (YouTube) and linking professional contacts (LinkedIn).

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IROCAMM- International Review Of Communication And Marketing Mix | e-ISSN: 2605-0447

IROCAMM

VOL. 1, N. 4 - Year 2021

Received: 19/12/2020 | Reviewed: 30/12/2020 | Accepted: 31/12/2020 | Published: 02/01/2021

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/IROCAMM.2021.v01.i04.05>

Pp.: 54-62

e-ISSN: 2605-0447

