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Communication and advertising in NGDOs: Present and future

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Abstract

Non-Governmental Organizations for Development (NGDOs), as part of the Third Sector, coexist in society with large business conglomerates, trade unions, public entities, etc. that use communication to improve their bottom line, whether tangible or not. New technologies and the Internet are becoming indispensable tools to reach audiences, increasingly influenced by social networks, work, blogs, and so on. At a time when solidarity is more necessary than ever and administrative support is diminishing, NGDOs need to communicate what they do and how they do it, because their survival and that of those they assist is at stake. This paper seeks to highlight the lack of communicators in NGDOs throughout their existence. It shows that today most NGDOs still do not have expert communication officers, but they do have digitally trained people in their ranks in order to make themselves known and attract the attention of their target audiences. It seems that in the not too distant future communication will become a fundamental pillar for social entities.

Keywords

Communication; networks; NGOD; Third Sector; tools.

1. Introduction

Solidarity is something as old as coexistence in society itself, but once the Welfare Society has arrived it will be the State that provides certain comforts and guarantees to citizens; as pointed out in the Manual of Aid for the Management of Non-Profit Entities published in 2002,

> "One of the greatest challenges of this century is to ensure that the benefits of the so-called Welfare State, of which so much has been said in the 1990s, are extended to all countries and reach everyone, especially those belonging to the most disadvantaged groups. It is a question of making the globalization of welfare a reality" (Assisi, Gross, Lillo & Caro, 2002, p.14).

However, as recognized in this manual

> "This noble objective will only be achieved with the coordinated participation of two sectors, the public (through the Administrations, at all levels and in each of their agencies) and the private, especially the non-profit sector. The latter plays a subsidiary role, because it reaches where the administration does not, as well as channeling the social concerns of many citizens who devote part of their time to collaborating with the most needy" (Assisi, Gross, Lillo, & Caro, 2002, p.14).

This is why private entities have replaced the State in the provision of goods and services. Similarly, political parties and trade unions seem to have lost the legitimacy that was once granted to them. And as a consequence, "between the State and the market, a wide space has opened up where modern societies are defining a new type of actor, volunteerism" (Mora & Gómez del Río, 2001).

Faced with this panorama, social entities need to make themselves known, on the one hand in order to achieve voluntary adherence and, on the other hand, to raise funds, financial or otherwise, in order to be able to carry out the purpose for which they were created. Thus, Edward L. Bernays already in 1998 stated:

> "Generally speaking, the relationship and interaction of the audience and any movement are quite obvious. Charities that rely on voluntary contributions for their operation have a clear and direct interest in being represented favourably to the public. In the same way, the big company that faces the danger of seeing its profits cut by taxes or that sees its sales fall or that sees its freedom curtailed by legislative actions, must know how to resort to public opinion to successfully combat these threats" (Bernays, 1998, p. 35).

Therefore, companies as well as institutions and organizations of all kinds need to make themselves known, and for this communication is established as a link between the organization and its audiences.

In the case of NGDOs, as Bernardo García Izquierdo argues, communication is of paramount value for the following issues:

- "When structuring the activities to be offered, it will be necessary to reflect on the audiences to which the organization wishes to address.
- When looking for people to provide the service, it is also necessary to analyze which group you want to collaborate in the project.
- In order to seek funding, one has to ask what social sectors may be interested in financially supporting the association" (García, 1999, p. 164)

But without falling into the drama and banalization of poverty, as Martínez warns:

> "The media and NGOs, moved by their enthusiasm for raising awareness among public opinion, often show dramatic images of the consequences of underdevelopment. These have two opposing effects on their audience. On the one had there is the immediate inclination to do something and make an emotional and financial commitment to the people affected. On the other, there is a gradual loss of interest brought about by saturation of information about this type of situation. Almost always, whenever information is given about underdevelopment it is done negatively, following the rule that only extraordinary events are newsworthy. There has never been so strong a call for solidarity or so much display of unacceptable realities accompanied by reproving language. But, this frenzy of solidarity is a skin-deep, flimsy, one-off phenomenon; it is a rootless, restrained and partial commitment which keeps its distance" (Martínez, 2002, p.2).

In this sense, on January 3, 2005, the Coordinadora de ONGD de España issued a press release asking the state televisions (TVE, Antena 3, Telecinco and Canal Plus) not to use the drama of Asia to carry out fundraising shows. In the same, the president of the Coordinadora states: "NGDOs do not want to collect donations through the manipulation of the good feelings of the population and be accomplices of a business policy that we do not share: the search for an audience at any price".

Precisely, to put an end to this situation, what NGDOs have to do is to become the ones who manage the information transmitted from the media. If they receive information on situations of poverty from a catastrophic point of view, this will be what they transmit to the rest of society. However, if NGDOs were able to sensitize the media in a way that has nothing to do with the dramatization of the situation in the Third World, the vision of the Third World offered through the media would change. In this sense, García Izquierdo says that:

> "There seems to be a general lack of professionalism and agility among Spanish NGDOs in those responsible for preparing and issuing press releases. Despite the fact that the credibility of the messages issued by Humanitarian Organisations is very high, their presence in the media and the effectiveness demonstrated in this relationship is quite low" (García, 1999, p. 108).

What García Izquierdo wrote in 1999 was corroborated in his doctoral thesis Román-San-Miguel:

> "Of the NGDOs studied, a total of twenty-two, only four claim to have a press or communication office in the entity or in the Andalusian delegation (if they are). The most common argument is the lack of financial resources to maintain a specific department dedicated to communication work" (Román-San-Miguel, 2006, p.240).

And as it appears from the participant observation carried out in this work, it continues today.

2. Methodology

This work aims to highlight the situation of communication in the Third Sector in Andalusia, starting from how it has been developed in the last ten years according to bibliographical references and using as a current example the organization of communication of the Andalusian Network for the Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EAPN-A) which brings together about 50 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), some of which work for Development (NGOD).

To elaborate this study we have used mainly the participant observation as a work methodology, since it is the method that best adjusts to analyze a living reality, in constant change and of which the own authors of the work are participating actively. Marshall and Rossman (1989:79) define observation as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study. In the participant observation the researcher is part of the studied reality, at the moment in which the environment to study admits him as one more member of the community. Thus, this work is based on the information gathered through experience working in communication in the Third Sector. Likewise, an exhaustive bibliographical follow-up has been carried out, for which authors of renowned prestige have written about the importance of communication for NGDOs, and about the innovations that they are incorporating in their communicative task.

3. State of play. Past and present of communication in NGOs in Andalusia

The need to have a communication area that meets the needs that social entities have comes from afar. The study 'The Third Sector seen from outside' by the Splai Foundation (2007) reflected how communication, despite being considered important, continued to be a pending issue in most entities.

As Vidal Clemente (2004, p. 322) indicates in 'La comunicación para la solidaridad: las ONG y el papel de la comunicación social y periodística en la sensibilización de la opinión pública y el desarrollo' by Marta Isabel González Álvarez (2010):

"Companies communicate to exist, but Third Sector organizations exist to communicate, to transmit their values to society. It can be said that communication forms part of the very essence of these organizations and is present in all their processes, in all their management (...). These entities exist fundamentally to impregnate society with their ideas. The challenge is to do so with increasing professionalism, creativity and efficiency" (González Álvarez, 2010, p. 27).

In 2002, Javier Erro Sala was already telling us about a communication problem in NGDOs that, according to him, is concrete in:

The inability to offer a real and accurate image of the mission and performance of NGDOs, so that society does not know in depth and rigor the realities of the South; Difficulties in controlling their communicative products. NGDOs are unable to communicate with society as a whole without distorting mediations. In this sense we can say that there is an open conflict between NGDOS and the mass media; the challenge of making a communication that is not absorbed or neutralized by technological reason and mercantile logic if they want to stop the threats of distorting their own nature" (Erro, 2002, p.77).

In this sense, according to this same author:

"Perhaps because they lack sufficient sensitivity or interest to rethink communication from the point of view of the unequal relationship between donor and recipient, they focus on seeking more or less aggressive technical media solutions based on marketing and public and corporate image. In this way, they reduce their communication needs to the hiring of good advertisers and image consultants. That is why they either entrust their communication policies to advertising firms (when they have sufficient economic resources), or ensure that the postgraduate courses related to International Cooperation provide them with more technically qualified communicators" (Erro, 2002, p.97).

As a conclusion Erro Sala also pointed out that NGDOs:

"Do not practice communicational co-responsibility. The communicational co-responsibility starts from the transversality of the communication processes. If communication crosses the entire institution, the responsibility for communication cannot be reduced to the staff spokesperson or professional communicator: everyone in a NGDO is a communicator as soon as they communicate" (Erro, 2002, p.97).

Over the years, the sector has acquired a greater perception of the impact and importance of communication in society as well as facing the impossibility of addressing a need that had been dragging for years: to have communication professionals in their ranks, possible only for a few, mainly national entities (Arroyo Almaraz, Baladrón Pazos & Martín Nieto, 2013). The constitution of new powerful social entities, the appearance of new information technologies and the creation of new channels of communication, in recent years has highlighted the important role that communication is increasingly acquiring in the Third Sector.

The birth of new technologies, such as mobile devices, and communication channels, such as social networks, has driven the communication of social entities that have been able to add to their work these new efforts. But this fact has relegated other NGOs that now have to create and manage other channels and do not know how, mainly because of the scarcity of human and material resources faced by the entities.

Communication in this sector has been seen as a transversal line present in all areas but without its own. In spite of this, the roles of communication professionals in social entities have diversified, strengthening their permanence in NGOs (Balas, 2012, p.197). In addition to their duties, the areas of communication include political advocacy, the management of training and awareness campaigns, fundraising and mobilization actions. What is certain is that, "the importance of communication advises the creation of a department to manage this task, adapted to the nature and dimensions of the non-profit organization" (Vidal, 2004, p.312). This Department of Communication will have as:

"Main generic functions: to disseminate information coming from the management, to manage the internal perception of the different areas by proposing communicative actions, to direct the general framework of communication (procedures, budget, training to other departments...), to coordinate communication services (external presentations, publications...) and to animate the institutional function of the organisation and its managers.

Although until seven years ago communication was still framed in a traditional model where the main communication channels were television, radio and the printed newspaper, now the panorama is very different. Internet has managed to displace the protagonism of these channels creating a consumption of the most select communication, now users can decide what to see or what to read when and where they want. This has meant that entities that already had a communications department had to adapt to the new changes by creating websites, managing social networks, producing online graphic materials, etc... In this regard, it should be remembered that Spain is one of the countries most connected to the Internet in Europe, according to the Fundación Telefónica report 'La sociedad de la información en España 2015' (The Information Society in Spain 2015).

What is more, communication in the Third Sector is becoming increasingly important, little has changed in the current panorama. Various studies already indicated how the communication actions were taken by workers of the entities without specific qualification on the subject, they were social, administrative or orienting workers, among others (Román, 2006). This fact, which was expected to change with the passage of time and the growing importance of communication in NGOs, has not been the case.

It is not new that different experts advocate greater professionalism of those responsible for communication in the institutions:

> "Often, the lack of economic means or reasons of political tuning or obedience make people with little training to take charge of the communicative tasks. This makes it possible for the communication cabinet to only serve to get out of the way or stay defensive. It is another way of losing leadership or sinking into the most absolute mediocrity" (Álvarez & Caballero, 2004, p. 145).

In spite of this, in the last few years there has been a greater preparation and professionalization in the whole area of NGO communication," says Marta Caravantes, responsible for Communication at the Spanish NGDO Coordinating Committee (CONGDE). Most of them are journalists with years of trajectory both in the media and in social organizations. For its part, Celia Fustes, of Proyecto Hombre, believes that:

> "This has an impact on communication; now there is no longer any discussion of what is to be communicated what is being done is just another part of one's own social work. The communication is assumed in the organizations and it becomes a bet of future, but it is necessary to know how to handle in this so peculiar sector" (Molina Cañate, 2007, p.291-292).

4. Results Present and future communication actions of NGOs. The case of EAPN-A.

There are second level platforms, as is the case of the Andalusian Network against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EAPN-A), which brings together about 50 entities working against this scourge, where communication is worked unanimously by the Network. The entity serves as a spokesperson for poverty and social exclusion in the community, communication is managed from a single area for a single purpose. This contrasts with the parallel work of the entities that form part of this Network, some of them with diverse managements such as co-development projects, training or provision of services (EAPN Andalusia, 2015). These other managements, works of the entities, would form part of the communication that each entity would already assume, being on the margin of the express thematic of poverty and social exclusion. It is here where we find a disparity: although the communication assumed by the Network obtains an repercussion, in number of appearances in the media, the one assumed by each entity to make known its projects does not obtain the same results. The main cause of this fact is the scarcity of economic resources that allow to count on a person in charge of communication in the entities, a fact that is not new for the sector. This means that those with more training or capacity to take on these actions do so, without being expressly professionals in the field.

According to Esther Díez,

> "it should not be forgotten that NGOs tend to be organizations without many economic resources and it seems that it is not a priority to use them in a good communication cabinet. Volunteers have been used to meet these needs without taking into account that communication, positive image management is 50% of the success of any

organization's plans, governmental or non-governmental. Little by little, the cabinets are covered with journalists although I miss, in many occasions, that these journalists have not gone through any newsroom and have simply directed their professional steps to the cabinets for lack of exits and not for vocation" (Molina Cañate, 2007, p. 291-292).

Several studies indicate that there is a certain tendency on the part of social entities to take on more and more communication actions, a tendency driven mainly by the appearance of social networks (Nos Aldás, Santolina Monstserrat, 2015). This fact is understood for several reasons: this new channel does not imply an economic investment and in the short term it reports very satisfactory results. The fact is that the creation and management of these channels involves the submission of some tasks by some worker, many of them without experience in the management of communication on social networks. This implies a risk on the part of social entities: they communicate, but perhaps they do not communicate how they should or what they should, simply following the intuition of a worker.

"If we bear in mind that the Director of Communication is responsible for the Image of an Institution and that, even, as we have seen before, by identification sometimes 'he is the message', Institutions must professionalize this position to improve their Public Image. Professionalisation does not begin at the moment of their insertion into the labour market, but must start from the University, giving meaning to a discipline such as Institutional Communication and gradually burying the stereotype that this is based, above all, on public relations" (Molina Cañate, 2007, p. 292).

In short, communication in the Third Sector faces obstacles in the present and in the future that have already been encountered in recent years: a latent need to incorporate communication professionals into its team, capable of managing not only the communication channels of social networks but all the tasks of a communication department. Although, as expressed in this article, many of the entities do not have the economic resources to have a professional in the area, it is essential to invest in the training of the people who are responsible for the communication of the entity, in order to promote good communication habits in the entity, as far as possible. Likewise, the entities are in an era where new technologies and new communication channels demand to be constantly connected with current events, so every social entity has to begin to incorporate a new vision of work focused on the constant updating of their staff and communication channels. It will be difficult to implement communication in an entity without a professional in its team, although they manage communication no one ensures that such management is ideal. It is necessary to broaden our horizons towards the future, to make a safer bet for the professionalization of communication in social entities. Within the framework of the strategic plans that are designed for every three or four years, the Andalusian Network for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion incorporates the role of communication as a transversal line of work, it already did so between 2013-2015, and will do so again in 2016-2019. This fact represents a further step in the recognition of the work of communication in the Third Sector, a commitment to the search for economic resources for this purpose. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that today (2015) very few entities have communication officers, despite acknowledging their dependence on this area.

Since promoting the communication area in EAPN-Andalucía in mid-2015, the entity has doubled the use of communication channels, further diversifying messages and boosting digital channels. Also, the planning and design of awareness campaigns will be one of the strongest bets for the future months, all this is due to the presence of a communication expert in the entity, otherwise perhaps it could have been done but the results and impacts would have been different.

It is expected that the Third Sector will have to consider even more the presence of a communications officer in its ranks if it is to publicize its work, meet the requirements of the subsidies, in terms of their dissemination, and have a political and social impact. To this end, a communication expert will be one of the key figures in the preparation of grants and for this a highly qualified profile and able to perform multiple tasks, communication, graphic design and / or fundraising will be necessary.

At a time when citizens are constantly connected to current affairs and communication with others, due to the high consumption of mobile devices (PCs, mobiles, tablets) and social networks, social entities no longer contemplate their existence and their communication, whether or not it is enhanced, without their presence in the digital world, social networks and websites.

5. Conclusions

- Communication is a fundamental part of the organisational structure of NGDOs, although it is not always developed by communication professionals trained to put it into practice professionally.
- Currently social networks and new technologies are both a challenge to adapt to them, an opportunity for social entities to show their work to the whole world while making themselves known.
- The Third Sector is going to have to incorporate into its organisational structure qualified professionals capable of implementing strategically designed communication projects, as key figures if it wants to remain in the front line and continue to capture the attention of citizens, both the recipient and the supportive.

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