



From Tip to Base of the Consulting Pyramid



Not all Public Relations agencies are created equal. A few have the consulting skills to make a real strategic difference, while others thrive on day-to-day implementation. By **Salvador da Cunha**.

When I'm asked what the biggest differences are between communications consultancies, I usually point to three major lines of action in relation to clients. A top line level of action, in which the communications consultancy aims to influence management decisions; a second intermediate level between the board of directors and the marketing and communications management, where the communications consultancy adapts itself to management decisions; and a third level where the work carried out is merely operation and has no involvement with the top line management of the client company.

On the first level, consulting is provided exclusively at the level of the board of directors of client companies, in defining the public persona intended for the company, inducing management attitudes and practices that reflect positively on its image and in defining the wide-ranging reputational factors that the company wants to adopt.

It is at this level that definition is given to how the company wants to be understood by its Stakeholders. If it wants to be seen to be socially responsible, innovative and an excellent place to work, or if it would rather be perceived as a visionary company, with excellent financial performance and bullet-proof corporate governance. It is at this level that communications consultants can help company management to make decisions about the communication factors that will be part of its public persona in the future. Its DNA

Elite few

This is a level of consultancy from which only a very restricted number of communication-led companies are willing to benefit. It is also a level which very few consultancies are prepared to offer their clients. My estimate is that in Portugal there is one communications consultancy and two management consultancies willing to provide this service.

At this level, consultancies must have some tools to hand to appropriately carry out their work, such as an analysis of the perception the main Stakeholders have of the company or organisation, in other words a study of its reputation.

These surveys are essential for an initial big decision: Should the company increase communication to its Stakeholders? Or should the company, rather, correct aspects of its management that influence the perceptions of its main audiences, before starting communications processes?

Pertinent question

This question is pertinent because quite often companies have great chasms between perception and reality. Examples of good perception that walk alongside reproachful management decisions (such as the case of Nike in China), or of excellent examples of management that are simply unknown, are the day to day fodder of a communications consultant. And these are the chasms that need to be bridged: either by inducing companies to implement good management practices (first case) or by recommending good communications strategies (second case).

In both cases the communications consultant has to be on the client company manager's side and share information that is often a well-kept organisational secret.

Another level, which is of great importance but less rare is the level at which communication plans and strategies are fitted to previously outlined management and marketing strategies. Here, in a joint approach by the board of directors and the marketing and communication departments, consultants adapt communications plans and strategies to marketing plans and management strategies.

Content is gathered and compiled, Stakeholders are defined and prioritised and work is done on messages and methods and ways of disseminating them. Communication rules and procedures are established and communications flowcharts are drawn up in order to prepare for the third level. This second level of intervention is essential for optimising the communication process with the various Stakeholders. It is a level that is altogether worthwhile if the chosen consultancy has already worked on the first level.

The picture in Portugal

In Portugal, by my reckoning, there are some 10 companies offering this level of service. That's out of more than 110 communications agencies that are working in the market.

The lowest level of the consulting pyramid is that of press advisory. It is no less noble than the other levels, but it is in fact where we find the greatest number of services offered and less differentiation. It is the level of personal contacts, messages, press releases, press conferences, etc, etc. It is only at this level, the least differentiated one, that influence can be the

deciding factor. Games of influence are important throughout the entire Pyramid, but are only a decisive factor on this level.

The communications consultant, or communications agency (assuming that the agency is not working at the previously outlined levels) at this level has to boost levels of influence they have on the media, either via the strength of the messages they are passing on or via their own influence on the people that are passing them on. This second aspect is quite often a short-term asset.

On the level of communication agencies there are around 20 qualified companies. Which, added to the previous 10 and the one that in fact influences top level management, totals 31 benchmark companies. Those left out of the 110 working in the market can be considered “counterfeits.” These are the ones that SPAM press releases, randomly distribute information to journalists and whose prices are really very cheap.

The Author's Details

Salvador da Cunha is Managing Director of Lift Consulting and chairman of APECOM, the Portuguese Association of Communications and Public Relations Consultancy Companies.

[Email the author](#)

[Visit the author's website](#)

[Visit the APECOM website](#)