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# The strategic orientation of communications consulting firms in Colombia<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This article reports the results of a research conducted among a group of 55 CEOs of public relations and communication consulting agencies in Colombia. It aims at determining if strategic orientation predominates in the services for which these agencies are hired. As it has been found, some of them focus their business on this perspective. Nevertheless, there is a higher volume of technical services, such as free press and journalistic media relations. The increase in services in recent years has been due, among other reasons, to the good moment of Colombian economy. The reasons for hiring an agency are its prestige and reputation. However, this result contrasts with the argument presented by the interviewed executives as the main impediment to their practice as consultants: the lack of knowledge of their work on the part of clients.

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## 1. Introduction

A better economic performance (1), the increase of foreign investment (2) and the fact that today many organizations have the certainty that it is necessary to manage the reputation and trust with their stakeholders, are reasons that have influenced the growth of the sector that brings together public relations agencies in Colombia, also known as communication or public relations consulting agencies. In 2013, the 15 firms of this area that presented the highest turnovers, reported operational income (3) of \$49.586.407 million Colombian pesos (4) (Publicidad & Mercadeo, 2014). Despite the fact that it is not a market of the size and maturity of its equivalent in countries of the region such as Brazil (5), the local industry is becoming attractive for firms that want to compete in it (Parker, 2008).

According to Icco (2014) and Holmes Report (2014), communications and public relations consulting business grew 11% worldwide in 2013, and there is optimism about its evolution in Latin America. Some local sources (Dinero.com, 2012; Portafolio.com, 2013) have been reporting that the sector is gaining strength in the Colombian economic sphere.

As shown in studies carried out on the social, political and economic contexts that favor the practice of this profession in Latin America (Moreno, Molleda & Suárez, 2006; Molleda & Moreno, 2008), the country's current political and economic

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environment has an impact on the evolution and practice of the profession. The arrival of multinational companies in Colombia, product of the signing of free trade agreements, as well as the interest of local companies to open business in other countries or trade with them, have spurred the adoption of international business practices which, within their management models, include strategic relationships with their environments and a more planned communication. These researchs found that in recent years important efforts have been made to improve the living conditions of citizens in Colombia. There has been an increase of campaigns that advocate for the country's peace and construction, which have required contests and active participation of public relations professionals of the private, public and non-governmental sectors (Molleda & Moreno, 2008).

The analysis on the practice of public relations in Colombia must give an account of the level achieved by the agencies that integrate the sector and the competitiveness of the services they provide. To establish if the growth that they have had in number, services and turnover matches the increase in the quality of the services, a research focusing on knowing if a strategic approach is applied to this effort has been carried out.

## 2. Communication and public relations consulting

Traditionally, those who have been engaged in communication consulting have moved in the public relations and strategic communication business. In general, their work have consisted in helping clients to build their corporate brands and to generate a favorable image from campaigns, media activities and special events, as well as to “measure, improve, and protect the value of their reputations” (Fombrun & Nevins, 2004, p. 346).

Ideas and initiatives are part of what they commercialize, and although they can be materialized in communication supports, they can also be transmitted in face-to-face interactions with audiences. It is agreed that these entities offer services rather than products, because the value of what they do has a significant intangible component, which obliges to associate the service with the person who offers it and, its quality, to the talent and experience of those who are being hired. Hence, it can be said that, as in other professions associated to communication, talent goods are also commercialized in the case of public relations consulting (Arrese-Reca, 2004).

As reported by Fombrun & Nevins (2004), many consulting firms have developed practices in areas aimed at helping companies to define, measure, and exploit their intellectual capital. With regard to reputational capital consulting, they point out that this has had a slower development in comparison to others in the business, in part because reputation is an aspect that, in contrast to knowledge, is not under direct control of senior members of companies or their employees, but that depends on customers, investors, journalists, financial analysts or communities. In other words, it depends on their stakeholders. I.e., the public relations agencies service, as it is designed, is destined to be strategic, because these firms are focused on helping organizations to improve in the performance of their duties, to anticipate the future and to respond in a timely manner and successfully to the demands of the environment (Meintjes & Grobler, 2014).

In addition to mastering this knowledge, a consultant with strategic capacity is focused on advising the organization on how to communicate, in what kind of situations, and what activities and procedures are the most recommendable. Consultants integrate communication knowledge in decision-making on the company's strategic issues and seek that the challenges and strategies of a corporate plan always take into account the effects that these programs, projects or policies, can generate among stakeholders or the public in general (Caicedo, 2012). As a counterpart of this strategic profile of the communicator, we have that of the technician, who occupies his/her time in producing media and who follows instructions from the directors of the company or others who have previously designed the strategy (Dozier, 1992; Dozier & Broom, 1995). Being a press agent is a compatible denomination with the functions performed by the technician (Nieman-Stuweg, Meintjes, & Grobler, 2007; Beurer-Zullig, Fieseler, & Meckel, 2009).

Taking into account this series of considerations, the consultant in strategic communication is defined here as the person who is able to recommend and advise the organization, set goals and define communication approaches within a competitive environment. As a result, the public relations and communications consulting agency is understood in this paper as one that is dedicated to advise, recommend solutions and best practices, research, design and create programs, strategies, and communication plans from a conception related to the purposes of the organization that hired it, with the purpose of achieving results agreed in advance.

## 3. Strategic communication

In Latin America, in general, the expression “organizational communication” is used to refer to the field that brings together the knowledge and practice of communication in organizations. However, in countries like Colombia, this denomination coexists with others such as corporate communication, public relations, and in recent years, the concept of strategic communication has gained strength and has begun to be understood as a way of managing different forms of communication, including public relations (Preciado-Hoyos & Guzmán-Ramírez, 2012).

In Grunig's excellence model (1992), public relations are strategic when communication is guided by objectives, which, in turn, accompany the achievement of the entity's objectives; the head of communications is part of the group that runs the organization and advises the CEO on the implications that organizational decisions can have in the relationship with stakeholders. In the European approach of strategic communication, the organization should be a reflection of what society

and stakeholders expect of it (Verhoeven, Zeffass & Tench, 2011). It is a community-type model, which focuses much of the communications director's work on the detailed knowledge of the environment surrounding the organization.

As it has been pointed out, and as proposed in this paper, strategic communication works to support the organization in achieving its goals. To do so, it takes into account the entity's situation in the context in which it operates, which is recognized as competitive, because actors who may have the same interests as the organization, as well as opposite interests, are settled in it. This environment is always changing, so we must analyze its conditions whenever is sought to intervene in it.

Moreover, strategic communication involves a planning effort, as in the relationship with stakeholders, the organization tries to anticipate the movements made by its counterpart (Pérez, 2006, 2012). Then, on that planned scenario, it makes decisions, performs actions and monitors them, to determine if what has been proposed is what is being achieved. As a result, strategic communication implies that a process must be followed.

Many communications directors in Colombia know that communication must be planned; however, they do not dedicate working time to investigate the environment (Preciado-Hoyos & Guzmán-Ramírez, 2012). Environmental scanning is the first stage for identifying potential problems (Salas-Forero, 2011). It can be said that it is a moment in which the organization listens to its stakeholders, which is key in public relations in order to enable the scientific practice, "since only with a scientific attitude, solid diagnostics can be carried out and successful predictions can be made (Matilla, 2007, p. 278)." Furthermore, environmental scanning provides credibility with the management, because senior managers make decisions based on facts and verifiable information (Matilla Serrano, 2007). Hence, it is possible to say that environmental scanning and research are fundamental conditions to say that a communication is strategic.

Research is a key component in the development of thinking and a strategic mindset among communication professionals. Thanks to it, they learn to think in a methodical and articulated way; they define problems at the same time they define objectives and ways to solve them; they seek information, analyze it and contrast it, and as a result of this work, they make recommendations, develop policies, generate original proposals based on the company's global views in relation to the environment, and demonstrate the impact of what they do (Preciado-Hoyos, 2015a). Thus, it can be said that environmental scanning confirms the character of the professional as a consultant and advisor of the senior management.

This point of view is consistent with the findings of a study carried out in Colombia to know what clients value the most about public relations agencies in the country. In it, it was found that what they seek, first and foremost, 'is a strategic partner, an expert in communication as the essence, and in a creative, planned, timely and reliable way to support the fulfilment of marketing and corporate objectives' (Gómez Ramírez, 2011; p. 171). Now, it would be relevant to complement this research with the perspective of the other side of the relationship, i.e. the agencies' consultants. For that purpose, this study has been conducted. But before, we will present a brief context about what the development of the profession in the country has been.

#### 4. Context of public relations and communication consulting agencies in Colombia

While public relations have had a further development in Western capitalist democracies, in which individuals and organizations have equal opportunities to show their interests in the public sphere (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003; Sotelo, 2004), in Colombia, many people link them to "social aspects, events management, physical attributes, to be an open person. . ." (Salas-Forero, 2011; p. 238), and even some communication professionals equate them with lobby, which has a negative connotation in the country because it is associated to the bribery of public officials (Molleda & Suárez, 2005), to cosmetic issues and predetermined agendas that are developed with media, State institutions or regulatory bodies (Preciado-Hoyos, 2015b).

This view about public relations may be due to the lack of knowledge of more ethical approaches in their study, because so far, the training that is taught in the area has been poor or predominantly oriented to journalism. The results of the first Monitor Latinoamericano de Comunicación (6) (Moreno, Molleda, Athaydes, & Suárez, 2015) show that 44.3% of professionals consulted in Latin America claim to have their own knowledge and skills, which give them a special status in the labour market. However, when asked if they were formally studying in higher education institutions that grant degrees or diplomas, Colombia has the second lowest percentage with 63.3%, after Mexico, which holds a 62.3%. The highest is Costa Rica, with 100%. The same study found that the press relations field is the most important professional field for the consulted professionals, with a frequency of 66% of the responses. In Colombia it was selected as the most important one by 59% of respondents.

The arrival of multinational companies in Colombia occurred with intensity after the economic opening processes of 1990. As in other latitudes, these companies implemented their own management models in their regional headquarters, which included the professional practice of public relations (Ferrari & Franca, 2011). This does not mean that these professions were not studied in the country or practiced within organizations before the 1990s. A Colombian case that has been documented is that of the Department of Antioquia, where the intensification of industrial processes and exports, as well as the consolidation of manufacturing firms and textile companies, strengthened the business and led to the development of communication in organizations, to such an extent that this function began to be part of the corporate structure since the 1960s (Arango & Pulgarín, 2010). However, the first professionals aimed their efforts at engaging with journalists and mass media.

In regard to rigorous academic research on public relations in Colombia, this has just begun to bear fruit and generate interest among students, teachers and professionals. Papers on these issues made by professional associations are scarce. There are the Centro Colombiano de Relaciones Públicas y Comunicación Organizacional, Cecorp, created in 1963 in Medellín, where it is headquartered, and which does not generate periodic and systematic research on these issues, and the Fundación

Escuela de Relaciones Públicas y Protocolo, [Ferp \(2016\)](#), which is promoted as an educational foundation conformed by people interested in the public relations and protocol field that brings together teachers, students and specialists, particularly in Bogotá and the center of the country.

Existing research on public relations agencies is even more incipient. There is data that the first firm to provide these services in Colombia arose in the mid-1990s in Sancho, the advertising agency, in Bogotá ([Gómez Ramírez, 2011](#)). Twenty years later it is acknowledged that communications agencies operating in the country not only have an impact on the agendas of media, as part of their business is to plan strategies for the processing, orientation and location of information occurring in companies and entities, but also on the point of view developed by citizens on an idea, an organization, or a person, supported in communication aids created by them.

Support from agencies outside the entities' communication departments began to consolidate in the 1990s. This fact coincides with the arrival of the multinational agencies, which began in 1997 with Burson – Marsteller. Hill & Knowlton was established in 2010, and FTI Consulting, in 2011, when it bought the local agency Gravititas. In 2015, Edelman bought Position Comunicaciones Estratégicas, and to date, several multinationals in the sector have presence in Colombia, including the two agencies with the highest turnovers in Spain: Llorente & Cuenca and Atrévía (formerly Inforpress).

With the aim of exploring if agencies engaged in providing consulting services in communication and public relations in Colombia focus their work on strategic perspective, a research applied to 55 companies in the sector was conducted.

Strategic-level services are those that require a wide look at communication on the part of consultants so that they can act as advisors to the senior management of companies in aspects such as the definition of communication policies, communication in crisis situations, corporate responsibility and reputation management. All these aspects aim at symmetrical communication models, because they take into account the environment composed of stakeholders. Technical services, on the other hand, aim at aspects associated with the execution of daily activities and forms of communication of a single route, such as free press ([Nieman-Stuweg et al., 2007](#)).

## 5. Methodology

Applied research has sought to determine if there is a strategic orientation in the work being done in the public relations and communication agencies sector in Colombia, and what are the most associated elements, of the consultant's exercise, with a performance that can be called strategic, in the sense that has been proposed here.

An interview with semi-structured questions has been the most appropriate methodology to achieve the research objective, as the information obtained is provided to make qualitative and quantitative analysis, the latter, associated with the frequency in the responses.

The applied questionnaire contained 25 semi-structured questions associated with these themes, which were structured into several sections. A first group of questions sought information oriented to determine the profile of the companies by their size: number of employees, offices, local or international presence. In other section there were questions on the specific aspects of relationships with clients, characteristics of the market and others, to determine the emphasis or strategic orientation of the services. In relation with this last aspect, we worked on three axes: a) size of the agencies and profile of the executives; (b) conceptions of consulting firms executives about what they consider to be the strategic communication services in the sector, c) services offered by these entities and the most common services for which they are hired, and d) reasons executives believe companies have in order to hire communication agencies. Finally, some questions about training, gender and age of the executives were made.

The interviews were conducted during the first half of 2014. The CEOs of these companies were chosen to be consulted, because they are the ones who have the best knowledge on the orientation of each entity, the surroundings of the businesses in which they move, the clients who hire them and the services that they demand.

In the absence of a directory or an official register of the companies involved in the sector in Colombia, a first inquiry was made via e-mail to a group of 1200 companies of different industries, from a database that was purchased from the Chamber of Commerce of Bogotá. This city was chosen for having a greater projection in the growth of such services in Colombia ([Parker, 2008](#)) and because it is the nation's capital. In this inquiry by e-mail the names of communication consulting agencies that these companies knew or had hired were asked. This survey produced 26 responses. To complement these records, the help of the Chambers of Commerce of the cities of Bogotá, Medellín and Cali (7) ([Parker, 2008](#)) was needed, in order to know the number of companies registered in the sector, but it was found that these companies are grouped under a broader label, called "Consulting and Advise Services to Companies, which does not discriminate between those that deal only with subjects related to the field of communication, and others.

In view of this series of results, it was necessary to create a database for the study, based on the consultation of media and public relations directories and the review of the web sites of each of the companies. Those companies exclusively dedicated to provide "content management" or "community manager" services were ruled out, because they engage in activities considered here as technical, that do not have a broader vision of the client's business, or activities that have been described here as related to a strategic service.

The final population included 129 records of companies of Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Barranquilla and Manizales, whose core business, as they promote it themselves, consists of public relations and communication consulting. The questionnaire was answered face to face or by phone, by 55 CEOs of equal number of companies. The final sample is presented in alphabetical order in [Table 1](#). Only one is headquartered in Cali. The rest have their main office in Bogotá. The group includes ten of

**Table 1**  
Sample of Companies.

No.	Company name
1	ABC Estrategias
2	Acceso Directo Asociados Ltda.
3	Actio comunicaciones
4	Aljure & Ocampo
5	Avant Garde
6	Brújula Comunicaciones
7	Burson – Marsteller Colombia
8	CMS Communication and Marketing Solutions
9	Compass Porter Novelli
10	Comunicación 360 grados
11	Comunika Relaciones Públicas & Mercadeo
12	Corporativa Comunicaciones Estratégicas
13	Cube Comunicaciones
14	Dattis Comunicaciones
15	DDB Worldwide Communications Group Inc-Colombia
16	Dos y medios
17	E – media Comunicaciones y relaciones Estratégicas
18	Eco Resultados
19	Estrategias Asociadas SAS
20	Fabiola Morera
21	Feedback comunicaciones estratégicas
22	Free Press Divulgación en medios Ltda.
23	FTI Consulting
24	Giomar Jaramillo Comunicaciones
25	Gloriza Comunicaciones
26	Grupo 13
27	Grupo Holística
28	High Results
29	Hill & Knowlton Strategies
30	Icono Comunicaciones
31	Image & Press
32	Inforpress (Atrevia)
33	J Torres Consultores
34	Jimeno & Acevedo Asociados
35	JWT
36	Llorente y Cuenca Colombia Ltda.
37	Margarita Calle Comunicaciones
38	Mediática Comunicaciones Ltda.
39	Medios y difusión comunicaciones
40	New Link Comunicaciones Estratégicas
41	Opción, Imagen & Medios
42	Padua Comunicaciones
43	Patricia Amaya Comunicaciones
44	Plat Comunicaciones
45	Position Comunicaciones
46	Raquel Sofía Amaya Comunicaciones
47	Sensoria Consultores en Comunicación Limitada
48	Sentidos Comunicaciones
45	Síntesis Comunicaciones Ltda.
50	Stampa Imagen medios y Comunicaciones Ltda.
51	Strategic PR Group
52	Táctica & Estrategia
53	The Line Group
54	Toro Love Comunicación Total
55	Vega y Jaramillo Comunicaciones

the companies listed on the top 13 of the ranking of companies with the highest turnovers in the country, according to information reported by *Publicidad y Marketing*, P&M magazine (2014), which is the monthly publication of reference on investment made by companies that settle in the country, in commercial communication. These ten companies' turnover represents around 91% of the income reported in this ranking (8).

## 6. Results and analysis

### 6.1. Size of the agencies and profile of the executives

The size of the agencies is usually associated with the number of employees and offices that they have. With regard to the number of employees with direct contract, 55% of the companies in the sample have up to 10; 33% has between 11 and



50 people hired in a direct way, and 9% of the remaining agencies have between 51 and 200 employees under this very same type of contracting. These latest agencies correspond to multinationals. In terms of origin, 20% of the sample's organizations are multinational and 80% correspond to local companies, even though they are smaller in number of employees and clients.

The CEOs of the multinational agencies agree that they give their clients access to best practices, through the knowledge they have reached on this work in other countries, where trade relations have helped to mature and consolidate the work of this kind of entities. In local agencies it is understood that clients want the agencies' CEOs to do the job, they don't want them to delegate it, because they (clients) are paying for their particular dedication and expert knowledge. It is said that clients cannot find this in multinationals, because they have so many clients, they can not give them all the time they required.

Likewise, there is hiring of temporary employees or freelances in the sector. In this aspect, the results indicate that 58% of companies employ 10 or less indirect employees, 22% from 11 to 50, 7% 51–200, and 4% more than 200. These proportions are similar to direct contracting. Just like the advertising sector, this sector is very permeated by labour flexibility. Given that the hiring of such services depends on each country's economic behaviour (Etayo & Preciado-Hoyos, 2009), the agencies manage a fixed volume of employees, according to the number of permanent clients, who pay a monthly fee on year-long contracts. Additional contracts are managed with flexible hiring arrangements.

In regard to the gender of the executives participating in the study, 60% are men and 40% women. 73% of them have professional degrees in Social Communication – Journalism. The others are business administrators, publicists and lawyers. In terms of postgraduate training, 43% of the interviewees have specialization studies, 33% has master's degrees, 22% has undergraduate degrees and only 2% are doctors. As it can be seen, not many of them have master's and doctoral degrees.

In the task of characterizing the sector's size and its income level, significant difficulties arise. According to the interviewees, there is a perception that there are few barriers to entry into this market because it is believed that any professional administrator or other professional in similar activities is enabled to be a communications consultant or adviser. In this sense, it is usual to find people performing these jobs, often without having studied communication or having gone through some kind of training. Such circumstances, coupled with the disparity in the size of the companies and the refusal of some interviewees to reveal the amount of their annual turnover, prevent to accurately determine how big the sector is in terms of the number of companies that comprise it and, as a result, the exact value of what their clients invest in such services. Sector leaders focus on identifying their most direct competitors, who they consider to be the major players in the market.

Respondents agree that the sector is growing and that there is still room to continue with this tendency. As for the aspects of the environment that have a bigger impact on the prosperity of the agencies, we can see a better training of the human talent; people have more postgraduate courses in the area; they have studied abroad; they dare to come up with more creative ideas; they have developed proactive capabilities and know multiple languages. In addition to this, we have economic dynamics and better development prospects for the country. They agree that Colombia has become a dynamic market, partly, due to the crises in neighbouring countries and the existing atmosphere, which is more favourable to peace.

## 6.2. Strategic orientation of the services

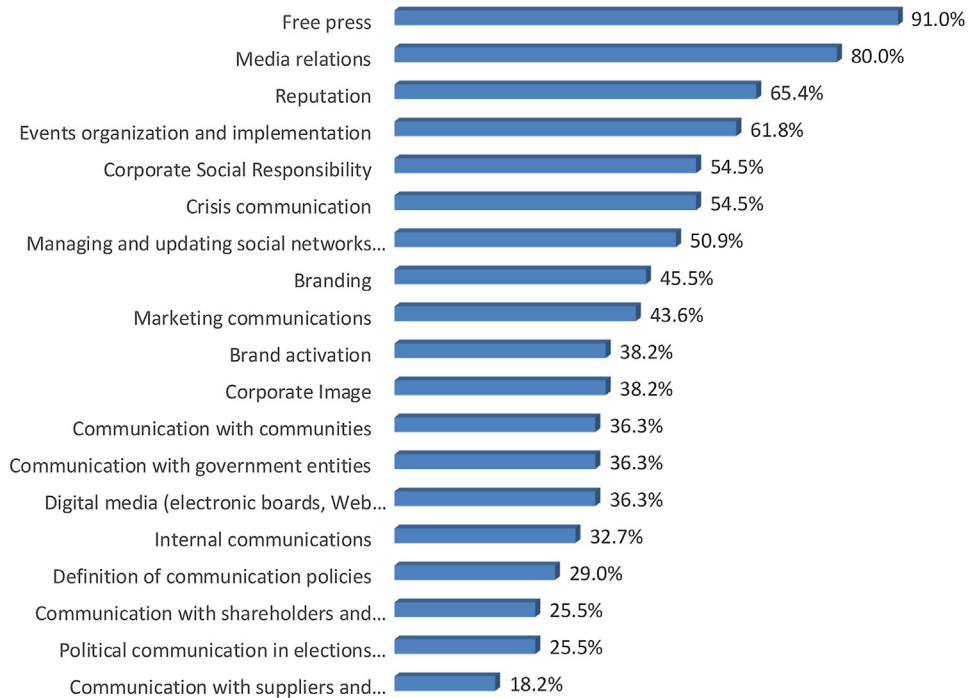
When identifying what a service of strategic nature is, responses make a greater emphasis on planning and accompanying clients in the achievement of their business goals (41.8% of the responses). In that sense, they aim at identifying the clients' business goals to properly connect them with their stakeholders. In this way, they depart from understanding what clients need to develop in the field of communication, to make a plan that involves the entire process of strategic communication.

Most agencies help to define and execute strategies. In this way, 100% of the CEOs ensure that the company they represent provides strategic level services. An 83.6% combines them with others that are more technical; i.e., in addition to designing the strategy, they are responsible for executing it.

This last segment focuses on the service's most technical aspects, because it conceives that the provision of strategic services includes: generating contents, organizing events, training spokespersons, working in processes to manage change, transformation and organizational development. It relates the strategic with developing content, messages and, in general, with qualities of the work they do: impact, creative and timely communication. This response relates to another finding of the research, according to which, in the agencies there is no specialization in only one type of service, or a productive sector in particular.

One of the agencies makes emphasis on environmental scanning and research as a substantial part of the work they do as advisors and consultants. In this regard, its members analyze communication situations that may have an impact on brand positioning. They also advise and recommend. In this same group, totaling 16.4% of the sample, we might include those who focus their services on effectively managing their clients' reputation and, as they say, "shielding the company in the environment in which it moves, from communication strategies. They involve stakeholders directly in their work, because they mention that the services' strategic orientation consists of changing public perceptions to effectively manage the reputation of the institutions.

Strategic process elements such as monitoring and evaluation, which also require implementation of research instruments, are referred to as part of the monitoring of ongoing activities. *Táctica y Estrategia*, an agency headquartered in Cali, specializes in measurement and evaluation of the impact of communication. Its CEO says that this is a very new issue in Colombia, and that even large multinationals established in the country do not have it highly developed, 'because, so far, in many of them, they continue to think that the only way to measure the impact of communication is to count column centimetres.'



**Graph 1.** Most Contracted Services from Communication Agencies Frequencies Distribution.

Source: Own elaboration.

For the CEO of FTI Consulting, the relationship should be directly with the companies' presidents and managers, so that the consulting service can be considered as strategic and they can be seen as consultants and not only as executors. In general, the agencies' CEOs are in charge of the relationship with clients. Likewise, they (CEOs) determine, in conjunction with senior executives, the strategies and proposals that are presented to them, although many of them keep contact with the companies' communication directors.

### 6.3. Most contracted services

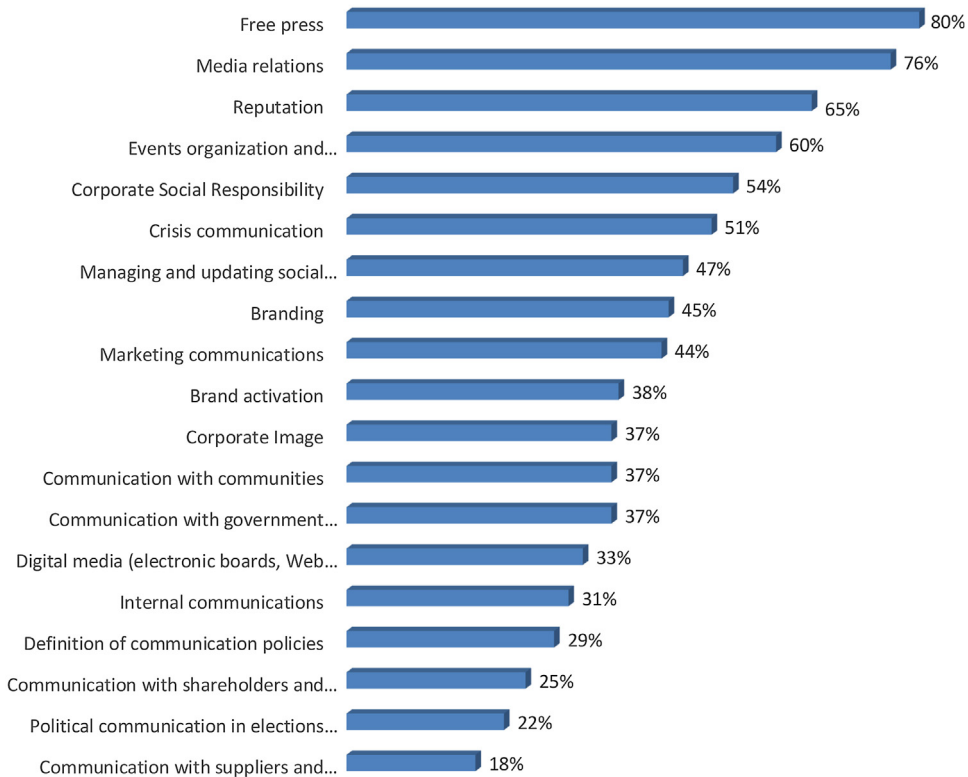
Likewise, considerations of CEOs on those services having a more technical nature fit the conceptions that we have used here to define them as such: 41.8% of the sample defined technical services as the activities that take place every day to meet the strategic objectives, and a 36% responded that they consist in executing the strategy. Both answers are quite similar.

Graph 1 shows services that clients have hired the most. Free press, with a frequency of responses of 91%, and media relations, chosen by 80% of the interviewees, predominate in the survey. Reputation management appears with a lower frequency, with 65.4% of the answers. It is striking that the two most contracted services, free press and media relations, require a more technical profile for their execution, press-agent type, because of the high burden they have regarding media production, and that they differ, in levels of response, from other services provided by the agencies which require a more strategic profile associated to recommend, advise, propose ideas or plan.

However, the distribution of answers from the question about which are the services offered by agencies, presented on Graph 2, shows percentages that are slightly inferior on the offering of free press services (76%). The distribution is identical concerning the relationship with the media, and the other frequencies do not define on a significant manner the answers given to the question about which are most contracted services.

This series of findings leads to assert that clients seek out for agencies, foremost, to develop technical-level activities. This has a notorious impact on the sector, because clients' behaviour sets the dynamics of services offered by many agencies. In this way, CEOs of larger agencies complain about smaller ones, those that are recently entering the market, claiming that they do not have the same coverage capabilities of services for clients, that they lower the prices and compete only in the provision of services which are most commonly contracted, such as free press, and not just in the most critical aspects that have an impact on the business strategy and that reveal the true value of the service provided by consulting agencies, such as the analysis of business environment as well as the reputation and crisis management (Jimeno Acevedo Director, personal interview, March 2014).

Another explanation would connect what some CEOs have exposed, regarding that many times, the strategy design covers the execution of such strategy. What could be inferred, in the latter case, is that the exercise of consulting in Colombia brings the intensification in the provision of outsourcing services.



**Graph 2.** Services Offered by Communication Agencies Frequencies Distribution.

Source: Own elaboration.

#### 6.4. Reasons for hiring agencies

For 50% of the people surveyed, the main reason why Colombian organizations hire public relations and communication agencies in general, is because they do not have the necessary staff trained in all aspects regarding communication in organizations. This answer is followed, in descending order, by the lack of technology for the proper communication management by the client (45.4%); the fact that the client’s human resources have no available time to perform all activities demanded by the area (43.6%); the unforeseen crisis situations and circumstances (34.5%) and the external vision of the agency which helps to identify the problems in a better way (30.9%). 12.7% of the CEOs confirm that agencies are hired because it is cheaper to work with them than to work with the in-house staff. The lack of internal staff time and the possibility of lowering prices when hiring agencies are not reasons that conform to the notion of consulting services that has been presented herein. All other reasons can be considered as such.

93% of CEOs believe that the reasons for which companies they represent are hired, are the knowledge and the prestige of the agency, as well as the staff working in it. However, when asked what the biggest difficulties the sector deals with are, 43.6% agree that is the lack of knowledge of the consultant’s work on the part of their clients. In this case, it is paradoxical that the name and prestige of consultants are recognized, but it is not clear what they are hired for. The answers match those of another question that was made about what the most important challenge of the market at the moment is, and that is precisely to get organizations to understand what they do. That would help them continue to grow and to push themselves harder as companies.

Just like the economy improvement is seen as a factor that favors the growth of the sector, the market slowdown is seen by the largest part of the surveyed people as a reason for the sector to start stagnating. For one of the executives, if customers are able to understand the importance of the work being done, it will also be possible for them to understand that it is equally as important to rely on them in crisis situations as well as in good times.

#### 7. Conclusions

This study has found that the strengthening of the business sector and the economy generates an atmosphere conducive to the development of professions associated with the practice of communication in organizations. As it has been exposed, in Colombia this type of professions emerged first with staff who worked inside organizations, and later in the 1990s, it began to count on the support of public relations agencies.



Results also show that the tendency of the former communications departments, which were predominantly oriented to interact with the journalistic media, given that, as it has been seen, free press and media relations are the most hired services today with communications agencies.

In the latter case, agencies act as press agents, generating content and focusing organizations' visibility on media, not taking into account that the strategic look forces to give importance not only to journalists, but to all groups that are part of society (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010).

Although a preliminary study discussed in the first part of this article, said that for clients, the most valuable aspect when hiring agencies was to have a strategic partner (Gómez Ramírez, 2011), that vision has not been verified in this paper. No conductive information was found to affirm that strategic services have a significant weight and, on the other hand, the provision of outsourcing services, as it is, in particular, *free press* appears to be so evident. This result shows that the work of communication professionals is pending to be positioned. A subsequent research could be focused on clients, to determine the reasons by which the consultant's work consultant is unknown, or by which they are not hiring them for more strategic-type services. A matter arises related to the need to "educate clients, in the sense that they know what communications agencies are for. This result is consistent in any way with the findings of the Monitor Latinoamericano de Comunicación (Moreno et al., 2015), according to which, in Colombia, the influence of the communication professionals in organizations, is more executive than consulting.

The sample covered here is representative of the sector, as it includes agencies that represent more than 90% of the turnover of the annual investment that is officially reported. It is possible to affirm that the agencies that make up the sample are generalists, because there is not a specialization in services or in specific production or economic lines, which would also explain why they are not hired in a prevailing manner for consulting work, understood as consulting for senior management, as they move in very diverse fields and fronts, which separates them from a specific task specialization or a specific business knowledge.

The main difficulty of this research has been to determine the true size of the sector in Colombia, because many organizations are registered before the Chambers of Commerce under different labels, or, the communication and public relations services are integrated to others in the general business management field, which prevents to accurately quantify them or perform a classification focused only on the business they handle.

## Appendix A.

### Interview Questionnaire

#### General information of the company

1. What is the name of the agency?
2. How long ago was it founded or constituted?
3. Does your company provide services abroad? If the answer is affirmative, in which country or countries?
4. What is the number of employees or direct collaborators currently working in the company in Colombia?
5. What is the number of employees or indirect collaborators currently working in the company in Colombia?
6. Does your company provide consulting services of the organizations?
7. What is understood in your company to be consulting services of the organizations?
8. Are the services provided by your company of a strategic level?
9. For you, what is a strategic service?
10. Who manages the relationship with clients?
11. Who defines the communication strategies for clients?
12. Which are the most demanded services by clients from communication consultants?
13. Which consulting services are offered within your portfolio?
14. Which are the main difficulties faced in this market?
15. Are you specialized in any subject?
16. Are your services directed to any particular sector?
17. Why do you think that Colombian organizations hire consulting services in communications?

#### Market environment

18. What aspects of the environment have an impact on the prosperity of these companies?
19. What do you consider the key factor that has determined the expansion of this market in recent years?
20. Do you know what the size of the market is in terms of annual sales?
21. What are the revenues of your company for the provision of these services, in the last year?

#### Information about the surveyed people

22. Age
23. Gender
24. Profession
25. Last professional title degree obtained

## Notes

1. According to the Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas de Colombia (National Administrative Department of Statistics of Colombia), Dane, in 2013, the country's economy grew 4.3%, and the gross domestic product, GDP, registered an increase of 4.9%. This last index was greater than that of other countries in the region, such as Chile (4.1%), Mexico (1.1%) or Brazil (2.3%) and was only surpassed by Peru (5%) ([Portafolio.com](http://Portafolio.com), 2014b). These figures are in line with those published by the International Monetary Fund in the report *Perspectivas económicas. Las Américas: desafíos crecientes – 2014* "Economic Outlook. The Americas: growing challenges – 2014," according to which, Colombia and Peru maintained the highest growth rates in the region in 2013.
2. Data published by the Banco de la República de Colombia (Bank of the Republic of Colombia), in January, 2014, show that the direct foreign investment made in this country in 2013 registered a historical record of 16.822 million of dollars, equivalent to a boost of 0.87% in comparison with 2012 ([Portafolio.com](http://Portafolio.com), 2014a).
3. In Colombia, operational revenues consist of the profits product of an enterprise's main economic activity.
4. By 31 December, 2013, one Americal Dollar consisted of 1.926,83 Colombian pesos.
5. In the ranking of the 250 most important public relations agencies in the world, by turnover and growth, the only ones that are from Latin America, are Brazilian. These agencies are the following: FSB Comunicacoos, Maquina Public Relations, Grupo CDI – Comunicacao e Marketin, Imagem Corporativa, Approach and RMA Comunicacao ([Icco](http://Icco), 2014).
6. Latin American Communication Monitor.
7. These are the country's three main cities, in terms of presence of companies, income per capita and number of inhabitants.
8. The ten companies are: FTI Consulting, Imagen y Relaciones Públicas, SAS (Burson-Marsteller), Dattis Comunicaciones, GC Comunicaciones Estratégicas (Compass Porter Novelli) Jimeno Acevedo Asociados SA, Llorente & Cuenca Colombia, Ltda., Position Comunicaciones Estratégicas, Mediática Comunicaciones Ltda., High Results Ltda. and Corporativa Comunicaciones Estratégicas Ltda. This ranking corresponds to the year 2013. P&M uses the following to elaborate the ranking: Superintendencia de Sociedades (Business Superintendncy) and Superintendencia Financiera (Financial Superintendence). The ranking and the indicators are audited by KPMG Advisory Services Ltda.

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