Public relations in growth hacking strategies in digital communication: the case studies of Wallapop, Westwing and Fotocasa

Patricia Coll-Rubio
STReaM (Society, Technology, Religion and Media), Faculty of Communication and International Relations Blanquerna Blanquerna, Ramon Llull University, Spain

Josep Lluís Micó
STReaM (Society, Technology, Religion and Media), Faculty of Communication and International Relations Blanquerna Blanquerna, Ramon Llull University, Spain

Abstract

This work focuses on the strategic planning of public relations in well-known digital brands, based in Barcelona. This is the host city of the international technology fair "Mobile World Congress" and, at the same time, is in fifth place in Europe, in terms of the number of existing start-ups. The qualitative methodology, using the case study, was the research strategy used, which favoured triangulation in data collection through in-depth interviews and document analysis. Three brands founded on the digital environment were studied, whose activity is developed in the online environment. The results of the study showed that the public relations planning of the analysed digital brands is carried out in four stages: research, planning, implementation and evaluation. The public relations actions of these brands are integrated into marketing strategies and focus on advertising, content marketing and influence marketing actions, which combine creativity and analysis in order to achieve growth hacking goals. The strategies of these brands seek to achieve communication goals in the short term and the techniques used are guided by a management approach by objectives.

Keywords

public relations; growth hacking; content marketing; digital communication; influencer marketing

Relações públicas em estratégias de *growth hacking* na comunicação digital: os estudos de caso da Wallapop, Westwing e Fotocasa

Resumo

Este trabalho debruça-se sobre o planeamento estratégico de relações públicas em marcas digitais de referência, que estão sediadas em Barcelona. Esta é a cidade anfitriã da feira internacional de tecnologia "Mobile World Congress" e, ao mesmo tempo, está em quinto lugar na Europa, no que respeita ao número de *startups* existentes. A metodologia qualitativa com o recurso ao estudo de caso foi a estratégia de investigação utilizada, a qual privilegiou a triangulação na recolha de dados através da realização de entrevistas em profundidade e da análise documental. Foram estudadas três marcas sustentadas no ambiente digital, cuja atividade se desenvolve no meio online. Os resultados do estudo mostraram que o planeamento de relações

públicas das marcas digitais analisadas é realizado em quatro etapas: a pesquisa, o planeamento, a implementação e a avaliação. As ações de relações públicas destas marcas estão integradas em estratégias de marketing e privilegiam ações de publicidade, de marketing de conteúdo e de marketing de influência, que combinam a criatividade e a análise a fim de se atingirem as metas de *growth hacking*. As estratégias destas marcas procuram atingir metas de comunicação a curto prazo e as técnicas utilizadas orientam-se por uma abordagem de gestão por objetivos.

Introduction

This study analyses the role of public relations in the communication strategies of the main digital brands in Barcelona, the city where the international technology fair "Mobile World Congress" is held and the fifth European urban centre with the largest number of start-ups[1].

The case study was the method of investigation used, and the respective data were collected in the last three years, a time when communication processes were being rapidly redefined, due to the changes in the network society (concept that started being discussed by Castells, in 2001, standing as a good characterization for today's society).

Studying public relations' strategies for brands that are born and operate in the digital environment provides valuable knowledge to the field, since it allows an in-depth analysis of the way public relations professionals investigate, plan, implement and evaluate their actions. At the same time, it furthers the understanding on their aims.

This work also seeks to increase knowledge about growth hackers (Ellis & Brown, 2018), as a strategic element of public relations, by analysing how this technique is developed and implemented by brands that are born in the digital environment.

Theoretical framework

The essence of public relations has remained the same since the term was created by academics, to refer to professionals responsible for managing the relationships between an organization and its audiences (Bernays, 1923). However, the discipline is constantly evolving, since "new forms of communication and technology revolutionize its practice" (Wilcox, Cameron & Xifra, 2012, p. 6).

Thus, the study and practice of public relations become increasingly complex and closer to other areas, such as marketing communication and influence and content marketing (Aguilera, 2016). According to García Carballo (2012), the essence of marketing communication is the understanding that "users tend to reject any type of message with an explicitly commercial character, anything that looks like an advertisement and,

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[1] Retrieved from https://2018.stateofeuropeantech.com

in response, organizations turn to public relations, especially through social networks" (p. 145). Ries and Ries (2003) therefore emphasize the effectiveness of public relations in the new context of communication, thanks to their greater credibility when compared to advertising. In addition, they inspire the way marketing is oriented. As Armstrong and Kotler (2003) observe: "today, marketing must be understood, not in the traditional sense of selling, but in the sense of satisfying the client's needs" (p. 5).

In fact, and as Kaplan and Haenlein(2010) infer, the digital environment has brought new communication models, which have been gradually emerging and which involve the public actively, as is the case with content marketing (Pulizzi & Barret, 2009; Pulizzi & Rose, 2017) and influence marketing (Katz & Lazarfeld, 1955; Rushkoff, 1994; Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009).

As seen in the results of this study, the public relations actions that are implemented by the analysed digital brands are integrated in their marketing plans, which favour growth hacking (Ellis, 2010; Ellis & Brown, 2018): a multidisciplinary strategy whose main objective is to achieve growth, combining creativity and analysis. The term growth hacking emerged to define a multidisciplinary technique designed to achieve growth. Thus, a growth hacker is an individual whose true orientation is growth. This professional must be creative to discover unique ways to drive growth, in addition to testing and improving the techniques of other companies (Ellis, 2010).

The term growth hacking became popular outside the start-up ecosystem after it was used by Chen[2]. For him, the growth hacker is a professional who constantly asks himself how he can expand his business and answers this question in an analytical and creative way, with A/B tests, landing pages, viral techniques and content marketing strategies that create the search engine optimization (SEO), in addition to many other alternatives.

In fact, for Chen, growth hacking is not a function within an organization, but a philosophy that must characterize the marketing strategy, operating to win millions of users in a short time, since it is a possibility brought by the digital environment[3].

The public relations strategy of the three brands studied is in line with the vision of growth hacking. In these cases, the principles of integrated marketing communication are privileged (Kotler, 2003; Schultz & Kitchen, 2000; Schultz & Patti, 2009), according to which public relations actions are planned and implemented in conjunction with other disciplines, such as advertising and digital marketing. The strategic planning of these actions therefore comprises the stages of research, planning, implementation and evaluation (Marston, 1963; Matilla, 2017; Wilcox et al., 2012), with the objective of meeting short-term communication goals.

It was noticed that, when digital brands execute the strategic planning of public relations, the research and evaluation phases are considered the most relevant. The research concerns the stage of the environment and people, so that it is possible to foresee the effects that actions can have (Cuenca, 2017). The assessment, which follows the

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[2] See http://andrewchen.co/how-to-be-a-growth-hacker-an-airbnbcraigslist-case-study/

[3] Retrieved from http://andrewchen.co/how-to-be-a-growth-hacker-an-airbnbcraigslist-case-study/

action, compares the proposed objectives with the results obtained, seeking to learn new things and develop future lines of action (Marca, 2017). The focus of growth hacking is also found in assessment, which leads to learning (Ellis & Brown, 2018).

The data analysis thus follows the entire public relations strategic planning process, in line with the principle of growth and achievement of goals that characterizes the growth hacking vision.

Next, the study methodology is presented.

Methodology

The investigation used a qualitative methodology, namely a case study, to explore the role of public relations actions in the growth hacking strategies of three brands that were born in the digital environment and located in Barcelona.

Respecting the selection criteria outlined, the brands had to have marketing and communication departments based in Barcelona and also had to be market leaders in their sector, as determined in an interview by Esteban Redolfi (Coll-Rubio & Mico, personal interview, 2016, November 18), CEO of 4YFN Mobile World Capital.

According to these criteria, the following case studies were selected:

- Wallapop, created in Barcelona in 2013, was the first Spanish application for buying and selling second-hand items, based on location;

- Westwing, created in Germany in 2011, was the first European e-commerce platform dedicated exclusively to the home and decoration segment; currently leads the Spanish furniture sales market;

- Fotocasa, a real estate portal created in 2004 by Adevinta, Spain's largest and most diversified classified ad and job offers company.

The triangulation of data was privileged through the use of three techniques: in-depth interviews; observation; and the documentary analysis of the content produced by the brands and their followers, between the years 2014 and 2018. The combination of these methods produced more reliable and complete empirical data.

As shown in Table 1, three stages of (successive) interviews were carried out to the professionals involved in the planning and implementation of the public relations strategies of the brands in question. These representatives were selected by the brands themselves, in order to meet the needs of the investigation. Thus, the following professionals were interviewed: Gemma Escribano, marketing director at Wallapop; Jessica Amador, Wallapop's director of public relations and social responsibility; Carlos Macho, content marketing manager at Wallapop; Beatriz Friol, marketing director at Westwing; Patricia Mas, Westwing's account director at the Interprofit communication agency; Montse Lavilla, Fotocasa's marketing director; Anaïs López, head of communication and press at Fotocasa; and Violeta Ruiz, head of content and communication with Fotocasa users.

STAGE 1 INITIAL INTERVIEWS	STAGE 2 GROUP INTERVIEWS	STAGE 3 FINAL QUESTIONNAIRE
Gemma Escribano, marketing director at Wallapop; Beatriz Friol, marketing director at Westwing; and Montse Lavilla, marketing director at Fotocasa	Gemma Escribano, marketing director at Wallapop; Jessica Amador, director of public relations and social responsibility at Wallapop; and Carlos Macho, content marketing manager at Wallapop Beatriz Friol, director of marketing at Westwing; Patricia Mas, director of accounts at Westing at Interprofit; Anaïs López, head of communication and press at Fotocasa; and Violeta Ruiz, head of content and communication with users at Fotocasa	Gemma Escribano, marketing director at Wallapop; Beatriz Friol, director of marketing at Westwing; and Anaïs López, head of communication and press at Fotocasa

Table 1: Interviews carried out for the research

The first interviews, carried out during the first stage, were based on a set of open questions, namely: what are your responsibilities? What internal and external teams do you lead? How do you structure your department? How do you plan the communication of your brand? What are the communication objectives? What resources do you have to implement public relations actions? And what is the role of public relations in the brand strategy?

The second phase of interviews was conducted in a group, with the professionals responsible for implementing the public relations actions. The questions asked, also open, were the following: what are the brand's communication objectives? What public relations actions are implemented and how? What role do public relations play in the brand strategy and what synergies exist with other fields of activity, such as advertising or digital marketing? How does the press office work? What professionals are involved in the implementation of the communication plans? What is the role of brand ambassadors? What is the role of influencers? How does the company coordinate the different professionals involved in advertising, digital communication and public relations? And how are the results measured?

The third and last stage of interviews aimed to gather the information collected in the previous two phases, in order to allow comparison. For this purpose, questions were elaborated based on the concepts of study and the data collected through document analysis and observation, which were being carried out in parallel. The following questions were then asked: how do you analyse, plan, implement and evaluate the brand's communication actions? What is the role of research? Is your action based on previous data and information? What is the relationship between communication objectives and business objectives? How are these goals determined? How important is creativity in this process? Can planning be described in the short term? Are actions monitored in real time?

While the interviews were being carried out, the observation was made, which allowed to complete and interpret, in a more detailed way, the information provided by

the interviewees during the three phases. This observation period (three years) can be considered long term in the current economic context, which is rapidly evolving.

The interviews and observation were complemented with documentary analysis which, in addition to the notes and records of the interviews and observation, included the collection of 100.000 documents, of which more than 12.000 were analysed. Table 2 shows the different types of documents examined, many of which are directly related to the public relations strategies of the three brands.

Type of document	Number
Press materials (press releases and others)	26
Clipping	11.500
Communication with users (app, blogs and social media)	1.000

Table 2: Documental analysis

After gathering and comparing all information, it was categorized according to the concepts detected in the case studies, following the principles of grounded theory (or data-based theory), a methodology that allows a theory to be developed from the systematic data collection and analysis. Thus, the conclusions presented in this article show that the theory derives from the categorization of results through the "constant interaction between analysis and data collection" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 273). This is followed by the discussion.

Findings

The results of this investigation seek to describe the role of public relations in the growth hacking strategies of three digital brands: Wallapop, Westwing and Fotocasa. When analysing the strategic planning models of each of these brands, differences and similarities were found, which are presented below.

Case studies

The three case studies discussed were analysed using data triangulation based on the three methods of data collection: in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis.

Wallapop

Wallapop was the first Spanish application serving as a medium to buy and sell products based on location. Founded in Barcelona in 2013, the platform sells second-hand items, allowing users to sell objects they do not use to people close to them.

Wallapop's public relations strategy follows the four-step RACE model[4] (Marston, 1963): research, planning, implementation and evaluation. Research is a fundamental step in the strategy of this brand, since the decisions taken before the implementation of any action are always based on data, as shown by the information collected in the case study.

The second step in Wallapop's strategy, then, is planning, in which clear, quantifiable, realistic and timed objectives are defined, before choosing the appropriate means to carry out the action. To meet the need for speed, Wallapop's communication plans are prepared only a few months in advance. In order to provide the necessary flexibility, the brand has a horizontal, dynamic, innovative and multidisciplinary structure. According to the marketing director, Gemma Escribano,

> speed is a must in start-ups. For us, long-term planning would be about six months, in the medium term of three or four months and, finally, short term of one or two months. New companies, such as Wallapop, tend to have highly horizontal structures, which ensures the sharing of knowledge, while encouraging everyone to innovate, making everyone feel involved in the project. Wallapop's multidisciplinary communication team is able to adapt the message to different channels, making the most of its synergy.

In this regard, Jessica Amador, communications director at Wallapop, stated that: "there are no double roles, everything is combined. For example, we have a professional who manages communication in the application, another who is responsible for the relationship with influencers and other people who manage the content of each channel".

After planning, Wallapop starts the implementation phase of actions, which is carried out based on a 360° communication strategy, combining advertising campaigns with public relations actions focused mainly on advertising and marketing communication. Escribano explained how brand communication actions are carried out:

> Wallapop has a 360° strategy, which combines all possible channels, making the most of each one. Currently, the digital medium is the priority, although traditional channels also work well. Television, for example, works very well for Wallapop. Combining means promoting all channels at the same time and improving the company's metrics.

The 360° communication strategy of this brand therefore includes a vision of growth hacking, which includes advertising campaigns and actions, as well as marketing communication and influence marketing, bringing together all possible online and offline channels to obtain better results in the evaluation.

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[4] Strategic planning model used in digital marketing, whose initials correspond to its four phases: reach; act; convert; engage.

Westwing

Westwing.es is a home décor portal, which belongs to the Westwing Group GmbH, founded in Germany in 2011 by the decoration expert Delia Fischer. It was the first European e-commerce platform dedicated exclusively to home décor and, today, it is a leader in furniture sales in Spain.

Westwing's public relations planning also follows the four-steps of the RACE model (Marston, 1963). The first step, research, is based on the large amount of data generated by e-commerce. The information is analysed in order to maximize the chances of success in the communication actions. In general, this planning is carried out annually, although the actions are outlined quarterly, since the brand needs a quick reaction time. The objectives proposed by Westwing aim to increase brand awareness among the target audience, which is made up of buyers of decorative items and their influencers. In the words of its marketing director, Beatriz Friol, "Westwing generally plans its public relations actions annually. However, detailed actions are prepared quarterly to give us a faster reaction time".

Regarding strategy, Westwing bets on creating relevant content in all types of formats, in order to position itself as a market leader. For this, it has its own internal press advisory team, composed of journalists and photographers who work exclusively in the production of content, which are published daily on social networks and in newsletters. The communication strategy of this brand then combines digital content marketing with online and offline advertising campaigns and with public relations actions. Like Wallapop, actions at Westwing are also planned and executed in an integrated manner, with a 360° vision and with a focus on growth hacking, which uses creativity and takes advantage of the synergy between channels to achieve the best recognition of the brand with customers.

Finally, the fourth stage of Westwing's communication strategy is the evaluation, which includes continuous and real-time monitoring of the actions being implemented in order to assess the return on the investment made.

Fotocasa

The Fotocasa real estate portal was created in 2004 after the merger of the Anuntis and Vivendum portals. It belongs to Schibsted Spain, the largest and most diversified classifieds company in Spain.

Fotocasa's public relations strategy focuses on growth hacking techniques and strategic planning, following too the RACE four-step model (Marston, 1963).

All brand communication plans start with research, since most of their projected communication actions are based on data collection. Some of this data is obtained through samples designed to reach a percentage of the target audience and, thus, guarantee an early measure of its effectiveness.

Then, the action planning is prepared based on the communication objectives that are defined annually and aligned with the company's objectives. But action planning is also carried out on a quarterly basis. In addition, Fotocasa still has a tactical plan, designed to meet sudden needs. The decision-making process is flexible and the brand strategy seeks to take advantage of the synergy between the planned actions and the actions carried out, with a vision that also fits into the concept of integrated communication, and which is evolving towards growth hacking.

The essential factor in Fotocasa's planning is the coordination of advertising and public relations actions in a beneficial way. In the words of the company's head of communication, Anaïs López,

> these actions are synergistic. Not a single action is taken without thinking about how it can affect or be used in any area. There is a lot of coordination between the teams. We try to interconnect all areas so that actions are coordinated and designed in the same spirit.

Fotocasa's communication plan is thus implemented through a combination of public relations actions – including press relations, content marketing and influence marketing – and advertising (online and offline) and presents a 360° view with a focus on growth hacking.

Finally, the results of communication actions are constantly monitored and considered when planning new actions, according to the spiral established in the RACE model (Marston, 1963). To assess the effectiveness of its actions, Fotocasa defined the following metrics: monthly top of mind, ROI (return rate) and share of voice (which measures the brand's impact on its audience).

Categorisation

As established in the methodology section, following the principles of grounded theory, the results of the investigation were categorized into concepts related to the strategic planning of public relations.

After categorization, connections were observed with the creation of the 360° strategy in all stages of the interviews conducted with representatives of the three companies. The strategic planning of public relations coincides between the brands and corresponds to the RACE model of four stages: research, planning, implementation and evaluation (Marston, 1963). The growth objective, centred on the growth hacking approach, is also present in all case studies.

The public relations actions carried out by the brands, fall within the scope of marketing communication, according to the classification of ADECEC (2008), with emphasis on advertising, content marketing and influence marketing. In all the case studies, there was integrated planning through the implementation of public relations, publicity and marketing actions.

Category	Wallapop	Westwing	Fotocasa
360° Strategy	X	X	**X**
Research	X	X	**X**
Planning	X	X	**X**
Implementation	X	X	**X**
Evaluation	X	X	**X**

Table 3: Categorisation

Discussion and conclusions

The results of this investigation show that the public relations actions carried out by the digital brands present in the study are part of their marketing planning, which has a vision of growth hacking, focused on achieving growth through creativity and data analysis.

In terms of strategy, the results of the study reveal the presence of the four main pillars in the public relations strategic planning process: research, planning, implementation and evaluation. The actions implemented by the brands in question focus on achieving short-term communication objectives, which privilege communication techniques responsible for managing intangible assets.

Conducting research and evaluating the results are key factors in the public relations' actions of the analysed brands. All decisions are driven by the data collected and analysed. As a result, the three companies adjust their strategic planning, which is flexible and dynamic.

However, this study did not find significant influence from other areas, such as reputation, institutional relations or crisis communication, in public relations strategies. This can be explained by the short-term plans that characterize the strategies of these brands, and that do not allow working on issues such as organizational reputation.

Still, the results of the investigation showed that all public relations and marketing actions are planned and executed in a coordinated and integrated manner. Digital brands operate in a context in which speed and change are the watchwords and, therefore, plans are almost always thought out in the short term. This type of planning requires highly coordinated multidisciplinary teams, with a collaborative and flexible culture (Mintzberg, 1979). In addition, the observed leadership style is characterized by management by objectives (Drucker, 1954), and leads exactly to the RACE model of strategic planning (Marston, 1963), with particular interest in data-based decision making, which is driven by digital tools.

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Biographical notes

Patricia Coll-Rubio has a PhD in Communication and is a professor of the subjects of Introduction to Journalism, Corporate Communication and Digital Content Management at the Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations of Ramon Llull University. As a journalist specialized in digital transformation, she collaborates with *El País Retina, La Vanguardia,* and *Wolters Kluwer.*

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7649-800X

Email: PatriciaCR1@blanquerna.url.edu

Address: School of Communication and International Relations, Blanquerna Ramon Llull University (URL) Pça. Joan Coromines08001 Barcelona, Spain

Josep Lluís Micó is a professor of Journalism at the Ramon Llull University (URL) and vice-dean of the Blanquerna School of Communication and International Relations (URL). He has led international research projects and is the author of dozens of articles, chapters and books on communication and technology. He is a technology and trends analyst in media such as *La Vanguardia*, Radio Nacional de España, *NacióDigital, Diario de Girona*, etc.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1191-226X

Email: JosepLluisMs@blanquerna.url.edu

Address: School of Communication and International Relations, Blanquerna Ramon Llull University (URL) Pça. Joan Coromines 08001 Barcelona, Spain