

Experiences Using Social Networks in Spanish Public Administrations

J. Ignacio Criado
Dpto. de CC Políticas y RR.II.
Universidad Autónoma de
Madrid
Cantoblanco (Madrid), Spain
ignacio.criado@uam.es

Yolanda E-Martín
Dpto. de Automática
Universidad de Alcalá
Alcalá de Henares (Madrid),
Spain
yolanda@aut.uah.es

David Camacho
Dpto de Informática.
Universidad Autónoma de
Madrid.
Cantoblanco (Madrid), Spain
david.camacho@uam.es

ABSTRACT

Public administrations are developing several mechanisms to increase the reception level or the impact of the information that they communicate (i.e public policy-making or public service delivery) using for this, marketing techniques. Therefore, we may consider the concept of marketing in the public sector as the process of identifying the needs of a target audience to try to meet them, taking into account at the same time the objectives of the organization and the society. This paper aims to address this reality, regarding to the new opportunities resulting in the use of the Internet. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyze how the public administrations are using Internet and, above all, the tools associated with social networks, to carry out the marketing process of their policies and public services. This study shows several experiences to integrate the citizenry within a more collaborative information process.

Keywords

Public Administration, Social Networks, Institutional Advertising, Citizen.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public administrations are developing several mechanisms to increase the reception level or the impact of the information that they want to communicate, using for this marketing techniques. The concept of marketing in the public sector implies the process of identifying the needs of a target audience to try to meet them, taking into account at the same time the objectives of the organization and the society. The above description can be understood as a way to facilitate the production, management, communication and delivery of public services and policies. The application of marketing to the public services and policies should only serve to mediate in the communication between those who have a need in society and the specific public organizations

to satisfy those needs (either a biomedical research laboratory, a business promotion agency or a center for evidence-based care of older people).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how the public administrations are using Internet. Specifically, the definition of the new relationships with citizens due to Internet, and how the social expansion of the Information and Communication Technologies make possible a new way of understanding the marketing activities. Therefore, the aim of this work is to examine how public authorities are using social networks tools to conduct the marketing of their policies and public services. Concretely, we focus on the phenomenon of institutional blogs, as well as the deployment of YouTube or Twitter, as communication environments with the citizens. Since public administrations are increasingly using social networks tools to enhance their business processes, this paper is founded on various cases in operation in organizations of the public sector.

The paper is focus on 1) enriching the studies about marketing activities in the public sector from a public policy point of view, 2) analyzing and providing empirical data on the new experiences that are developing public administrations using Internet and social networks tools, and 3) drawing some preliminary conclusions about the scope of the public sector marketing using the Internet and social networks, and whether this method represents a change in the way of understanding the relationship between citizens and public administrations. The starting point of this paper is to explain several innovative ways based on social networks tools which are using by public administrations for interacting with citizens. However, it is still necessary to study the true scope of social networks in the relationships between public administrations and citizens, that is, if indeed is an improvement.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical analysis that supports this work. Specifically, the role of marketing activities in public administrations, and its new features related to Internet and new services associated with social networks. Next, we present a short discussion derived from the approaches previously conducted. Finally, the conclusion shows the highlights of this paper and suggests outlines future for works in the innovation of public administrations.

2. MARKETING IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS AND THE INTERNET

During the last years, marketing techniques are the most

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developed strategies by public administrations to improve their relationships with citizens. This trend has intensified through the Internet media. Traditionally, the governments and public administrations spread messages to the citizens in order to provide information or promote their services or products. However, as a result of the growth of Internet, it is clearly that the tools available to the Government have changed [6]. In any case, before addressing the latter issue, it is necessary to emphasize some aspects related to the role of marketing in public administrations. In particular, with respect to policies and public services.

Marketing of services and policies has gained importance within the public administrations in recent years. Because of communication with the environment became an indispensable task, and due to the growth of the welfare state (representing an increase of potential beneficiaries) it has grown the need to increasing the impact of information issued from public entities about their services among users and the society [11]. This feature occurs at the same time as the increased attention that government entities give to the relations with external agents to the organization, minimizing the traditional concern with the internal processes and management [7]. All this is inscribed in a frame in which communication skills of public sector is linked to the field of traditional media, which provided to this kind of communication with an unidirectional nature.

However, the abovementioned methods are modified due to the adoption and diffusion of the Internet in the political landscape. Initially, there was an unilateral communication where the citizen does not participate. Later, at the beginning of the Internet social diffusion, public administrations tended to use their website to provide information and promote their services or products [5, 8, 9]. Without any doubt, the above mentioned process limits the possibilities that the social networks tools offer regarding to how interact with information.

It seems that the social networks would be willing to break some of these traditional communication ways of the public authorities. The web has been a remarkable technological success with political, cultural, social and economic impacts. However, the success of the Web was not free. The Web was invented by Tim Berners-Lee [2] in order to communicate with different groups of scientists that were working on complex projects at CERN (*Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire*). But it soon became clear the potential of his idea [1]. The Web was developed until became into the key that has provided people with the skills and habits necessary for using Internet, which in the early 1990s was almost exclusive of research centers and universities.

Search on the Web may be not easy because of the amount of information available and some technical problems for saving the information in a compatible format. There are complex search engines that help us find the information. However, some services of this type have structural weaknesses very difficult to solve. Traditional search engines are based on the syntactic process. That is, this process searches web pages where the keywords appear, uses a scoring system (for example, based on the number of times these keywords appear), and then shows the results. However, there are semantic search engines, like Google, that are focus on what the search means. This process consists on combine linguistic algorithms and traditional search engines methods, thus getting better results.

In last years, the appearance of collaboration software has been a high influence on the develop of the Web. These collaboration tools are based on the social networks framework. The social networks concept is closely related with Tim O'Reilly [10]. The term is associated with web applications that facilitate participatory information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web. As is defined in [3], these web-based services allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. Since their introduction, social networks sites have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices.

The philosophy of social networks has been applied in various fields, being one of the most important the creation of new contents in a simple and economical way. In this regard, the format most prominent is the blog. The blogs are very important components on Internet. They provide to the user with an easy way to publish online and to comment their views [12]. Although originally the blogs were intended for individual use, in practice these services increase and make easy the distributed conversations. Likewise, YouTube is a content sharing site with a similar philosophy, because it allows to show audiovisual content to people and organizations, with a minimum cost of broadcast. The main component of these services are the users. They themselves are the creators of the contents, which are shared with other users, facilitating the visitors to leave comments, giving updates or exchanging of ideas. This interactivity is the most useful aspect of the collaboration tools that distinguishes them from other static web sites.

3. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS APPLICATIONS

Spanish public administrations are using, or trying to use, social networks for a range of official and professional activities. Although currently this incorporation is in its beginning stages, we may observe that the developed framework is merely informative and one-directional. That is, public authorities have been focused on informing and communicating the citizens about public services and products. Taking in consideration the above ideas, in following sections we present several cases in which Spanish public administrations use social networks tools to carry out marketing activities, and the results that we have extracted.

3.1 Blog of the State Enterprise for Management of Tourism Innovation and Technology

The blog is the collaborative tool with the highest growth. The term was coined by Jorn Barger on 1997 to describe what he was doing with his *Robot Wisdom* web page (the word was an abbreviation for the *logging* of interesting *web* sites). The blogs have evolved into a web-wide phenomenon as a media that have gained increasing importance and coverage for their role in the Web [4]. From a practical perspective, the blogs are hosted on servers, are visualized using different browsers and are accessed through URLs. The blogs are updated periodically, thus the posts have the date and time of publication, and are listed chronologically with the

most recent displayed first. The editorial control is performed by the author. Weblogs require some level of maintenance which is supported by free tools that allow (without need for high-skilled) manage, coordinate, delete or rewrite posts, moderating comments from visitors, etc. The starting point of blogging in the policy field is the United States presidential election of 2004. Then, millions of people have used the blog to exchange information, build policy social networks and consolidate digital platforms to support candidates. This success boosted the use of these methods in policy.

One of the most interesting blog types are those related with the public servant and government agencies. In these cases, the bloggers, that usually belong to a government agency, seek to achieve a impact in the policy implementation or a public service. Thus, the role of blogging in policy would be designed to improve the design and implementation of public policies and services through direct contact with the target public or affected communities. Several agencies have performed this practice in order to inform about their daily work as public servants, or to reflect on the administrative activity on the Internet. As example, the Figure 1 shows he blog of the State Enterprise for Management of Tourism Innovation and Technology (SEMTIT).



Figure 1: Blog of the State Enterprise for Management of Tourism Innovation and Technology.

In this case, SEMTIT promotes debate on the renewal of the Spanish tourism sector, as well as technological innovation within the sector. Its purpose is to exchange ideas, experiences and knowledge on how to improve the Spanish tourism industry. The debate and conversation is growing. The authors often differ in their texts and reflections, and they offer contrasting or support arguments regarding to original ideas or approaches. In this way, the set of ideas derived from the citizenry and key players in this sector may facilitate to public institutions becoming more innovative, while they increase their awareness of societal demands.

3.2 Gijón City Council on Twitter

A step further in blogging is Twitter, a website which offers a social networks and microblogging service. This

website is the most widespread at the time of this paper is delivered. Twitter is characterized by the instant messaging, enabling its users to send and read messages called tweets. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the user's Web site, with the feature that they can be sent and received with instant messaging software, with mobile phones or through social networks like Facebook. As mentioned above, the main feature is its instant messaging, which may become an outstanding element in finding out what is happening right now. These kind of websites have been incorporated within the current activities of several main politicians, but this idea is also being tested on some public administrations. This is the case of Gijón City Council (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Gijón City Council Twitter

The Gijón City Council is one of the pioneers using Twitter in Spain. Since its inception, this Twitter has has a notable increase in following and followers. Although it is not available data on total visits received, without any doubt we can assert that Twitter has become an important marketing tool for civil servants, and gives the public the opportunity to talk directly with them as well as with the institutions' representatives.

Gijón City Council Twitter issues tweets targeted to report about the local life, instead of focusing on improving the interaction with the citizen or committing to the current problems and their affected citizen. Obviously, progress and results of this type of media are starting, so that perhaps requires more experience of use to provide further evidences and conclusions. However, we can estimate that this microblogging system would may create links between users of the same cities and thus, they can exchange points of view, hobbies and other aspects of municipal politics, and outside local authorities.

3.3 Spanish Radio and Television Corporation on YouTube Channel

The broadcasting is one of the most used social networks tool among people, organizations and public administrations. YouTube is a file sharing online service which allows users upload, share, and view personal and institutional videos easily. Usually, YouTube displays a wide variety of user-generated video content, such as movie and TV clips, music videos and home videos. One of the key features of YouTube is that offers to the users the possibility of view-

ing its videos on blogs or personal web pages outside the site, which gives more publicity to their content. This is performed by embedding a piece of HTML (associated with each video) on a page outside the YouTube website. Public administrations are interested in the development of channels offered by YouTube as the media to provide people with information. One of the most successful channel in the Spanish public sector refers to Spanish Radio and Television Corporation (RTVE) showed in Figure 3.

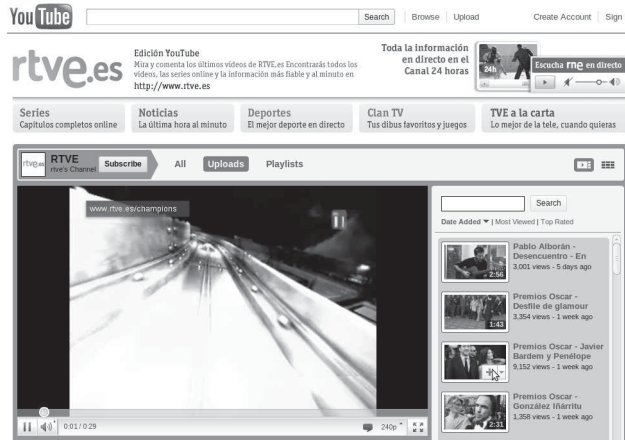


Figure 3: RTVE YouTube Channel

In the last years, RTVE has changed radically. It has developed its own channel on YouTube, which is one of the most known and visited channels in Spanish.

The results of RTVE YouTube Channel show the potential success of this type of applications in the public sector. Since its inception in March 2006, the uploaded videos have exceeded one million of reproductions, and it has more than eleven thousand subscribers. The fact that RTVE YouTube channel is one of the most visited sites allows us to think about the international effect that it generates because Spanish is the second language in terms related to YouTube (77% English, 11% Spanish, 3% French, ...). The spread of this type of websites in other areas of public sector is proving particularly effective because the easy of use, and the low costs of using it.

3.4 The Hydrocarbons Geoportal of Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Trade

Georeferencing processes are producing many services in the Spanish public sector. Specifically, the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) integrate hardware, software, and data for capturing, managing, analyzing, and displaying geographically referenced information in order to solve complex planning and management problems. The most popular GIS is Google Maps which is a free Google web mapping service application which offers map and satellite images. Besides this, the web has an option to allow developers to integrate Google Maps into their websites.

Among the possibilities offered, the searches can be focused on a zone that provides more specific results. Thus, one may integrate in the map a set of personal interests. Google Maps also allows us to create paths to reach a desired place, taking into consideration time and distance between two locations. A remarkable feature of these kind of

services is the available tools that allow one to personalize the localization icons, just as to know the exact position of some place or service. Public administrations use this characteristic in order to develop services based on geotagging. An example of this type of utility is the Hydrocarbons *Geoportal* (shown in Figure 4) made by the Spanish Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Commerce.

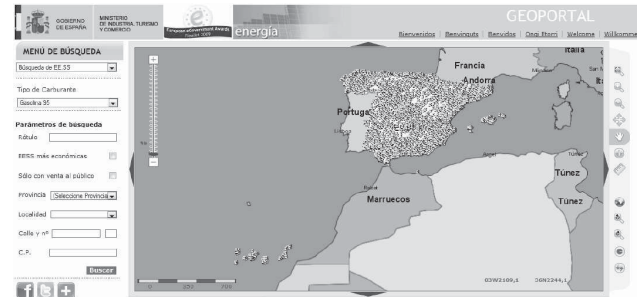


Figure 4: Hydrocarbons Geoportal

The service is characterized by providing to the citizen a knowledge base about the localization of petrol stations and the cost of the gasoline in Spain, both daily updated. With this information it lets make searches in order to know the nearest and cheapest petrol stations from the user location. Despite of the innovations that can be performed in this type of services, we may assert that represents a good media to communicate with the citizenry, giving accurate information about public regulation, and promoting competence dynamics among private companies.

4. DISCUSSION

The Web applications associated with social networks offer new channels to carry out marketing communications in public administrations. These Webs are based on participatory information shared between citizens and governments. The success of new social networks allow us to draw several ideas. In contrast to the websites where the users are limited to the passive viewing of contents, social networks allow the users to interact and collaborate with each other. That is, the user is an active player who generates and receives contents. The new role of the user powered by social networks promotes the change in marketing strategies within public administration.

It is remarkable the new terms introduced by social networks. Concepts as collaboration, interaction, users, networks or simplicity make up a new idea of the Web. The increasing number of blogs or the success of websites like YouTube or Del.icio.us shows a successfully collaborative work methodology.

The relationship between social networks and public sector marketing is based on concepts such as participation, citizenship, networked jobs, etc. which were previously employed in Information Technology (IT). The governments took these advances to try improving the relationship with the citizen, but they did not get the expected results.

Social networks reinforce the above concepts and are changing the way that messages about products and services are delivered and received. The rise of social media is a change for marketing techniques because of its ability for interaction, collaboration and user-generated content. In this re-

gard, the possibilities of hypertext are widened from a text with references to other texts, to a person with links to other persons.

The above mentioned would involve that public authorities have discovered new techniques to increase information impact on their public policy-making processes or services delivered, by introducing social networks tools in marketing activities. The earliest examples seem to indicate that marketing strategies on Internet, specifically those based on social networks, suggest a change in the relation between public authorities and citizens. It seems clear that citizen participation is positive, but it is still early to determine its capacities in the near future.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has focused in the public sector marketing on Internet. This perspective offers novel communication strategies that allow public administrations to carry out marketing activities in a different way. The theoretical frameworks which underpin this work are focused on the role of marketing in public administration, and the new features related to the development of social networks tools as blogs, YouTube or Twitter. We have shown several cases related to the most popular social networks services that are currently running in different Spanish public administrations. Next, we have presented a brief discussion derived from the previous analysis, specially about the initial process, in which the communication was one-directional, and the current approach, that is more collaborative and integrated.

It is possible a more deep study on this because the application of these techniques is in its early stages. Specifically, it is necessary to deepen on experiences with a longer time of running. In this way, a greater comprehensive analysis of the method would be possible. On the other hand, the uncertain evolution of social networks tools implies being cautious with our conclusions. Nonetheless, it would be desirable to discern whether (or not) these type of tools are really a new public sphere for the communication of civil servants with the citizens. It also requires further study the consequences for both types of actors, regarding to the growing role of the citizens as co-producers of public services based on social networks instruments.

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