# CASE STUDY ON THE COMMUNICATION REGARDING THE WATER AND MANAGEMENT PROJECT: THE CHALLENGE OF COMMUNICATING IT TO LATIN AMERICA

Foz do Iguaçu - PR - 05/2015

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**Class B - Innovative Experience (IE): Case study**

**Education Sector: Continuing Education in General**

**Classification of Research Areas in Distance Education: Macro Level - Distance Education Systems and Theories - D. Theories and Models**

**Nature: Description of Ongoing Project**

## ABSTRACT

*This study presents the communication actions implemented by the Water Project: acquiring knowledge to improve management [Projeto Água: conhecimento para gestão], whose main characteristic is the fact that it offers distance education courses in Brazil and other Latin American countries. Communication presents two main goals within the context of Distance Education: promoting the courses to attract new students, and captivating them based on the knowledge they receive, as well as for the satisfaction of participating in the initiative. Due to its characteristic of offering free courses on specific topics related to the management of water resources, the Project must establish a close relationship with institutions involved in environmental issues, and develop a joint effort with the coordination of tutors, who are the main promoters of student satisfaction, as they communicate directly with students. In addition, we present communication at the strategic level by developing a communication plan and constantly measuring the results, as well as the communication tools used by the team, and the promoted interactions. Another approach is how the Project communication structure was developed, since it was planned and created four years ago, and the challenges of communicating it to Brazil and other Latin American countries, with limited financial resources.*

**Keywords: Communication; interaction; communication tools; strategy**

**Introduction**

The project entitled "Water: Acquiring Knowledge to Improve Management" [*Água: Conhecimento para Gestão*] is the result of an agreement between the National Water Agency (ANA - *Agência Nacional de Águas*) and the Itaipu Technological Park Foundation (FPTI - *Fundação Parque Tecnológico Itaipu)* with support from Itaipu Binacional, whose purpose is to develop actions focused on communication, promotion, social mobilization, training, and education related to the management of water resources in Brazil and other Latin American countries. This Project was developed by these three institutions based on the need to develop people's skills to work in various water resource management fronts. A total of 33 free courses are offered through Distance Education, self-instructional, and blended learning methods. In just over four years, the Project will offer a total of 35,000 spots in different courses. Known as "Water and Management", this is an unprecedented project in terms of audience reach, territorial scale, topic diversity, and social actors involved, working in the education segment to improve water resource management in Brazil and other Latin American countries. This article presents a case study on the communication structured in the Project in order to reach all Brazilian states across such large territory as well as all Latin American countries, not only in terms of dissemination to different audiences, but also in terms of integration and scope of knowledge related to water resource management.

**1 - Goals**

At the project planning phase in 2011, even before the initiative was formalized, a team of professionals associated to those three institutions established an outline of the actions that would be developed through the agreement. In terms of communication, financial resources were allocated for the development of a visual identity, a bilingual website, a newsletter, a magazine, and resources for producing printed material. Thus, the following goal was set: the communication actions should reach 750,000 people in four years. Based on this goal, we began to map the target audiences and to determine the best means of communication to be applied in order to reach them. Following we will present the Project communication structuring process, and how this process allowed us to reach more than 1.9 million interactions thus

far - more than twice the number expected during the agreement design phase.

## 2 - How distance dissemination works

Communication was strategic tool to disseminate the new Project in all Brazilian states and within Latin American countries. The Project's communications team is installed at the Itaipu Technological Park in Foz do Iguaçu (PR). Alignment meetings were conducted mostly through videoconferencing with ANA's team in Brasília (DF). From the beginning, the approach was that in addition to being a tool to promote the courses offered, the methodology included to produce and share news on water-related topics, because, in general, the Project focuses on sustainable consumption and aims to reach all segments of society. At the same time, it offers courses for a specific audience: professionals, members, and leaders of collegiate bodies involved in participatory decision-making related to water management. There are also actions that focus on young adults, teachers, and educational institutions, whose purpose is to encourage the development of new leaders.

### 2.1 - Strategic contacts and Mailing

Once the audience was defined it was gradually mapped - both that more specific audience that already operates in the area, as well as new actors who could become interested on the subject. One of the first actions was to establish telephone contact to present the Project to the Departments of the Environment and Water Resources of all states. We chose phone contact rather than e-mail, to attempt to establish a more personal communication. Since the courses have their own attracting power: the fact that they are free, they are mostly offered in the distance learning mode, they meet the need and demand for skills in the area, and they also offer a certificate, their characteristics have been key factors that allowed, in such short time, to establish "replicating agents" who promote the courses. As a result, the action spread to several other public and private institutions. It was the result of hard work and many hours on the telephone. In this sense, in all the areas related to Project presentation, we were able to rely on an action that involved transferring the positive aspects from one brand to another, since the Project counted with well respected and renowned partner institutions: ANA, FPTI, and Itaipu. Thus, the

base work included a macro disclosure scheme as a foundation for the work to be conducted later in other areas, reaching organizations that involved a smaller audience. The mailing list was built gradually through permission marketing. We currently have over 45,000 objective contacts - no e-mail lists have been or are currently purchased.

The press played a key role to promote the Project. The National Water Agency provided a contact list of the major media organizations in Brazil. The team then mapped the press and institutions of other Latin American countries.

## 3 - Structuring the Project image

One of the first steps after the Project was formalized was to consider the institutional image. Because it is a unique initiative in relation to its particular characteristics and the audience involved, some guidelines were established early on. However, the Project's institutional image was structured more definitively over time. An advertising agency was hired to create the Project's visual identity. Among the restrictions, we asked that the image made a reference to water, and included the colors of all three institutions involved. Perhaps due to their extended scope and the respect it has earned over time, these institutions have a more formal type of communication. After discussions and studies on Distance Education, and once the first contacts with students were made, the Project's DNA was established: despite being developed almost entirely remotely, we try to decrease the coldness created from the lack of physical contact, with lightness, warmth and friendliness, in order to establish some kind of contact with students. This action would not be restricted to the tutors, but it would be extended to the technical support team and to the Project's customer service staff. Internally, the image we tried to convey was that this would be a "Friendly Project". Torquato (1985) and Kunsch (2003) agree that the purpose of institutional communication is to gain compassion, credibility, and trust, and to influence political and social opinion by determining how the institution is symbolically remembered by the public. However, Kunsch (2003 p.170) points out that communication is not the only element responsible for building this image; other interactions conducted with the public are also a factor. In this sense, the Project's communications team has worked intensively with all 90 tutors. In a joint initiative with the tutors coordination staff, as they are

hired, the tutors undergo a training session where it is explained to them the communication format applied in the Project. After four years, it is clear that this was an effective communication strategy: the feedback received from students and partners indicates that the Project is known for this characteristic.

Among the requirements regarding communication with the student, the points that stand out are: transparency, responsiveness, proactivity, and the fact that there is always a call back: tutors and the technical support staff do not take longer than 24 hours to respond to the student. Costa (2001, p. 58) believes that "the company's image is the mental representation, in the imagination of a group of people, of a set of attributes and values that act as a stereotype and determine the behavior and opinions of this group of people".

### 3.1 - Communication tools applied

In addition to serving as a gateway to the development of the courses offered, the institutional website also acts as the main channel to disseminate news about the Project. Around 45,000 users are registered on the website, and it receives about 20,000 hits a month. The communication actions developed on the website and in other digital social media promote participatory culture, promoting public interaction and involvement in a cyclical process that includes information exchange and knowledge building. The communications team uses platforms and tools to map the interactions with the website through Google Analytcs, and to map the interactions with the Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle) and social media. These analyzes have allowed the team to learn the best way to disclose the news.

Jenkins (2009, p.47) also addresses these interactions by naming the public who accesses the network as consumers. The author states that before the Internet, new technologies and social media were available, such consumers were isolated individuals. The new consumers are more socially connected. In the Project, an example of an action conducted exclusively with "consumer" participation was the "Social retribution" campaign, which aimed to encourage the audience involved in the Project to share the good practices related to water use and conservation. Photos and reports were published on the website and on social media. The initiative lasted two weeks, and spread mainly because the participant was the individual involved in the action.

Students from different parts of the country submitted material for this campaign. Another example was the "Water and tourism" campaign, implemented during the school break, recommending Brazilian tourist destinations whose main attraction is the water. Both campaigns received their own visual identity, which facilitated the process of promoting them. Yet, they did not benefit from any financial investments, they only required internal efforts. The initiatives were positive, since Facebook interaction and website access have increased, it brought visibility to the Project, and it reached the goal of instigating people to think about the issue and encouraging the adoption of responsible attitudes.

In addition to the website, the Project has three more digital social media: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The language used to disclose information in these social media is more informal, since the characteristic of interactions made in social media is more relaxed, and also due to the image of this being a "friendly" and accessible Project, even in online environments.

The social media that brings the most communication return to the Project is Facebook. More than 9,000 people follow the web page "Water and Management", and the publications have reached 70,000 people a month. Publications that create the most repercussion are those related to new open spots in the courses and the publication of pictures, poems, videos and other play materials that address the water topic. There is less interaction on Twitter. Among Brazilians, the target audience of interest to the Project does not use this network very often. Publications have a greater impact among foreigners. However, keeping the media is strategic, since blogs and other means of communication use Twitter on a recurring basis. Publications made in this network have the same frequency and content of those posted on Facebook.

The communications team wishes to invest in video production, since this option attracts user attention. Therefore, YouTube is a necessary tool. Last year the Project purchased the equipment needed to produce videos, and the first material produced focused on tutor training. This year, the team started experimenting with tutorials and video selfies, following the trends of informality and closeness to the public, already practiced in the media such as SporTV and Globo Television Network. The initiative has been achieving great results: the number of views has tripled compared to the previous year, when the site only

posted other people's videos.

The agreement does not include funds for institutional disclosure or for investment in ads placed in social media. Thus, all actions in the networks are implemented without financial support. We rely heavily on spontaneous media; thus, press releases are strategic. Usually, the subject being disclosed includes promoting the open spots in the courses. Since the courses are free, offered as distance learning, and they address topics of general interest, they gain space on their own in the media's editorial departments related to education and the environment. Nevertheless, it is important to maintain good contact with the press, be always available and respond to them quickly.

Another important tool is the newsletter, released every two months in Spanish and Portuguese. The newsletter is published only in digital format and has recently undergone a major change: initially it looked like a "booklet", in which, by clicking the arrows, the reader could turn the pages of the newsletter. Producing this type of newsletter required us to hire a company to work on the layout, and the file was submitted manually (in .pdf format). The lack of an adequate server to send the file meant that the work would take days to be completed. In order to reduce costs and shorten the time needed to produce and submit the file, the newsletter started to be developed and submitted through a specific tool used for sending e-mails. Before, we used to invest about R$ 1,000 per newsletter; currently the cost is R$ 170 a month, and we are able to use the tool in other actions, such as send announcements about available spots in courses - an action that significantly increased the number of registrations and encouraged the return of former users.

In 2014 we published the first edition of *Revista Água e Gestão* [Water and Management Magazine]. Its focus is to promote upcoming spots available in the courses, actions taken, and results achieved in the agreement. A digital version of the magazine was posted on the website. Even so, the team received about 300 requests from people interested in receiving the printed version of the magazine. The high demand and interest in receiving the printed version of the magazine led to the decision to release it annually.

According to Soares (1999), educational communication can be understood as "interpersonal, group, organizational, and mass communication promoted in order to produce and develop communicative ecosystems through

educational and training activities" (SOARES, 1999). The purpose of the project "Water: acquiring knowledge to improve management" is to develop actions related to the communication and education to ensure efficient water management. Thus, the concept of educational communication is built into the Project's DNA. In this context, one of the highlighted initiatives is to promote river basin committees to disclose their actions and involve people. The work is complex, especially regarding the mobilization of participants. Those who are interested can participate in a blended course, where they learn communication techniques necessary to produce and edit radio spots. The committee receives a mini radio studio containing essential equipment such as a recorder, computer, microphone, speakers, a sound board, etc. Providing the equipment is a way to allow sustainability to the proposal. Students participating in the training have the mission of replicating the knowledge. In addition to the radio, these spots can be played on audio advertising vehicles, blogs, and social media related to the committees.

## 4. Communication plan and results measurement

A Communication Plan is developed at the beginning of each year, in order to strategically guide all communication activities. The plan includes the main objectives for the year, indicates the human and financial resources available, and lists the planned actions providing details, implementation date, target audience, expected results, and the required investment. According to Tavares (2010, p. 132), communication should be considered as part of the business and as a strategy, and not be seen only as an operational matter. Thus, the main characteristics required of communications professionals are planning, figures, and results. According to Barbosa and Rabaça (1987), planning is the "act of listing and assessing information and activities - in an orderly fashion and with a logical connection between them - to be executed within a specified time frame, in order to achieve pre-established goals" (BARBOSA AND RABAÇA, 1987, p.463). The Project's Communication Plan is in line with the schedule of classes offered. The communications team places a daily effort of promoting open spots in the courses, monitoring registrations, and answering the questions submitted by those who are interested in the courses. Thus, in the weeks in which there are many open spots, the time invested in

other initiatives is reduced. Backed by a detailed plan, the team can be organized to efficiently reach all goals.

All initiatives and actions in progress, as well as publications on the website and social media are monitored daily. An assessment of the efforts and a detailed measurement of the results are completed at the end of each month. The collected data are consolidated into a report including qualitative and quantitative analyzes, graphs, and comparisons. The diagnosis of the results achieved by the actions is used as the basis to develop future initiatives and to improve current processes. Lorenzetti (1999) points out that measuring results provides more than a simple assessment; it allows us to create "an improving environment, since it lets us review and correct actions, generate more knowledge and credibility to the activity, prioritizes excellence, and positions its professionals not only as communications managers but, above all, as communication strategists" (LORENZETTI, 1999, p.2).

Free tools are used to collect data (such as number of hits; most visited pages and regions of the country, in the case of the website - number of likes; shares and reach, in the case of Facebook - e-mails delivered; articles read and clicked links, in the case of newsletters). In addition to measuring the effectiveness of the actions, the analysis of this data allows us to learn about the profile of the public seeking the Project, how they came to access the pages, what subjects interest them the most, among other data. Through these tools it was possible to map the website access by state. The map indicated that the North and Northeast presented a low access rate, compared with other regions of the country. After this diagnosis, we have intensified the dissemination of open spots in the North and Northeast. Six months later, the results reflected even on the increased number of students trained in these regions. The same action was implemented with foreign users.

**Closing remarks**

The project has been successfully reaching its goals. It is recognized by the quality of courses offered, both with regard to content, as well as the level of service provided. In 44 months of operation, a total of 10,000 people received training through the project, which offered 18,600 open spots in the courses, for which 64,300 people applied. A total 1,992,649 people have been reached by

the Project communication actions, implemented within a territorial scope that included all Brazilian states, 20 Latin American countries, in addition to Spain, the United States, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Belize, and Angola. The Project has received three national awards: the 2013 Innova World Award on Social Innovation; the 2014 Ozires Silva Entrepreneurship in Education Award, and the 2015 Ecology Expression Award - Environmental Education category. Submitting the Project to receive awards is a strategic action because it adds credibility and respect to the Project, and it generates spontaneous media. More than excellent figures, the main achievement is to be contributing to the training of people who become better qualified to promote water management, awareness of the different users, and contribute to the development of new leaders in the area.

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