

## Online Marketing in Firms with Professional and Legal Services: A Local Study

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**Abstract:** The use of communication technologies as tools for effective and efficient communication seems to be essential for all kinds of public and private entities in current society. Small and big companies, public and private institutions, and those companies and professionalized individuals that overtake a part of the tasks of public and private bodies they all experiment with different technologies and developed over the last years different communication strategies in order to hold up with the demands of the markets and in order to promote themselves successfully. However, not all sectors adept to the rising importance of communication technologies in the same way, instead some are rather slow adaptors. This article focuses on the in Spain widely spread figure of the administrative business agent, a person who overtakes professionally all kinds of administrative tasks for different companies. We have carried out our research with firms with professional and legal services in the Spanish province of A Coruña. By the help of a quantitative analysis, we analyzed the spread and uses of new communication technologies in these small firms and tried to figure out whether and how they adapted to new technologies. Our results show that they are rather slow adapters that make only a very limited use of newest communication technologies.

**Key words:** online marketing; administrative business agents; administrative business agencies; technology; communication; A Coruña

**JEL codes:** M, M3

### 1. Firms Offering Legal and Professional Services and Online Marketing

The quick rise of information and communication technologies and the shifts in the discourses on the

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advantages of online communication, and online services have strongly impacted strategies of companies and institutions. Today, companies, public and private institutions need to implement communication technologies in order to be able to compete with other providers and in order to cope with the shifted demands of clients and customers. Especially companies' marketing departments have started to explore the possibilities for improvements accomplished by the help of digital tools, following thereby the demands of what has been called the Broadband Society (Fondevila, 2012a).

Although it is to expect that sooner or later all kinds of institutions and businesses are going to implement some kind of advanced communication technology in order to stay connected to customers and clients, it is doubtlessly expectable that smaller companies in less metropolitan areas, in rather slowly changing and innovating sectors show significant differences regarding the speed with which and the ways how they adapt to the new ICT challenges in and requirements of the market. Despite the diversity of different companies with different connections, demands, clients, interest areas and technology adaption procedures, most studies focus on ICT adaption in big companies in metropolitan areas, in quickly developing market sectors and therefore on the early, rather strong adaptors (Rodríguez & Bernal, 2003). In contrast, the aim of this paper is it to shed light on the adaption of smaller companies and on how they deal with the transformed demands of the network society.

### **1.1 Administrative Business Agents in Firms with Legal and Professional Services**

The here-discussed figure of the administrative business agent is an expert that provides companies with legal and professional support, services and assistance. Usually, administrative business agents with different expertise form together small companies called firms with legal and professional services. The common forms of support that these small firms provide are of economic nature, legal nature or concern tax issues (Del Olmo, 2011).

Offering legal and professional know-how to companies and individuals, administrative business agents are professionals who act according to Article 24 of the Administrative Procedure Act (Act 30/1992, 26th November, Legal Regulations for the Public Administration and the Exercise of Common Administrative Activities). This act guarantees that professionalized administrative business agents are allowed to solicit and perform all kinds of administrative and legal procedures that do not require the direct application of any task that is by law exclusively reserved for special legal or administrative bodies. Carrying out not especially regulated legal, administrative or professional services the administrative business agent working in firms that provide professional and legal services can receive a financial remuneration. Legislation defined the profession of the administrative business agent in the first article of the legal rule 424 (1st March, 1963) of the legal order for the regulation of administrative tasks and practices.

According to this article, the administrative business agent needs to receive a specific professional education and qualifications that entitle him to call himself an administrative business agent. Furthermore it is necessary that he or she is officially recognized member of the Association for Administrative Business Agents, and registered at the corresponding local or better to say provincial branch of the association.

The wide geographical spread of businesses with however quite significant local differences is an important attribute of the Galician business network. In general, we find a larger amount of businesses in the urban areas and along the Atlantic coast. This unequal distribution shapes also the demand and therefore the unequal distribution of firms offering professional and legal services. In the Association for Administrative Business Agents in Galicia, 361 administrative business agents are registered (a statistical figure found on the webpage of the webpage of the Association for Administrative Business Agents, <http://www.ga-galicia.com/portada.php>) of which 47.65% engage in employment in the province of A Coruña.

However, and despite the quite strict legal regulation for the performance of administrative activities, administrative business agents face competition from a variety of other sectors and entities. Main competitors are private companies, non-specialized private agencies, advisory, banking and financial institutions, public companies, local governments, the government of Galicia, as well as individuals who offer illegally some of the administrative services (Garcia, 2011).

## **1.2 Online Marketing as a Form of Marketing in Firms Offering Administrative and Professional Services**

In general, online marketing is defined as a form of marketing that uses telecommunication networks in order to accomplish and improve the objectives of traditional marketing to the same and new customers. According to the American Marketing Association, objectives for online marketing include pricing, promotion, distribution and the creation of value for consumers and interest groups (De la Torre, 2008; McCracken, 2011). We can divide the contents in online marketing into 4 categories, called either the 4 Fs: flow (interactivity, brainstorming), functionality (functionality of the website), feedback (is accomplished by an appropriate flow and a natural functionality) and loyalty (user turns into a part of the community created by the marketing efforts) (Fleming, 2000), or the 4 Cs (content, context, connection and community) (Reinares & Calvo, 2012).

Online marketing has become a necessary and very important part of marketing work. For a good marketing effect of a marketed product or a marketed company it is necessary to guarantee that not only the content presented to possible customers fits with their demands but that the form in which it is presented allows them to access the content smoothly and easily. Once accomplished these two first steps the effort of the marketing team will concentrate on the creation of a community (Gálvez, 2010). Online marketing demands marketing via different channels of which some might create viral effects. This is especially the case for marketing via social media that thanks to the very own dynamics of social media might cause a multiplier effect.

### **1.2.1 Website, Email, Social Networks, Intranet, Extranet and Corporate Blogs**

Internet has allowed to create completely new business models, e.g., in the of media sector (Fondevila, Sierra & Del Olmo, 2011). However, Internet presence and professional uses of communication technologies are factors that allow making a difference in market competition for all kinds of companies. The most important and relevant digital media opportunities are:

First, the companies' webpage or website and the corporate blogs are the epitomes of a company. They are not only the company's door to reach out to a local, national and potentially worldwide community; they are also the window through which the customer looks at a company and its products. Successful presentation and promotion on a website is the alpha and omega of today's web presence.

Second, emails are one of the first commonly used means of digital communication applied in most companies. Emails are still a very effective means of electronic communication (Salas, 2002), serving to deal with customers quickly and over distances.

Third, a new form to connect with clients, customer, business contacts and in order to create community are the numerous social networks like Twitter, Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Xing, Viadeo and Grera.

Another great tool coming along with the implementation of TICs in companies is the Intranet. The Intranet is an internal communication and information exchange network that allows the employees of a company accessing shared information and communicating with each other quickly and easily.

Quite similar to the Intranet is the Extranet, however in contrast to the Intranet the Extranet allows people outside a company accessing the provided information.

### 1.2.2 Interactivity and Engagement with Digital Marketing

Interactivity is the key factor in Digital Marketing strategies. It has been studied the most. Proposed as a qualitative leap in publisher-reader relations, audiovisual interactivity has a short track record. There is a growing demand for collaborative activity with the media (Sánchez Navarro & Pastor, 2009), which has prompted the development of new contact tools. According to mediamorphosis (Fidler, 1997), it is not unusual to see the email addresses of the content producers in digital versions. The use of resources such as the online interview is somewhat moderate due to reluctance by certain media outlets to change and the technical requirements; interactivity is, thus, considered a pending challenge for online journalism (Goldenberg, 2005).

In the empirical study on the digital versions of the *Daily Mirror* and *The Sun* (United Kingdom) and *El País* and *La Vanguardia* (Spain), an intensive use of interactivity in the comments forum and a symbolic fostering of symmetric and asymmetric interactivity were observed (Fondevila Gascón, Del Olmo, 2011). In *The Sun* and *La Vanguardia*, 74% of articles included comments, well ahead of *El País* with 36.74% and the *Daily Mirror* with 31.07%. 52.77% of articles in the British newspapers contained comments whilst in Spanish papers 55.38% of articles included comments, though this difference was not significant given that the overall average was 54.08%.

In terms of interactivity, both the United States (Schultz, 1999) and Colombia (Llano, 2005) have been analysed. In these two cases, online forms and interviews were studied in order to obtain feedback. Both types were included in 42% of the newspapers studied. The surveys inquired about irrelevant and trivial subject matters, and none of the newspapers used this resource to obtain an assessment of their own paper. Acosta (2008) analysed interactivity from the perspective of reader forums in the digital press in Colombia and presented an analysis of the activities of the reader-commentator and the characteristics of the communication contract.

Another debate is the degree to which reader-generated content is used, which leads us to the concept of citizen journalism (Gillmor, 2004). Equally remarkable is the overriding need for constantly updated content, which brings us onto cloud journalism (Fondevila Gascón, 2010a). This flow of content reflects the consolidation of digital media in Catalonia, Spain and in the international arena, which has led to proposed business models (Flores & Aguado, 2005; Fondevila Gascón, 2010b, 2012b; Fondevila Gascón, Del Olmo & Sierra, 2011). This confirms that despite the phenomenon's synchronicity and the ups and downs experienced, from early versions of the late 20th and early 21st Century to the versions approved by the scientific community, the phenomenon of digital journalism has gained in significance and has been established long enough to be analyzed from a longitudinal perspective.

In this framework, the head of Social Media (or name you want to assign: Digital Communication, Digital Business, Digital Marketing Digital Management or other) is mainstreamed.

For a business, it is essential to create quality content. It is paramount. If there is not digital marketing strategy, the company does not exist. An enterprise can develop the business plan you want, and manufacture or produce a needed product. If the potential customer cannot access it, if you do not receive communication about it, everything falls apart. Based on this axiom, enhanced with Broadband Society, in the digital environment, it is that the various departments of the company to bathe digital socialization. Communication, Marketing, Advertising, Public Relations, Market Research, Reputation Management, Customer Service, Business Development, Human Resources, Legal Department, Technology (Telecommunications and Informatics) require digital harmonized action. Social media should be adopted first in general, focused, operational and integrated. The Director or Head of Social Media, or not depending of the Communications or Marketing, stands on the central axis of the action of the company or entity.

### 1.2.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Digital Media in Marketing

Having introduced into the variety of different means that can be used in order to improve communication and to profit from the possibilities of the era Internet, we have to discuss briefly the advantages and disadvantage that different TICs offer.

According to previous analyses, TICs have the following advantages (Table 1):

**Table 1 Advantages of TICs for Firms Offering Administrative and Professional Services**

Advantages	Digital resources					
	Web	E-mail	Social network	Intranet	Extranet	Blogs
Expands schedule in order to interact with customer	•	•	•		•	•
Flexibilises the company		•		•		
Allows avoiding unnecessary travels	•	•	•	•	•	
Integrates applications for administrative and professional services		•		•	•	
Improves productivity		•		•	•	
Facilitates administrative or professional services via the internet	•	•	•			•
Allows knowing customers better		•	•		•	
Allows publishing informative newsletters	•	•	•		•	•
Allows receiving private messages		•	•	•	•	
Allows transmitting and receiving recommendations		•	•	•	•	•
Reduces wasted time-costs	•	•	•	•	•	
Overcomes the impersonality of the firm offering administrative and professional services	•		•			•
It has a low cost		•	•	•	•	•

Source: Self-elaboration from Nafria (2007), Celaya (2008) and Del Olmo (2011).

However and despite the quite extensive advantages, there are also some disadvantages or additional costs that come along with a good web-presence (Table 2):

**Table 2 Disadvantages of Web Presence for Administrative Agencies**

Disadvantages	Digital resources					
	Web	E-mail	Social network	Intranet	Extranet	Blogs
Requires highly technical knowledge	•					
Requires outsourcing services	•			•	•	
Possible high costs	•					
Negative reviews are accessible to other customers/clients			•			•

Source: From a survey of 26 firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services with website.

## 2. Empirical Study

### 2.1 Methodology and Methods

For our research, we worked with quantitative methods and systematic online observation. Despite the already mentioned survey that we carried out in 26 firms offering administrative and professional services we carried out a systematic e analysis of firms offering administrative and professional services' web presences.

Therefore, we analyzed websites of firms from A Coruña offering administrative and professional services at a specific moment (September, 2012), providing us with cross-section data, data that are collected from a variety of different research object at the same historical moment.

Of a total of 172 firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services only 26 entered into the sample (15.1%) for online analysis, which means that only a poor 15% of firms offering administrative and professional services in A Coruña have a website. Of those firms offering administrative and professional services that have a website, we collected data regarding the purpose of their website: the contents, the structuring, the design, digital service providers, web presentation of the physical office, email, social network connectedness, intranet, extranet and blogs. Furthermore following the provided links we also collected data from their social network representations, blogs and extranet.

Whilst a high amount of data was collected in the World Wide Web, a part of our analysis was built on existing data collected from secondary sources by other researchers in other research contexts (Pérez Riobó, 2006). We used data from the Galician Institute of Statistics, the National Institute of Statistics, the Association for Administrative Business Agents in Galicia and from the association Bic Galicia (2009). However, from the administrative agencies was received few information. Furthermore, we used data from a survey that was sent to Galician firms offering administrative and professional services.

Despite, its limitedness we gathered useful data that helped us drawing some interesting results. We have assigned value 1 to those firms offering administrative and professional services that had and made use of a certain digital communication tool and value 0 for lacking firms offering administrative and professional services that were lacking it.

## **2.2 Analysis of Results**

After working through and analyzing the obtained data regarding the contents, the structuring, the design, digital service providers, web presentation of the physical office, email, social network connectedness, intranet, extranet and blogs we gained some useful results that helped us to analyze and explain the use of online marketing as a marketing strategy in firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services.

The main purpose for establishing a website in the first place determines the presentation of the content, the structuring, the design, the web presentation of the physical office, and social network use. We distilled the following factors:

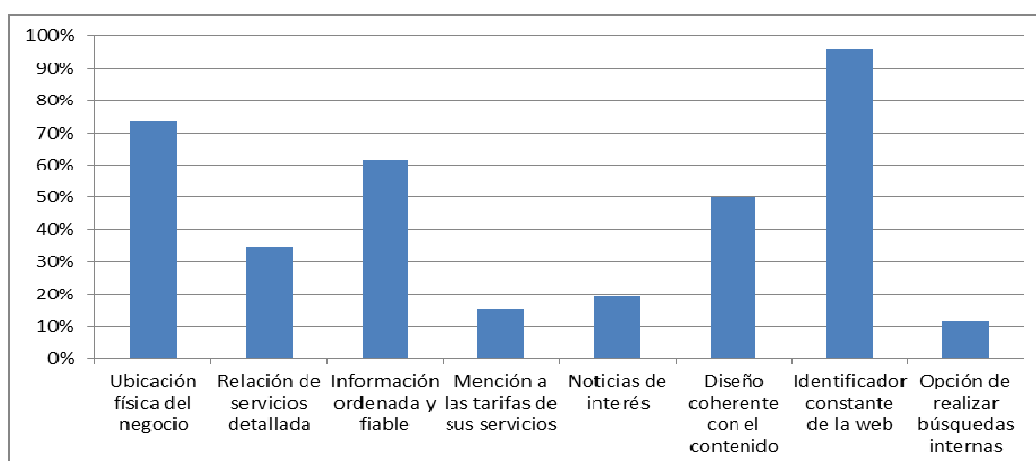
- A 73.8% of firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services used and important part of their website to point at the physical location of the office and structured their web presence accordingly.
- Only 34.62% of the firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services put a detailed list of services on their website.
- 63% of the firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services have a systemized presentation of information on their webpage and can therefore guarantee data reliability and security.
- Data collected in our sample show also that the vast majority of firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services (84.62%) don't mention prices and service fees on their webpage. Only three (representing a 15.38%) allow calculating the cost of a demanded administrative or professional service.
- Only 19.23% of the websites from firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services have a space for the regular publication of news or information related with the provided services that might be from interest for users and clients.

Following results from other studies (Hassan & Martin, 2003), we consider the coherence between the objectives for creating a website, the design of the website, the correctness and exhaustiveness of information related with the purpose for creating a website, the website's brand, the appropriateness of language and writing, the distribution of the contents on the website, the adaption of multimedia contents to client needs and the quality

of internal site search possibilities as most relevant. From the data we gathered on the pages and from our survey, we are able to come forward with the following results:

- Only 50% of firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services present a coherent design and content on their webpage that fits with their main purposes.
- A 96.15% of the websites of firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services provide fixed search options on their website, but only 11.54% allow the user to perform an internal website search.
- Firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services might be able to use free, low profile digital servers/host/web domains. However, generally they opt for the most renowned ones (e.g., .com, which represents 57.69% of the total sample).

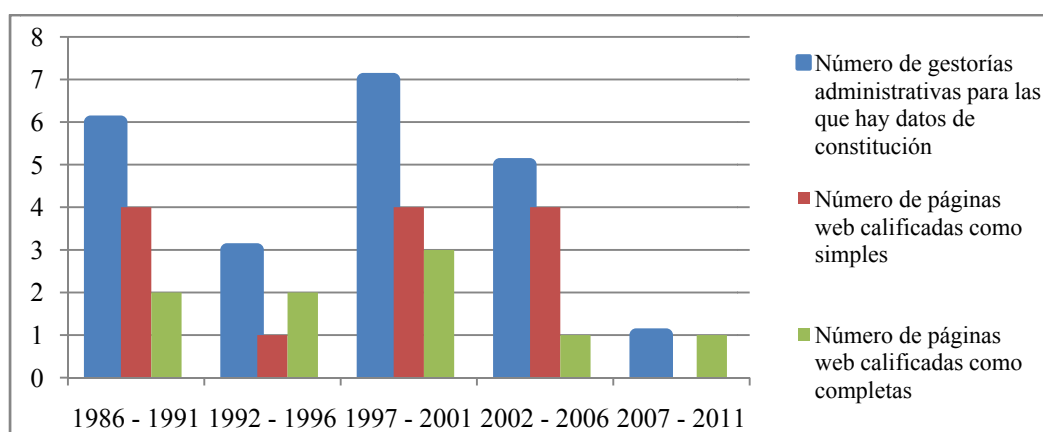
Figure 1 shows the users possibilities to make use of websites of firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services: the location of the office, the offered services, information about services, services and fees, news and information, coherent design fitting with contents, fixed search option, internal website search function (from the left to the right).



**Figure 1 Possibilities to Make Use of Websites of Firms From Corunna Offering Administrative and Professional Services**

Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2 presents data regarding existing firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services (blue), with existing but very simple web pages (red) and with completed and well-created web pages (green).



**Figure 2 Correlation between Age and the Simplicity of the Website and Agencies**

Source: Own elaboration

If we look at the gathered data, it becomes evident that of those view firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services most have opted for a rather simple website. On the websites we have discovered the following elements and results:

- On most websites of firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services (57.69%) the email address is in a different tab than the address of the firm. 53.85% has their email on the home page, allowing therefore an easy access to this form of communication. On 23.08% of the analyzed websites information on the email address is always visible, a result that emphasizes the importance of email as a form of contact with clients.
- Only two firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services make use of social networks. One has a Facebook Profile (however without using it regularly). The other has a Twitter account.
- 15.38% of the firms from Corunna offering administrative and professional services that have a website have a restricted customer exclusive area.

### **2.3 Ideal Types for Adaption to Digital Media**

Our extensive research allowed us developing on ideal types, representing different forms and stages of web adaption and uses of online marketing:

#### **2.3.1 Pioneers**

There are a limited number of administrative business agents (just 34.61% of our sample) that make systematic use of the considerable marketing advantages presented by digital media. Only a few firms offering administrative and professional services show an extensive and intensive use of the webpage and of other digital services and possibilities (e.g., SNSs, intranet, extranet). Thus, they are considered the pioneers, leaders in technology uses, able to use and exploit them as professional business management tools (Amado, 2008) that lead to improved results (Maldonado, 2010) thanks to optimized consumer responses (Mollá et al., 2006), as demonstrated in the fashion industry (Fondevila, Del Olmo & Bravo, 2012).

#### **2.3.2 Laggards**

In this group consisting of 65.39% of the sample, we find those firms offering administrative and professional services that make a less reliable, less coherent and less extensive use of the ICTs and the possibilities of the web. Their digital performance is inaccurate, fragmented and poorly ordered. They rather invest very little time and money in digital media and digital representation.

#### **2.3.3 Invisibles**

This is a group of firms offering administrative and professional services that have no website or blog. Their marketing strategy is based on traditional media and on local reputation. In order to use their services the customer or client needs to visit the office or contact an administrative business agent via telephone. As a result these firms offering administrative and professional services lose possible clients and miss out on an important business opportunity. 84.9% of the total amount of firms in Corunna offering administrative and professional services have been in this group, which is not only alarming but shows the slow adaption to the era web and the necessities and demands that come along with it.

## **3. Conclusions**

In the era of the Internet in a Society based on digital Information Exchange and Communication with a digitalizing business field, the incorporation of information technology and communication technologies is doubtlessly unavoidable. Web presence can create the fine difference between surviving, or being kicked out of



the market. However, quite surprisingly and in contrast to today's demands only 15% of firms in Corunna offering administrative and professional services have a web presence. A scary number reflects not only the huge differences between online adaption of different sectors but also between different geographical zones, and different company sizes.

In general, of the analyzed firms offering administrative and professional services, only some present complete and valid information on their webpage. Digital communication and community building is rather poorly used. There are no systematically used professional profiles on Social Networking Sites, reflecting once again the missing comprehension of needs, demands and possibilities of the Broadband era.

In fact, we did not find much evidence of any intentional action that we could define as online marketing, neither in our observations nor in the survey we carried out.

The only extensively used service in the web is email. Evidently emails are not used for marketing purposes but to facilitate communication and to make carrying out service tasks more effective, efficient. This shows that firms offering administrative and professional services understand the web not as a place to market and promote but simply to support what is already there.

Further studies are necessary in order to shed light on whether this is only a local phenomenon or symptomatic for firms offering administrative and professional services, in general.

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