

# **Corporate Communications in an Emerging Country**

**Ana Lucia Magalhaes**

**FATEC - Faculdade de Tecnologia de Guaratingueta**

**Bruno Andreoni**

**Servtec Engenharia**

The current global economic crisis does not have the same effect in all countries and societies. Brazil in particular did not have time to borrow extensively in pre-crisis years: it was still healing from chronic inflation and was setting its finances in order. As a result, at the beginning of the crisis the country had a growing internal market and neither government nor individuals held considerable debt. Nine months into the crisis, though exports are down, unemployment has remained low and consumption has decreased by less than 2%. Brazil, like India and China, is growing in importance and stature in the concert of nations. Unlike China, however, it became a solid democracy (military coups, for example, are now unthinkable) and unlike India, it is free from ethnic struggles and separatism.

It was expected that Brazil would receive large amounts of after-crisis foreign investment, due to the promise of high yield from an expanding market – for the first time in history the middle class constitutes the majority of Brazil's population. Surprisingly, investment is coming (July 2009) even before the crisis is over. Business in Brazil must be prepared to respond to this foreign investment in an era of social responsibility and concern about the environment.

## **Brief Historical Background**

Historically, institutions in Brazil (Government, Legislature and the Judicial System) were not the product of an evolution dictated by markets, as in northern Europe and consequently the US. In Brazil, as in large parts of the colonial world, institutions were created before markets even existed (Santos, 1994). As a result, the deep roots of society include the notion that government is all powerful, unchallengeable and the universal provider. This notion has been changing over time, and in Brazil the process of change can be said to have started in the late nineteenth century, with the first wave of immigration from Europe and Japan.

Two main factors fostered the transformation of Brazilian society: immigrants' quest for personal prosperity and the standards and example set by (mostly American) multinational corporations. Exxon, for example, has been in Brazil since 1913 and Ford since the late 1920s.

Making a (very) long story short, two societies coexist in contemporary Brazil: a government-dependent culture (public service employees, welfare recipients) and a modern, enterprise-oriented private sector. The latter received powerful incentives in the mid 1990s, when inflation was curbed and the country's finances were set in order. Private corporations of all sizes are the leading force in making Brazil a productive and competitive society by creating wealth, providing an example of ethical behavior and applying legitimate pressure to the political establishment. Corporate communications play a major role within that context, as we shall demonstrate.

## **Corporate Communications in Brazil**

Historically, there have been a few corporate communications initiatives named as such in the late 1940s and as early as 1914, but the start of Corporate Communications as a branch of activity in its own right is generally believed to have taken place in the mid 1950s. Brazil then had a spurt of progress centered in the birth of the automobile industry in the country. US-imported public relations professionals started the first house organs and press offices for the car manufacturers and industries that came with them. These same people then began organizing professional structures for internal communications within the companies. In time, corporate communications and public relations became inextricably intertwined and remain so to this day; the difference being that corporate communication is a more flexible toolset – it may act both internally and externally to a company and can freely interact with administration and human resources, while retaining a close relationship to marketing and journalism.

In Brazil, marketing and corporate communications, though separate functions in most organizations, usually work in close cooperation, centered in the concept of corporate image as a powerful marketing tool. One concrete example of such cooperation is the issuing of press releases to announce new products, routinely done by the communications department.

In Brazil, professions are sometimes regulated – a heritage from colonial times that stems from craft guilds in the Middle Ages. For example, you can only be a speech therapist if you graduated in speech therapy and are registered with the Speech Therapy Board. Until recently (June 2009), you could only lawfully be a journalist if you possessed a degree in journalism. In 1971, public relations majors acquired by law the exclusive right to exert the functions pertaining to the subject. The law could not possibly be enforced – the subject is too dynamic to be confined within a limited set of rules; corporations had to hire other kinds of professionals to deal with the interfaces. Corporate communications, then, as an indirect result of a cultural trait of society, affirmed its grasp on public relations.

Today, public relations majors share corporate communications work with journalists, administrators, psychologists and languages majors, with no area being exclusive to a determinate kind of professional. This process made corporations in Brazil develop three distinct functions: public relations, journalism and administration. In large and sometimes not-so-large companies, these three functions are included in an Integrated Corporate Communications Plan, which is common practice in Brazil (Cahen, 2009). The idea of having such a plan is to ensure the organization says the same thing to the public as it says to its employees (one pervasive feature of communications departments in Brazil is that they take care of both external and internal communications), and to strengthen corporate identity.

### **The Public Relations Function**

Ethics and social responsibility are not always apparent – the approach has to be aggressive and facts must be created. This is especially important in a country like Brazil, where an example must be set at all times that the pace of an accelerated evolution is being followed. In other words, there is a sense of urgency (Voltolini, 2008).

One good example may be found in the contents of a sustainability report published by Itaipu, a major utility provider which owns and operates one of the world's largest hydroelectric power plants. The production of such a report is not mandatory by law; it is issued on a voluntary basis and adopts the

guidelines of the Global Reporting Initiative, an international network-based organization. The report reflects concern with the attitude of international investors: the area covered by Itaipu includes giant export-oriented agricultural concerns and meatpackers. The publication covers relationships with employees, poverty fighting initiatives, dealings with native-indian communities in the power plant area and is particularly focused on rainforest protection. The contents include a social balance sheet, which is examined below.

The social balance sheet is a unique tool for concise and objective indication of company involvement in social responsibility. Its origin took place in France, where the *Sudreau Report* was published in 1977. The report was intended to be a diagnosis of the so-called “social health” of the country. The format combines business indicators with numbers on social responsibility. The report, with minor changes, was used as a model when France made it mandatory for every company with more than 750 employees to publish a social balance sheet, to be audited by unions and labor authorities. In Brazil, the social balance sheet encompasses more than labor – it includes social responsibility and environment as well. Though not mandatory, it is published by virtually every major company in the country and is increasingly being adopted by midsize and even small businesses as well; a well-known NGO, for example, ships a simplified form to 50,000 companies annually (Ibase, 2007). Table 1 shows the basic contents.

The publishing of the social balance sheet, with its year-to-year comparisons, almost forces the company to perform an active role in society beyond the necessary quest for profit. Social balance sheets of larger companies have more financial details and a section on environmental action and environmental record (actions, prizes and other). One important peculiarity is the presence of professional education and training in the social balance sheet, separated from academics. Due to centuries-old deficiencies in formal basic education in Brazil, informal education within the workplace is extremely important, and often includes personal ethics (Whitaker, 2008). This is one of the duties carried out by the socially responsible corporation in Brazil and another instance of businesses being on the front line of society. As explained later, this education effort does not include literacy. Maria Arruda (2002) points out that company ethics enhance profits in the long run, a vision now commonly accepted in Brazil.

Priority publics, a well-known concept in public relations, include clients, media, internal public, all levels of government, suppliers and others. Roger Cahen, a well-known business communication consultant and bestselling author, while reminding that all publics are essential, points out (Cahen, 2008) which one is considered the most important for the practice of corporate communications in Brazil: the internal public. Cahen, whose opinion can be said to reflect the general attitude within the corporate communications establishment in Brazil, considers an internal public not only the employees, but also their families and circles of friends. According to Cahen (2008), they are the true soul of the company, its brain and even its heart (p.1). In other words, there is a consensus that a corporation cannot project a positive image to the outside if it does not care about the inside.

Cahen’s opinion is strongly related to the constitution of corporate ethos, which becomes solid via internal communications and then broadens its scope (Maingueneau, 2005) by including what the theoretician calls scenography, made not only out of discourse, but out of the whole set where company life takes place. Such set includes physical workplace, psychic conditions, details and concern about employee well-being. Considering society’s historical roots – a country colonized by adventurers whose aim was to get rich as quickly as possible by whatever means necessary, the growing of this conscience

is nothing less than a revolution. Since what takes place inside business organizations is far more effective than formal indoctrination in schools or by government instances, it is fair to say that corporate communications are the true performers of such a revolution.

**Table 1 – Main Contents of a Simplified Social Balance Sheet**

economic indicators	last year		planned for this year	
	\$	% of gross sales	\$	% of gross sales
gross sales				
taxes and social security				
payroll				
internal social indicators	last year		planned for this year	
	\$	% of gross sales	\$	% of gross sales
meals to employees				
health of employees				
workplace safety				
employee education: grade school, high school, college				
training and education for professional development				
daycare				
other				
total of internal social investment				
external social indicators	last year		planned for this year	
	\$	% of gross sales	\$	% of gross sales
charities and philanthropy				
volunteer work: investments and incentive				
investments in art and culture				
investments in literacy and education (external)				
other				
total of external social investment				
indicators related to employment	last year		planned for this year	
	employees	partners	employees	partners
number of employees and partners				
number of admissions and new partners				
number of terminations and resignations				
number of employees having their first job				
number of interns				
number of relatives of the owner(s)				
number of illiterate employees				
number of employees over 45 years old				
number of African-Brazilians				
number of physically handicapped employees				
number of employees engaged in volunteer work				
indicators of entrepreneurial citizenship	last year		planned for this year	
ratio between largest and smallest salary				
total number of work-related accidents				
Does the company listen to the employees to help with the solution of problems?	<input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/> on occasion <input type="checkbox"/> in scheduled meetings		<input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/> on occasion <input type="checkbox"/> in scheduled meetings	
Is there a written policy for workplace wellness?	<input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/> without investment <input type="checkbox"/> with money investment		<input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/> without investment <input type="checkbox"/> with money investment	
Does the company encourage the academic pursuits of its employees?	<input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/> partners only <input type="checkbox"/> all employees		<input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/> partners only <input type="checkbox"/> all employees	
Does the company select its employees in nearby communities?	<input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/> some employees <input type="checkbox"/> whenever possible		<input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/> some employees <input type="checkbox"/> whenever possible	
Does the company adopt a regular policy of profit sharing with employees?	<input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/> senior employees <input type="checkbox"/> all employees		<input type="checkbox"/> no <input type="checkbox"/> senior employees <input type="checkbox"/> all employees	

A closer look at the practice of issuing social balance sheets (practice not so common in the US) reflects yet another cultural trait of a society that does not adopt common law: written laws and practices regulate life in society. A business organization has therefore to provide proof that it is socially responsible: its word alone is not enough.

### **The Journalistic Function**

In Brazil, the de-facto corporate communications society that operates at a national level is named ABERJE. This is the acronym for Brazilian Association of Editors of Corporate Newspapers and Magazines. This fact alone shows the importance of the journalism function in the corporate communications practice in Brazil – important tools to both external and internal communications, like house organs and newsletters, are essentially journalistic. The journalistic function is particularly important for the strengthening of corporate ethos, since it is a source of updating of information on company-generated facts.

Information about a company is not disclosed to the public by a house organ in a purely factual manner - it has to develop interest in as many readers as possible. This makes for a thin line between business journalism and simple advertising. That subtlety should be dealt with properly in order to make the information credible. Editing and production of house organs in Brazil are in a moment of transition between two models (Bueno, 2005). The old model is highly laudatory of the company, putting it in the center of the world and being concerned with activities and personalities of vice-presidents and managers, all but ignoring employees lower in the hierarchy. Such model does not allow for any debate either. More modern house organs, which do exist in corporations both large and small, tend to look more like a legitimate press, allow room for ideas and are run professionally, applying the same rules and standards that regulate the “real” press. One example of a modern house organ is a low-budget bimonthly newspaper published by Servtec, a midsize engineering & construction company in Sao Paulo. The June 2009 issue, for example, featured a text by the board of directors with a fair assessment of the company situation vis-a-vis the economic crisis and a call for opinions and suggestions to be published in the August issue (Sonnenfeld, 2009).

The journalism function also includes press releases. There is a theory within the corporate communications establishment in Brazil (Kucharsky, 2007) that treats these releases as a subject better studied within the theory of discourse, as a separate type of journalistic product. Within the Brazilian corporate communications establishment, it is considered that press releases are required to be at the same time objective and persuasive, what makes them unique. That theory, an example of Brazilian academic production, considers press releases a discourse genre in a Bakhtinian sense. According to Bakhtin (1981), when diverse voices interact, there is a struggle to assimilate two different categories of discourse: the authoritative and the internally persuasive. That academic vision considers both categories to mingle in press releases, making them a separate genre.

### **The Administrative Function**

The adaptation to the use of modern tools like Twitter, intranet and presentation software does not present any noticeable difference to what is done in other countries. There are two issues in administrative communications, however, that have deserved the special attention of professionals in charge. The first is concerned with internal communication barriers in companies, which can be described as belonging to three types: personal, physical and semantic. Dealing with such barriers is part

of the functions of the corporate communications professional, in close interaction with human resources departments.

Brazilians in general relate well to each other and there is a tendency to be friendly and understanding (Holanda, 1997). That does not mean, of course, that personal barriers do not exist. In the mid 1970s a significant number of companies, both large and small, hired group therapists to conduct sessions with employees encouraging them to voice the complaints they might have. The results were mixed and the practice was abandoned. Today, companies in general delegate to managers the task of resolving conflicts that get to the point of hampering communications. Hiring practices became, with time, more careful.

Physical barriers relate mostly to comfort in the workplace – there is a strong trend towards certification of office spaces within the green building concept, including use of energy, water and also air quality and lighting. Other novelties imported from the US, like consumer rights and care with the environment were eagerly adopted in Brazil in the past two decades (Sorj, 2000), and adherence to the green building concept appears to follow that path, beginning with luxury offices and gradually reaching standard buildings. Organizations are proud to communicate that their office buildings reached green building status – in the vast majority of instances, certification efforts are pursued at the urge of communications departments.

Semantic barriers are important and of two basic kinds. One of them is related to difficult-to-understand writing styles by managers. This is addressed by the business community through MBA courses, which have become all but mandatory to managers of all levels in Brazilian organizations. MBAs in Brazil more often than not include language courses, which stress the production of understandable texts. The most pervasive semantic barriers, however, are related to differences in educational level, negatively reinforced by the lack of reading habits by employees with little schooling. Those barriers are eliminated mostly during employee recruiting, since training programs within corporations do not include literacy. Governments and unions in Brazil pose countrywide literacy efforts, since people with reading difficulties are increasingly being excluded from the formal workforce.

There is here a point worth noting: it is expected in Brazil that socially responsible organizations address social inequality in some way. Corporations do acknowledge this, but the actions in this respect do not comprise employing the illiterate. This is done indirectly, for example hiring garbage collecting groups for specific tasks. Organizations also routinely support social programs that provide care for the underprivileged. Affirmative action programs by organizations include the hiring of minorities and of the handicapped, provided that they have the same educational level as regular employees.

### **The Amazon Jungle and Corporate Communications: a Note**

Preservation of the Amazon Jungle is arguably the item with the single greatest international visibility regarding the efforts of Brazil to act as a responsible society. The press, governments of all levels and organizations are well aware of this, but there are ingrained habits within the population of the jungle states that have to be fought relentlessly. Politicians (especially state governors) are torn between the need to present their states as worthy recipients of investments and the immediate needs of their voters.

Few episodes are as enlightening of the role of corporate communications in Brazil as recent facts involving Blairo Maggi, at the same time owner of the country's largest soybeans exporting concern and governor of Mato Grosso, a major jungle state. The name Mato Grosso means dense jungle.

As a politician, Blairo Maggi started out as a champion of deforestation. As late as in 2003, after an area of the Amazon jungle larger than New Jersey was razed in just a year, he was quoted by the New York Times as saying (New York Times, Sep. 17, 2003. p. A3):

To me, a 40 percent increase in deforestation doesn't mean anything at all, and I don't feel the slightest guilt over what we are doing here.

As a businessman, however, Mr. Maggi felt a pressure much more effective than any he had as a politician. In 2007, the company owned by his family, Grupo Maggi, issued a Social Profile. The publication dedicated 30 of its 117 pages to financial statements and description of business activities, and the entire remainder to topics like company ethics code, wellness programs for employees, environmental responsibility, activities of the company-financed foundation for social development and the social balance sheet. The Environmental Management Department had its activities described in detail.

And, in 2009, Mr. Maggi was again talking to the press (O Globo, Aug. 16, 2009, p. B2):

I had to make an inflection, reevaluate my standings on issues. As a matter of fact, not only mine, but the standings of all my fellow planters. I had to call them and tell that we were not following the most correct path.

### **Trends in Business – The Role of Corporate Communications in Brazil**

Monsanto, in Brazil, has a Vice-President of Communications and Social Responsibility, a position that does not exist in the company's US headquarters. There, the Vice-President in charge of Communications is the Chief of Staff to the President. The responsibilities of the Brazilian Vice-President include the shaping of information on facts originated within the Vice-Presidency itself. The Coca-Cola Company in Brazil has a similar arrangement. There is a Vice-President of Communications and Sustainability, functions which are separated in the US. Business Communications departments in Brazil, not only in Brazilian branches of American companies, but in any major corporation report directly to the CEO (which is not generally the case in public relations) and are responsible to shape information in a manner that will refine and maintain company ethos. This information includes communications related to social responsibility, including active care for the environment and actions to reduce social inequalities.

An example of action initiated by corporate communications was an endeavor carried out by Vale do Rio Doce, a giant mining group formerly owned by the Federal Government. Former employees and politicians displeased with privatization started a campaign to revert the company to government ownership. The major argument was that the company, rather than being concerned with common good, would seek to enhance profitability by avoiding the costs of cleaning their mining sites, thereby polluting them. A revamped corporate communications department suggested an effort to zero the

company's footprint and took the lead in a crusade to rehabilitate as much soil as the sum of the surfaces eventually degraded by mining. The operation was so successful that the rehabilitated area was larger than the previously contaminated terrain. The action was broadly publicized and the company ethos changed to the point where its name is now associated with care for the environment.

The role and importance of corporate communications also involves mergers and acquisitions. Communications of these events carefully exploit the idea of greatness for the country. The newly established companies are keen on showing the value of a Brazilian corporation competing as an equal with world giants. Interbev, the company that recently acquired Anheuser Busch, now has a Brazilian CEO. The world's largest beer manufacturer was originated by a merger between Brazilian Ambev and Belgian Interbrew. Ambev itself was formed by an acquisition of the second largest beer producer in Brazil by the first. Loyal customers complained, and the deal was almost prohibited via an interpretation of antimonopoly law. At that point, a clarification campaign started, mostly through nonpaid media stories, showing that the competing brands would not disappear, their tastes would remain the same and, most importantly, Brazil would be the seat of a powerful company, ready to become global. Within several months, popular opinion changed and the deal was made possible. That episode paved the way for the merger of Sadia, a poultry processing concern experiencing significant financial losses, with its main competitor. News provided to the media once again emphasized the global reach of the new corporation, minimizing the significance of the original and primary reason for the merger.

Although Brazil has experienced since the mid 1990s a phenomenal economic reorganization, fundamental historical problems persist. Social inequalities have been addressed in the last decade with reasonable success but are still far from being eliminated – the wealthiest 10% of the population spend ten times as much as the poorest 40% (IBGE, 2003).

The sugar cane business presents a very interesting example of an industry, originated in colonial times that has modernized and must still confront centuries-old problems. The industry started in Brazil in the sixteenth century, and used slave labor until 1889 (when slavery was abolished). Slaves gave way to underpaid and exploited labor and a model developed that included the supply to workers of housing and goods by the planters, with rent and food being discounted from payments for the production of each family, including children (who did not even go to school). The planters' ethos included the notion that providing means of subsistence to otherwise starving families was the only socially desirable goal to be pursued. Environment was simply not a concern. The demands on environmental and social responsibility by international buyers forced modernization of the industry, that now produces biofuels in addition to sugar, and ended up turning planters and manufacturers into mainstream businesses. The ethos has been changing for the past fifteen years, the main agent being the Sugar Cane Industry Association. This association is a public relations concern that shapes information and uses strictly unpaid stories in TV, magazines and newspapers. In order to remain competitive, the industry substituted machines for most of the labor and carries out extensive retraining programs. Employees are duly registered and there is concern for a safe work environment. Child labor is completely prohibited and some planters and processing outfits maintain elementary schools on their own premises (Jank, 2009). In short, the new ethos includes care for the laborers as the central point.

## The Foreseeable Future

The public relations origin of corporate communications as an independent branch of activity and the changes experienced by society in Brazil since the late 1950s established a trend, which looks set to become stronger in the near future. That trend consists of two movements. The first movement is the consolidation in business of one department responsible for internal and external communications, shaping information on relevant facts and providing guidelines on what those relevant facts should be. The model has been successful and adopted by companies of all sizes. The second movement is a consequence of the first: the growth of corporate communications in academic importance. Most major universities are actively conducting research in this field; to date more than one hundred doctoral and master's theses have been presented.

## Conclusion

Corporate communications in Brazil reflect what is happening in a country in an accelerated process of transforming itself within a globalized economy. At the same time the professionals follow the pace of change and, in a way, set it by shaping information in order to communicate accomplishments by business, the forefront of society change. Such an approach is all but consolidated in large corporations and is spreading rapidly to companies of all sizes. There is also a growing academic focus upon business communication, emphasizing uniquely Brazilian concerns and points of view.

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**ANA LUCIA MAGALHAES** is a professor of corporate communications with FATEC, a network of technical colleges funded by the State of Sao Paulo. She holds a master's degree in Rethoric from the Catholic University of Sao Paulo.

**BRUNO ANDREONI** is an engineer with Servtec, an engineering and construction company in Sao Paulo. He has 30 years of design and operationd experience and is presently in charge of technical communications with clients. He holds engineering and chemistry degrees from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.