

**Darren Murphy** says that the practice of public affairs is so different in Latin America, that western-style direct advocacy can be deeply frowned upon

## Where lobbyists were coyotes!

Latin America presents a vibrant and exciting prospect for communication professionals: from the more developed economies of Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Mexico to the less developed, such as Venezuela, Honduras, Bolivia and Nicaragua.

In the 20th century, Latin America witnessed huge but uneven economic growth. It also witnessed large-scale societal and attitudinal changes, including the creation of a brilliantly vibrant civil society encompassing human rights groups, environmentalists, indigenous populations and religious interests, active and often strident in pursuit of their societal aims.

These changes, along with the continent's estimated population of around 570 million, have driven a growing realisation of the importance and potential of effective communication and public affairs campaigns in the region. Corporations are not just excited by the economic potential and vast markets; the region also presents other attractions, notably the fact that the majority of the region speaks Spanish (Portuguese is spoken in Brazil).

There may only be two principal languages, but there is a rich variety of politics and politicians. Governments range from long-established, tranquil democracies to nations ruled in more authoritarian and less transparent ways. Democracies often have fragile foundations formed from the ashes of decades of dictatorship or various political and economic crises.

The region is as challenging for the communication practitioner as it is vibrant and exciting. Public relations is more often thought of as events marketing rather than strategic communication, and it is often commoditised as such. The practice of public affairs is also different. Western-style direct



advocacy can be deeply frowned upon, and sometimes directly prohibited. At one point, the commonly used word in Mexico for lobbyists was 'coyotes'!

There is less reliance on the Internet and social media. Instead, there is a continued emphasis on traditional means of reaching decision-makers including newspapers, radio and television. This is changing, but the base from which growth is occurring remains low. This creates a special challenge for practitioners, particularly on behalf of multinational firms and interests operating in Latin America that are more used to the campaign strategies and tactics developed and deployed on their behalf in Europe or the United States. In truth, to be successful, these tactics can't simply be imported from outside the region as though the answer to communication challenges were some form of single transferable solution. Success depends on tailoring campaign techniques to the type, tempo and tastes of Latin American audiences.

Despite these challenges, through our own experience we have identified some aims

that help to generate success. First, always look for the local impact and local dimension. While the national and international perspectives mean much to key decision-makers in Latin America, it is the link that can be found between the issue and the local interest that is crucial to framing the problem and moving toward a solution.

Second, make use of existing constituent relations. While every nation is different, as a rule, the ties between decision-makers and their constituents' interests are direct and strong. These can include business organisations, academic experts, issue-based organisation, religious groups and others.

Third, educate decision-makers early and often – including as many as possible. Decision-making authority is commonly dispersed in Latin nations, or where ultimate authority is not as clear as in other nations. So it is vital to ensure that a broad range of decision-makers understand and know of the concerns.

Finally, the creation of vibrant civil society allows the practitioner the opportunity for varied 'portals' of entry into the decision-maker's world, based in part on the relations between the civil interest, the decision-maker and the interest of the practitioner. These should be evaluated and utilised where applicable.

Latin America is an incredibly diverse region within which to practice the arts of public relations and public affairs. It is changing rapidly, but it is also a region in which the appearance of change must not be mistaken for real change. The trick for the practitioner is to know the difference between the two, and to act accordingly.

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