Five decades of Mexican public relations in the United States: from propaganda to strategic counsel

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Abstract

This article describes U.S. public relations for Mexico through a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 940 Foreign Agents Registration Act listings from 1942 to 1991. The research delineates the shift from government to industry representation, the move from press agentry and public information to more research and counsel, centralization trends, and the evolving roles of U.S. public relations from technicians to public relations managers. The continuing robust technician role is confirmed.

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The 2000 Mexican presidential election introduced President Vicente Fox to the world scene and brought an end to the post-Cardenas PRI domination of the presidency. Despite the often tense 20th century bilateral relations between the United States and Mexico, many hoped the new Mexican leader and newly elected U.S. President George W. Bush would foster an era of vigorous 21st century relationship building between the neighboring nations. However, events in 2001 diverted U.S. attention from Mexico, repeating a familiar historical pattern.

What role has public relations played in U.S.–Mexico relations? The body of international public relations literature has been growing since the 1990s. But we know little about the U.S. public relations efforts of one of its closest neighbors and second-largest trading partner. To comprehend 21st Century Mexican public relations in the United States and the role of public relations in relationship building between two countries, it is useful to understand 20th Century Mexican public relations. The information adds to the communication literature in two ways: it contributes to our knowledge of domestic
(U.S.) public relations history and adds to our understanding of the evolution of international public relations.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the U.S. public relations efforts of Mexico as documented in five decades of Foreign Agent Registration Act listings. The quantitative and qualitative content analysis describes geographic centers of public relations efforts, types of public relations activities, organizations represented, and public relations budgets (when the U.S. collected financial data). Through this descriptive content, the study investigates what public relations roles were dominant in FARA listings for Mexico during each decade of study and how they varied in different periods.

The history of U.S. public relations overflows with examples of how the U.S. government, corporations, and non-profit organizations have achieved their organizational goals and/or built relationships with stakeholders. The present study is an example of how Mexico took advantage of U.S. communication expertise to achieve its own goals—sometimes “using” the system to empower itself and communicate strategically to develop as a nation.

1. Literature review

Four role concepts developed by Broom and Smith (1979) and collapsed into two roles later (Dozier & Broom, 1995) have been widely used in public relations research to look at public relations practice. Although practitioners may play many roles within their practice, they tend to enact one role more frequently than others (Broom & Dozier, 1986). One role is a communications technician. While functioning as a technician, the public relations person is mainly concerned with producing communication materials. He implements communication programs but does not participate in the decision-making process that planned the programs. On the other hand, the public relations manager uses strategic planning to achieve organizational goals. Fundamental to the public relations manager role is two-way communication, especially because of the environmental scanning and research that is necessary to fulfill a manager role (Dozier & Broom, 1995; Judd, 1987; Lauzen, 1997). The manager role conceptualization serves as an underpinning for recent public relations research on relationship building, after Broom, Casey, and Ritchey reinvigorated the concept of relationships in their 1997 model-building piece. One of their 1997 conclusions was that relationship formation and maintenance represents a process of mutual adaptation and contingent responses, reinforcing the significance of the public relations manager role(s), along with two-way symmetric public relations (e.g., Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Banks (1995) defines international public relations as public relations performed in nations other than the headquarters of the organization. The literature features several types of international public relations studies. Case studies of public relations in a particular country or set of countries comprise one cluster (e.g., Arceo, 2004; Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995; Molléda, 2000; Moss & DeSanto, 2002; Sriramesh, Kim, & Takasaki, 1999). Another group deals with countries’ image building in other nations (e.g., Albritton & Manheim, 1985; Zhang & Cameron, 2003). The third cluster is comprised of theoretical pieces or recommendations on future directions for research (Hiebert, 1992; Synnott & McKie, 1997). Culbertson points to the body of work on practitioner roles as a theoretical base for international public relations (Culbertson & Chen, 1996).

Other pertinent literature is about lobbyists. Terry describes the public relations aspects of lobbyists’ work: “Public relations practitioners, again including lobbyists, work to create meaningful representations of their clients’ worlds for their respective publics” (2001, p. 245). In her interviews with lobbyists, Terry
(2001) found that lobbyists enact both manager and technician roles. To summarize, studies indicate that practitioner roles are useful frameworks for understanding the history of Mexican public relations in the United States and that a look at one country’s public relations efforts fits into the international public relations literature.

2. Method

The Foreign Agent’s Registration Act (FARA) of 1938 and its amendments require that agents in the United States performing certain activities for foreign principals register with the U.S. government. The first published report covered 1942–1944, thus the start date for this Mexico study.\(^1\) The author analyzed content of all 940 FARA listings under Mexico through yearend 1991. Quantitative measures for activities were based on measures for manager/technician roles (e.g., Dozier & Broom, 1995) but tailored to the FARA listing descriptors. In addition to the quantitative coding, the researcher compiled notes on other information provided in the listings and cross-listings. These items were analyzed for general patterns and are reported in the results section along with the SPSS quantitative analysis findings.\(^2\) Although most role studies are cross-sectional designs implemented via survey research and in-depth interviews, this study is a longitudinal analysis. While providing historical perspective, the method is limited in the depth of information about each organization and makes a leap of faith when summarizing activities of individuals based on their brief reports about tasks.

3. Results

3.1. Practitioner functions and roles over five decades

Significant elements of the manager role are research, strategic planning, and counsel. Although there was one mention of monitoring news coverage in the 1940s, 90% of media-related research occurred from 1970 to 1991. Again, with one exception in the 1960s, 98% of environmental scanning/legislative scanning was recorded after 1970. And 80% of other research and data analysis was logged after 1970.\(^3\) A similar pattern emerged with the words counsel, strategic planning, policy advice, and synonyms, even though Edward Bernays introduced the public relations counsel concept in 1923. Public relations counsel was mentioned once in the 1940s; 50% of the FARA usage occurred after 1979. Policy counsel or policy advice was not used until 1970 and 54% of the usage occurred in the 1980s. To conclude, the manager role emerged in FARA Mexico documents about the time early role research was being published (e.g., Broom & Smith, 1979).

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\(^1\) The Department of Justice did not compile any reports in 1992, 1993, and 1994, and no raw data are available so this study is limited to five decades of public relations practice.

\(^2\) One researcher coded all of the data. Intracoder reliability for the quantitative data in a small subset of double-coded listings ranged from 82–86% (communication activities, type of Mexican organization) to 96–100% (year, contract amount, location of U.S. registrants, names of registrants and Mexican foreign principal). These were considered acceptable for the purposes of this descriptive historical overview.

\(^3\) No communication audits or Internet monitoring were listed in the 1942–1991 period; the pretest indicated that these items will be appropriate when late 1990s data are analyzed.
Functions related to the technician role have a longer history. Interestingly, the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938 was created because of perceptions of 1930s propaganda created by non-U.S. citizens. But after the 1940s, the term propaganda was never used again in Mexico listings. However, almost 10% of all 940 listings included a mention of publicity. Out of these 91 mentions, 9% were in the 1940s, 4% in the 1950s, 8% in the 1960s, 24% in the 1970s, 46% in the 1980s, and 9% in the years 1990–1991. Clearly, then, media relations was an ongoing function. Some 1970s reports display sheer numbers of “things distributed,” illustrating practitioners as journalists in residence. For instance, in 1972, Ruder & Finn (New York) documented that it distributed 2,400 news releases (on behalf of all foreign clients, not just Mexico). Reports of numbers of press releases, booklets, etc. disappeared from FARA later in the 1970s, suggesting that public relations counselors realized that the value of their work extended beyond mere quantity of output.

Promotion, too, was a continuing function mentioned in 12% of the 940 listings, but unlike publicity it was more heavily weighted in the earlier years. Ten percent of the mentions were in the 1940s, 18% in the 1950s, 22% in the 1960s, 40% in the 1970s, just 9% in the 1980s, and fewer than 3% in 1990–1991.

More than 90% of newsletter/magazine production and distribution occurred between 1942 and 1970. One example was Sugar y Azucar, published by Rouss & O’Rourke for the National Association of Sugar Producers of Mexico. Newsletters included the California and Texas production/distribution of a “house organ” for Union Nacional Sinarquista.4 On the other hand, organizations did not discuss collateral materials such as brochures and fact sheets until the 1970s, and almost three-quarters of the collateral listings were in the 1980s. Examples of two booklets disseminated by Ruder & Finn in 1983 were Mexican Thesis on Foreign Investment and Development in Freedom: The Policy of Change in Mexico. Fact sheets were mentioned in connection with a variety of target publics and appeared to be the trendy public relations tools of the 1980s.

Production, exhibition, and/or distribution of audio-visual tools reflected technology shifts and new orientations toward visual communication. Although Mexico paid a Los Angeles firm to produce/distribute “motion pictures” about Mexico in the 1940s (presumably short travel films), most of the audio-visual activities were in the 1970s (50%) and 1980s (28%). These included photo exhibits, videos, and films. A 1984 item contained the first description of a professional trade-show exhibit company designing, constructing, transporting, installing, and storing an exhibit. Prior exhibit listings did not provide this detail.

Employees in Mexican government tourist offices were responsible for attending or exhibiting at travel conferences and giving speeches about Mexico in many U.S. cities, with 85–90% of these activities occurring in the 1970s and 1980s. Likely target publics were consumer travelers, travel agents, and others in the travel industry. In short, although types of communication tactics differed among decades, the technician role remained robust from the 1940s through the early 1990s.

### 3.2. Interpersonal communication grows

Lobbying is a special category of public communication that receives little attention in the public relations literature. Twelve percent of FARA listings included lobbying efforts by the Mexican government,
businesses, and industry groups. Just 2% of mentions were listed in the 1950s, and almost 4% in the 1960s. However, this jumped to 26% in the 1970s, 50% in the 1980s, and 19% in 1990–1991. Other non-politically based liaison activities increased after the 1960s, as well. More than a third of the liaison activities took place in the 1970s, 44% in the 1980s, and 16% in 1990–1991.

Although Grunig et al. (1995) noted the importance of “cultural translators” in their international public relations research, not many U.S. Hispanics (as measured by Spanish surnames) appeared to be counseling Mexico unless they were unnamed practitioners working for consulting firms. One of the 940 listings (in 1991) described Edward Hidalgo of Washington, who “contacted members of Congress and Hispanic organizations to ascertain their views on NAFTA.” Similarly, Latino groups as target publics also were absent.

3.3. Increased centralization

It is no surprise, then, that when public relations for Mexico evolved from reliance on media and controlled tools to more in-person lobbying and liaison, the geographic loci of public relations changed, too. Overall Washington and New York were the centers of Mexican communications (about 25% each), with Los Angeles garnering a tenth of the business and Chicago about 7%. The patterns are interesting, though, when examining location of registrant by decade. Los Angeles peaked in the 1970s and dropped off sharply in the 1980s. New York surpassed Washington in the 1970s but dropped to second place in the 1980s and early 1990s. Starting in the mid-1980s Southwestern and Southern practitioners lost ground in Mexican public relations, and Washington public relations and public affairs firms picked up their business.

Most public relations research activities occurred in Washington and New York, although there were two instances of media monitoring each in Los Angeles and Houston. Public relations counsel or management was used as a term by public relations practitioners mostly in three major cities: New York (56%), Washington (17%), and Los Angeles (22%). Washington provided 92% of the policy counsel. So, taking into account the limitations of the data, one could summarize that enactment of the public relations manager role mostly occurred in Washington and New York.

Conversely, technician tasks were distributed throughout the United States. The number of registrant locations totaled 18 for promotion, 17 for public speaking, 16 for collateral materials, 15 for conference/trade show participation, 8 for newsletters/magazines, and 5 for audio-visual tactics. Nine locations were listed for publicity but more than a third of publicity tactics were handled in New York, perhaps a factor of its major media center status in addition to the public relations expertise available there.

Washington-based registrants were responsible for 88% of the lobbying and 40% of liaison activities. Registrants in six other markets also listed liaison activities.

3.4. The client: from state to marketplace

3.4.1. Tourism public relations

Throughout the five decades, Mexico’s central government funded tourism-related communication activities. In addition to using the services of U.S. public relations firms (and some sole practitioners), the Mexican government set up tourism offices in major cities beginning in the 1960s. In the mid-1980s the offices served tourists in 15 U.S. cities. However, by 1987 only three tourism offices were left (New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles). Correspondingly, central government efforts as measured by tourism-related
items in FARA climbed from 2% in the 1940s, 4% in the 1950s, 12% in the 1960s, to 50% in the 1970s. But in the 1980s, federal government tourism PR dropped to 29%. The data indicated that Mexico’s tourism public relations changed in the 1980s; the following illustrates some trends.

First, individual Mexican states and cities began to supplement federal travel boosterism. One example was a U.S. public relations campaign for former President Miguel Aleman’s pet project, Acapulco. Others were public relations activities for Yucatan, Cancun, Ixtapa, Cozumel, and Nuevo Leon. In 1985, for instance, Hill & Knowlton arranged for department store catalog fashion photography in Cancun, Leon, and Ixtapa. (This was the first example in FARA of using fashion to promote Mexico.)

Second, the communication focus on individual travelers and travel agents expanded to real estate developers and other investors during this period, and firms like Carl Byoir and Associates and later Hill & Knowlton (when it purchased Byoir assets in 1986) handled public relations programming aimed at prospective partners in Mexican development. Similarly, Mexican localities launched communication campaigns to build tourism and increase U.S. investment, like the state of Chihuahua’s 1986 public relations program. Positive references to Mexico as an investment location are scattered throughout FARA, an extension of the neo-liberal policies of the de la Madrid and Salinas presidencies (1982–1988; 1988–1994). For instance, in 1991, Fleishman Hillard reported being engaged in “activities aimed at highlighting Mexico’s opening economy and increasing foreign investment.” Third, public relations was conducted on behalf of specific airlines, hotel chains, and resorts. The 1980s FARA documents boasted 43% of the listings for hotel public relations and 26% for airlines.

To summarize, federal budgets allocated for tourism and tourism investment remained robust but the Mexican government began to rely more heavily on large U.S. consultancies to help with their objectives rather than staff its own tourism offices across the United States. Clients like city/state entities and businesses supplemented traditional federal government tourism and tourism investment campaigns.

3.4.2. Business and trade association public relations

The unfolding of non-government public relations is better viewed in the growth of public relations for non-tourism-related Mexican companies. Of the 75 listings for businesses, fewer than 3% were in the 1950s, less than 3% in the 1960s, 15% in the 1970s, 60% in the 1980s, and 20% in 1990–1991 (which suggests an upward trend). Non-food-related trade associations and chambers of commerce were busiest in the 1980s, too, with 40% of their activity in this decade. Four percent of trade association/chambers of commerce public relations were listed in the 1940s, 18% in the 1950s, 8% in the 1960s, 21% in the 1970s, 40% in the 1980s, and 9% in 1990–1991. Examples included the steel, cement, railway car, beer, cigarette, plywood, and textile industries.

Trade, import quotas, tariffs, and duties were critical issues for Mexico in the 1980s as it pulled away from the isolationist business policies of Lopez Portillo. Revamping of the General System of Preferences (GSP) in the early 1980s, GATT discussions, the 1984 Multi-Fiber Agreement (textiles), and the NAFTA-related jockeying in the early 1990s meant high-stakes public relations efforts for Mexican businesses. In 1990–1991 U.S. tax laws became another matter of concern. Mexican organizations also were engaged in lobbying related to proposed natural resource legislation in the 1980s. Supplemental to private activities, the Mexican government’s commerce/industrial development ministry began public relations and lobbying efforts in the 1970s, with 42% of the work taking place in the 1980s. Likewise, 60% of the finance/credit ministry’s communications were in the 1980s, perhaps because of U.S. acceptance of well-regarded finance ministers like Jesus Silva Herzog. In short, the government’s funding of sophisticated commerce and finance communication grew.
3.4.3. Agriculture and minerals public relations

Mexico’s commodities generally have been coveted by its Northern neighbors, sometimes serving as a bargaining chip, as in World War II when the United States experienced food shortages. At other times competing U.S. entities (e.g., flower/fruit/vegetable growers) challenged Mexican growers exporting to the United States. Public relations for agriculture and livestock began in the 1950s, with 15% of this communication occurring in the decade, 13% in the 1960s, 46% in the 1970s, and 26% in the 1980s. Public relations programs for coffee, sugar, livestock, and vegetable groups were long-standing. The New York-based Pan American Coffee Bureau worked for years on Mexico’s behalf (and for other international producers). Periodic “dumping” accusations about agricultural products appeared, and in 1989–1990 Mexico communicated with the Environmental Protection Agency related to EPA concerns about pesticides and residue on Mexican bell peppers and fruits. Although petroleum was discovered in Mexico in the mid-1970s, 35% of the public relations and lobbying related to Mexican oil and minerals was conducted in the 1980s. This probably is because of oil’s role in getting the U.S. and the International Monetary Fund to continue to finance Mexico’s post-Echeverría and post-Portillo disastrous economy, and the discovery later in the 1980s that reserve volumes were lower than first reported.

3.5. Show us the money

While FARA listings do not encompass all spending on Mexican public relations, they do indicate trends. Annual budgets were grouped into $24,000 or less, $24,001–$60,000, $60,001–$120,000, $120,001–$240,000, and more than $240,000. Organizations did not report budgets in the 1940s, only the Mexican government and a few other agencies reported budgets in the 1950s and 1960s, and just one-quarter of the 1970s listing included contract amounts. Of those reporting in the 1970s, the biggest contract category (mode) was $24,000 and under. In the 1980s, two-thirds of the listings included a contract amount, and the mode was $24,001–$60,000. In 1990–1991, 96% of organizations reported budgets, and the most frequent category was more than $240,000.5

What communications activities were associated with larger budgets? The mode for environmental scanning/legislative scanning was $24,000 and under, but media research and monitoring U.S. media’s mode was the $240,000-plus category. The mode for policy counsel was under $24,000, but $240,000 and up was the mode for publicity/media relations, newsletters/magazines, and producing/distributing collateral materials. The mode for lobbying was $24,000 and under, but for liaison activities it was more than $240,000. In summary, “traditional” public relations commanded bigger budgets than lobbying and legislative-related matters, at least through 1991.

3.6. What was missing?

Although much of 1940s–1980s media coverage of Mexico focused on problems such as student repression, immigration, and drugs (e.g., Aguayo, 1998; Bailey, 1989; Laiches, 1980), the FARA reports show few activities aimed at changing U.S. public opinion on these topics. The Immigration Control Act of 1982 garnered some public relations programming and lobbying. In addition, Mexico sought counsel about OAS testimony in the mid-1980s. In 1983 the Mexican government paid for updates about U.S. positions on El Salvador, Central America, and the Caribbean, signifying that Mexico monitored U.S.

5 These are reported dollar amounts with no accounting for inflation.
positions in the region, even though Mexico and the United States frequently differed on Latin American policy and regime support.

Although individual businesses and trade groups paid for counsel, scanning, and lobbying related to NAFTA, the only clear pro-NAFTA public relations campaign was Edelman’s 1991 work. In 1991 Marsteller created a War on Drugs advertising campaign and companion press kit. Otherwise, hot bilateral policy topics for Mexico did not surface in the FARA reports before 1992.

4. Conclusions and discussion

In summary, four trends were observed in five decades of FARA registrations about Mexico. First, there was a shift from publicity, promotion, and production of controlled tools to more counseling and personal influence. But publicity and media relations remained strong throughout and continued to command big budgets. The technician roles were jostled by the managerial roles, but the technicians stayed in the game. Second, as Mexico focused more on business development and business lobbying, public relations increasingly became centralized in the Northeastern United States. In addition, New York lost some ground to Washington as public affairs increased in importance. Public relations efforts were more likely to involve the big players (Hill & Knowlton, Marsteller, etc.) in the 1980s. Budgets grew. Third, target publics changed. The focus on a mostly retail target public – tourists – evolved to include businesses, Washington influencers, members of Congress, and a variety of U.S. government agencies. Fourth, clients changed from mostly tourism and agriculture-related (1940s–1960s), to oil and minerals (1970s and beyond), to other raw materials and manufacturing (especially in the 1980s). These conclusions portray a Mexico with growing sophistication about strategic public relations, targeting a broader array of publics for a larger set of clients, and directing more public relations spending to the political and economic power centers of the United States.

The conclusions also trigger uneasiness. The surge in lobbying and public affairs by some Mexican government entities raises the concern that public relations practitioners had not conducted enough foundation-building first. Perhaps efforts to create public opinion support were generated directly from Mexico, or maybe Mexican organizations realized that the U.S. public is apathetic about most policy-making. Nevertheless, it appeared that Mexico left the public out of public opinion and went straight to government agencies and lawmakers. Consequently, the U.S. public did not see a Mexico comprised of strategic, savvy organizations—the Mexico that emerges from the FARA documents.

Another impression from reviewing the documents is how the nature of bilateral relations became increasingly bureaucratic and legalistic in the 1980s. Perhaps this was because of the orientation of the new U.S.-university-trained “technocrats” in the de la Madrid administration; maybe it was the nature of the increasingly legalistic U.S. society. In our bilateral history, Mexico has accused the United States of military/political imperialism (pre-World War II) and cultural imperialism (1970s). But the 1980s-era United States could be accused of “paperclip imperialism.” Facing a myriad of bureaucratic hoops to understand and negotiate, Mexico was forced to rely on lawyers and lobbyists to try to get around U.S. minutia. This may place increasing burdens on U.S. practitioners in international public relations to become savvier about such legal and financial details.

Finally, there is a gap between what the U.S. media covered (in the 1980s, especially), and what public relations practitioners and lobbyists for Mexico were up to. Public relations efforts focused on making more money for the country and attracting investment, not on Mexico’s overall image or extended
relations with U.S. citizenry. Although there is evidence that the Mexican government approached the media directly earlier in the century to complain about negative stereotypes (Johnson, 1999), there are no FARA records of post-World War II attempts to decrease negative coverage about immigration and drugs. History shows that Mexico in these decades had too many other concerns.

Was the Mexico–U.S. relationship enhanced via public relations counsel and/or programming? This study cannot answer that question, although it indicates that communications expertise helped serve Mexico’s goals. U.S. public relations may have assisted Mexico in becoming a more equal partner, a logical first step in ethical relationship building. Future research would be enhanced by systematic study of consultants’ archives, other case studies, and in-depth interviews with Mexican clients and U.S. practitioners.

Space limitations required cutting this article. Contact the author for the complete study with comprehensive literature review and methodology sections.

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References


