Active Communications Policy in Costa Rica´s SAI

The Comptrollers´ General of Costa Rica (the national SAI) has developed a public information system that makes available relevant documents and materials (related to the auditing processes) for media, legislators and their advisors, civil society organizations, professional associations and citizens. Such information is sent directly to key users -adapting the content of each report to meet the needs of its recipients- and also posted on CGR's website. Additionally, the CGR offers training courses and seminars, and has organized outreach events as part of its information and communications policy targeting civil society.

Background

More than fifteen years ago the CGR created the first office responsible to deal with the public, the Press and Communications Unit (UPC), with the aim of establishing a formal relationship with the media, and thus inform citizenry about the auditing activities. With the UPC, the CGR starts the institutional practice of informing ex officio about its decisions, reports and studies, as well as to disseminate the documents of audit results.

In 2006, the CGR undertook a self-evaluation process of its guiding principles. As a result, the Institutional Strategic Plan (PEI) now includes in its strategic objectives the notion that citizenry is a fundamental actor in the auditing process. During the process, all CGR's employees were involved and their views were taken into account. In the 2008-2012 PEI, the communications practices were validated and institutionalized across the CGR. Another fundamental factor was the renewed CGR's self-understanding as an auxiliary body to Parliament. At the same time, the public debate around transparency, participation and accountability was crucial for introducing the new practices.

Implementation

In 2006, the CGR implemented a communications policy that addressed the need of generating relevant information for the media. It was later expanded to include other actors and diversify the information to every segment of society. The objective was to eliminate intermediaries in the interpretation of the audited facts.

The CGR developed distribution contact lists of various organizations (chambers, professional associations, business) including media to which the information is sent, and to ensure wider distribution the materials are also disseminated by government agencies, constituting a timely process conducive to institutional accountability that has become a permanent practice. The frequency at which the information is disseminated is not set. But, at least every week there is an auditing product which requires its own release and dissemination strategy that is produced according to the product, coordinating with each report management unit on how it is made available to the public, once the audited parties have been notified.

The materials that are published are mainly: press releases, with a summary of the audit findings; a document with the auditing product referred in the press release and a link to access it; pictures of an interviewed manager or of the CGR building are sometimes included; audio mp3, which is a summary of the information with the voice of the head of the area issuing the report; and video with a statement by the authority that issued the report.

It is important to note that for each issue dealt with in audit reports, a map of different actors linked to this issue is built. The objective is to identify these agents and the position they take on the matter, as well as to monitor the background. This turns out to be particularly valuable when developing a strategy to forward them information and reports in such a way that meets their needs and can be useful data to publish or work on.

When a long time elapses in between the dissemination of relevant documents has passed, the CGR produces information based on its information systems in order to promote issues that are less visible, or documents on reports that had not been highly disseminated previously. At the same time, parallel information systems (electronic systems to access public information on public budgets, procurement,

administrative hiring, electronic reports, and penalized officials due to offenses to the treasury) facilitate access to the information by citizens without the mediation of government entities.

Given that two former Costa Rican presidents had been involved in accusation of corruption, the demand for transparency increased considerably, positioning the issue in the public agenda. However, this practice has not been formalized in any specific regulation. Instead, it has been included in the general principles that establish the transparency and accountability obligations of public officials, through the disclosure and dissemination of information, and the universal access to information.

In the CGR, the Press and Communications Unit (UPC) is responsible for implementing this policy. The various management units provide support by producing the inputs for the external information and communications process. The UPC is headed by a person knowledgeable in journalism and political science, with a graduate degree; and it is staffed with human resources trained in journalism, psychology and marketing. The UPC's main task is to design the dissemination strategy for each product; determining the date to make the information available, the public that should be targeted, drafting a press release and sending the information. Subsequently, it is responsible for leading the process of receiving additional requests.

The human resources involved in the implementation of this policy have not increased over the years, although it has become quite time-consuming for the UPC's staff. It is a rather low-cost practice, in which the investment in IT (digital camera, video camera, tripod and mp3) was below US $1,250.

Critical issues and achievements

The CGR considers this a successful practice as long as the auditing agenda is relevant for the Costa Rican citizens. Currently, the CGR receives an increasing number of requests of information from external actors, such as media professionals, legislators, and CSOs, who are aware of the active communication policy and consider the information valuable.

At the beginning, some UPC's technical challenges were due to the lack of technological equipment and dated databases. However, the main challenges in the implementation of the communications policy are related to differences among the UPC and other CGR's units that are in charge of the substantive work, which at times had differing criteria not only about the message that needed to be disseminated but also about the issues that had to be communicated. In sum, the practice could face difficulties if an aligned institutional vision and an agreement of the different parties that allows planning a concerted effort are lacking. In turn, it is important that the UPC enhances its internal transparency on the auditing agenda and the adjustments of internal timings to external circumstances, in order to avoid a bad reputation for not publicizing certain issues.

A solid planning process, with a clear map of steps and responsibilities, is key for the implementation of this practice. This facilitated the CGR to build internal consensus about the methodology that was to be followed. Consequently, CGR's staff was able to incorporate the new transparency demands into their workflows. Moreover, the CGR's improved relationship with Congress allowed for a new understanding and recognition of its work.

To sum up, key points for success include: an integrated management and intensive use of information systems (photos, audio, videos, text); strategic planification; timely communication; adaptation of the message to different audiences and recipients; and an innovative vision based on the understanding that the public is not able in itself to approach the entity and ask for information.

In terms of how to improve the practice, some information users have recommended making the information more accessible, by using a less technical language.

Implementing partners

- General Comptrollers´ of Costa Rica (CGR)

Website

http://www.cgr.go.cr/

Additional resources

- Iniciativa TPA, "Costa Rica. Transparency and generation of public information at *the Contraloría General de la República*".
  http://iniciativatpa.org/2012/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Informe-Costa-Rica.pdf

- Presentation delivered by the Head of the UPC-CGR regarding this practice at the Regional Meeting "SAIs and Civil Society: opportunities of cooperation for an agenda on Transparency, Citizen Participation and Accountability", Buenos Aires, October 25th-26th, 2012. [in Spanish]
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjZgt5kvr50&feature=youtu.be