

MARIA ALEXANDRA VELEZ, M.A., J.D.

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COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY & LEADERSHIP

Designing and executing influential, well-targeted communications strategies that increase awareness and establish, restore, or preserve the reputation of a global organization or brand

Hands-on leader with a history of success creating and executing communications strategies that improve visibility (up to 57% annually), increase awareness, revive brands, mitigate crises, and carve out winning reputation initiatives for high-profile clients—The Coca-Cola Company, Codensa, Laureate Education, The World Bank Group, and others. Proven ability to build and sustain open lines of communication with the media, influencers, and public in a manner that is compelling, strategic—and never merely opportunistic.

Vast international experience and education offers a genuine understanding of (and deep compassion for) the political, social, and economic challenges that exist throughout the world. *Bilingual in English and Spanish with working knowledge of Portuguese and French. Lived, worked, and traveled extensively in North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.*

- Business & Communications Strategy Alignment
- Media & Public Affairs
- Branding, Marketing & Positioning Plans
- Corporate Communications
- Sophisticated Crisis Response & Mitigation
- Traditional & Digital Media
- Authentic Relationship Management
- Leadership & Employee Engagement & Education
- Customer & Market Insights
- Corporate Social Responsibility

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

LAUREATE EDUCATION, INC., Baltimore, MD, USA

Executive Director, Corporate Communications ▪ 2010 to Present

Pioneer and direct communications strategies and initiatives to build positive, credible, and trusting relationships with influencers and stakeholders in media, industry, and the public and subsequently increase enrollment for hospitality management universities with a global reputation. Lead innovative programs to boost awareness and precisely target key enrollment markets in the Americas, Asia, and Europe. Expertly manage people, budgets, crises, and changing priorities.

- Defined branding, and communications positioning programs that utilized **cross-platform print and media strategies**, interactive plans, and creative events to engage the media and public in the programs offered by 13 universities in 8 countries.
- Catapulted web traffic, enrollment, brand equity—and a **57% increase in free media exposure** year over year.
- **Transformed negative perception** of a newly acquired, 150-year-old college in New Mexico by leveraging media connections and utilizing well-crafted communications to restore trust in the community. Transformed the school's image in 18 months, evidenced through two **upbeat, positive editorials** in the *Albuquerque Journal* and *Santa Fe New Mexican*.
- Successfully **marketed and launched premium-brand institutions** in different parts of the world, including China, India, Mexico, the UK, and United Arab Emirates) and initiated upcoming implementations in South East Asia.
- Effectively **bridged the gap between "who we are" and "what people know"** about these top-ranking hospitality management education institutions by shaping the brand and reputation for the global marketplace, leveraging third-party endorsements, creating white papers, conducting scientific studies, and orchestrating innovative programs and events.
- Grew the communications budget from **zero to \$400K in two years** and brought **13 PR agencies** onboard throughout the world.

THE WORLD BANK GROUP, Washington, D.C.

Communications Officer ▪ 2008 to 2010

Revitalized the organization's flagship report through new communication tools and capitalized on previously untapped opportunities to capture attention on a global scale and provide accurate and timely information to local, regional, and international media outlets. Increased visibility through print and digital channels (web and news portals, social media, and traditional marketing and communications methods). Led special projects, events, and road shows for top-ranking global stakeholders and media professionals.

- **Increased media coverage 10% worldwide**—an unexpected and unprecedented accomplishment for a mature product.
- Championed a **full-scale rebranding strategy and website overhaul**.
- Transformed the well-established "Doing Business" report into a more compelling, relevant, and high-impact publication that **seized the attention of global media outlets** in North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Southeast Asia.
- Designed and **rolled out the communications strategy** for the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery organization; developed and launched a new website, brand, and messaging in six months.

CODENSA, S.A. ESP, Bogota, Colombia

Director, Corporate Communications • 2005 to 2007

Identified the critical need to improve public perception of the largest electricity utility company in Colombia with 8+ million customers. Initiated the massive effort by revamping the communications department from the bottom up, and then repositioning Codensa as a trusted leader and industry benchmark for the energy sector. Controlled \$4M USD budget. Served as engaging media spokesperson.

- **Restructured the communications department** and hired smart, savvy, and creative professionals.
- Educated the media, public, and politicians about the company's credit program (an initiative that offered customers credit to buy electric appliances, such as ovens, refrigerators, and washing machines). Completely **transformed public and media perception** by creating **powerful, compelling communication strategy** (with tangible information from consultative studies) that showed how the program empowered women and families, bolstered the economy, and promoted organizational stability at the same time.
- Immediately after joining the company, collaborated in creating and implementing a survey that measured the company's impact and reputation among key stakeholders and influencers in government, media, industry, and the public. When the survey was repeated two years later, it showed a **10% increase in positive perception** and greater awareness across all sectors.

CORPORATE & AGENCY CLIENTS, Miami and St. Petersburg, FL / Bogota, Colombia

Senior Media and Communications Consultant • 2000 to 2005

Consulted with decision makers to assess needs, present solutions, and launch integrated communications plans and media programs that fueled awareness, reengineered reputations, and contributed to profit and market growth. Worked directly with corporations as well as public relations agencies in providing leading-edge, customized communications and media services.

- **The Coca-Cola Company** – As Latin America News Editor, gathered news stories for distribution in Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, and other markets as part of the organization's International News Exchange program. Supported crisis management teams.
- **Burson Marsteller** – Promoted and marketed start-up companies and potential IPOs to improve visibility and attract investors.
- **Poynter Institute, EDF Communications, and other clients** – Developed messaging strategies, media and public relations materials, marketing tools, web content, and other solutions for corporate, nonprofit, and agency clients.

THE COCA-COLA COMPANY / COCA-COLA COLOMBIA, Bogota, Colombia

Director, Corporate Communications • 1997 to 1998

Built the first-ever corporate communications department from scratch for Coca-Cola Colombia—a major departure from the way the company managed (and valued) communications, marketing, corporate social responsibility, and media relations in the past. Owned all aspects of PR and communications. Hired intelligent, idea-driven people and instituted policies, procedures, and best practices.

- **Transformed negative perception into significant, positive media coverage** by identifying the uniqueness of the company's smallest bottling plant in the heart of the Amazon, and creating a media plan that highlighted these differentiating factors.
- Gathered **real-world customer insights** and reinforced the connection between the Coca-Cola brand and its customers, which prompted development of a consumer relations program and start-up of a new Consumer Response Center.
- **Established the corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach** from its inception (still in place today).

HOLGUIN, NEIRA & POMBO, Abogados, Bogota

Associate Attorney • 1994 to 1996

Negotiated contracts for Boeing Company, Cable & Wireless PLC, Saab AB, and other corporate clients.

GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF COLOMBIA, Bogota, Colombia

Diplomatic Service, Ministry of Foreign Affairs / Presidency of the Republic of Colombia • 1989 to 1992

Revamped communications strategy among multiple government agencies to create a single, cohesive plan for policymaking key issues.

EDUCATION

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY, Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C.

Master of Arts in International Relations (with Distinction)

PONTIFICIA UNIVERSIDAD, Bogota, Colombia

Juris Doctor (Top 1% of Class)

Additional Information: Fulbright Scholarship ~ World Bank Graduate Program Scholarship ~ Led week-long workshops on Global Strategic Communications for university students in Latin America ~ Volunteer, Greater Chicago Food Depository