



# MARKETING PRACTICE IN MANAGEMENT CONSULTING: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

*Linda Gabbianelli*

Department of Economics, Social and Political Studies  
University of Urbino Carlo Bo (Italy)  
linda.gabbianelli@uniurb.it  
Corresponding Author

*Tonino Pencarelli*

Department of Economics, Social and Political Studies  
University of Urbino Carlo Bo (Italy)  
tonino.pencarelli@uniurb.it

## Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to investigate if management consulting firms carry out marketing and communication activities as well as how they relate to customers.

The study is based on the results of surveys carried out through an online questionnaire. The sample under investigation is represented by 914 consulting firms located in central Italy.

Results show that 53% of the sample carry out marketing activities and 62% of the sample the communication activities, mainly thorough the web site and social media, participating to events also as a speaker at conferences.

The contribution provides some managerial implications that could be particularly useful for service providers with high knowledge content such as to adopt a systematic and strategic approach to communication, developing a complete and integrated digital communication strategy as well as rethink its business model in order to achieve it; to organize events on topics of major interest (also in collaboration with organizations, trade associations or other consultants).

There are no previous studies that provide insight into the marketing and communication of professional services in today's dynamic and changing economic environment.

## Keywords

management consulting firms; professional service; communication; service marketing.

## 1. Introduction

A consulting firm can exist and prosper if it gets and keeps clients. This is what marketing is about: define your market, identify clients, find out what they need, sell the consulting service to them, deliver the service to the clients' full satisfaction and make sure that once you have good clients you do not lose them.

In management consulting, as in some other professions, there has been a long debate on the appropriateness of marketing and of its various techniques. Even today, some consultants feel uneasy about selling their services: they regard it as unprofessional and beneath their dignity. Marketing is often thought of as a distinct function, a set of activities, tools or techniques, which cost time and money and which many consultants would prefer to avoid (if only they had a sufficient number of unsolicited clients).

It is not surprising then that the established firms did not favor the use of a wider range of marketing techniques, and in particular of advertising. From the late 1970s stress was laid on the point that competition in professional services ought to be encouraged.

Infact, it is almost universally recognized that professional services can and have to be marketed (Kubr, 2003).

According to this view, marketing is an unavoidable evil, something that consultants accept that they have to live with, although they do not like it. Many consultants are poor at marketing and, if they have to market, they do so with little enthusiasm.

Fortunately, more and more consultants, as indeed other professionals regard marketing as an inherent characteristic of the service concept. Marketing is not a supplement to a professional service, it is a professional service in its own right, needed to establish and maintain an effective consultant-client relationship. Service marketing does not stop when a sale is made, the consultant continues to market after the contract has been signed, while the project is being executed and even after the project has been completed.

The marketing of consulting is strongly affected by the "intangibility" of professional services: clients will not be able to fully examine the service they are willing to buy and compare it with them available from other professional service firms. The consultant is selling is a promise of a service that will meet the client's needs and resolve the problem and there could be different reason why a potential client buy a mere promise. First, because the client feels that it might be useful to get the consultant's help. Secondly, because the client has no alternative, buying any consulting service is always buying a promise. It is fully understandable that, in buying a promise, competent clients will wish to reduce the risk. Many clients buy without having any direct knowledge of the professional firm, just because of the firm's image in business circles or because a business friend or acquaintance has used the firm's services previously and has been satisfied (Kubr, 2003).

Furthermore, the marketing of consulting services deals with two dimensions of consulting approach: the technical dimension (the technical know-how needed to solve the client's specific business problem) and the human dimension (the relationship between the consultant and the client, and the consultant's ability to face human problems).

Thus, the consultant has to convince the client that, from the strictly technical point of view, he has all the technical knowledge, know-how and information needed to deal with the client's technical problem.

However, consulting is human relationship above all and the consultant and the client may spending long hours working together. Therefore, the client must be convinced that he is purchasing the service with whom he is prepared to work.

A wide range of techniques is available to management consultants for building up their professional reputation and image, or positioning their practice, in the client's mind. Their purpose is not to sell individual assignments, but to get potential clients informed about and interested in the consulting firm and its products, and to create opportunities for contacts with these clients.

The study aims to investigate the marketing practice of professional services firms.

Based on this objective, we ask the following research question:

*RQ1: Do management consulting firms carry out marketing activities? If not, why?*

*RQ2: Among those who practice marketing activities, what kind of communication do management consulting carry out?*

*RQ3: How do management consulting firms relate to customers in terms of building and maintaining the relationship?*

To answer these research questions, we carried out the analysis of the literature of marketing of consulting firms and professional services (paragraph 2).

The paragraph 3 shows the methodology followed for the empirical survey conducted sending of a questionnaire addressed to 18.342 management consulting firms. The sample surveyed consists of 914 management consulting firms, statistical analyses were necessary to meet the research objective. The findings are discussed in paragraph 4 and finally the paragraph 5 shows managerial implications, limits and future directions.

## **2. Marketing of professional services: a literature review**

In the past, marketing of the consulting profession has been denounced, then debated and ultimately declared necessary (Barr, McNeilly, 2003). In the early 1970s the marketing of services emerged as a separate area of marketing with concepts and models of its own to accommodate the typical characteristics of services (Gummesson and Grönroos, 2012).

As much as 35 years ago, Gummesson (1981, p.108) maintained that “a professional service is qualified; it is advisory and problem-solving, even though it may encompass some routine work for clients. The professionals involved have a common identity, like physicians, lawyers, accountants or engineers, and are regulated by traditions and codes of ethics. The service offered, if accepted, involves the professional in taking on assignments for the client and those assignments are themselves the limit of the professional's involvement”.

Service industries, in particular professional service firms, have historically considered marketing a luxury, rather than a critical part of the business mix (Nagdeman, 2009). For these reasons, service organizations have been slow to adopt marketing concepts and techniques.

Professional service firms face short deadlines, are typically small, often lack marketing expertise (particularly in smaller firms) and have been reluctant to devote time to marketing and to promote their services, as such activity is seen to reduce billable hours (Ellis and Mosher, 1993; Herbig and Milewicz, 1993; Kotler et al., 2002).

Correspondingly, the service of professional service firms is difficult for clients to evaluate even after receiving the service (i.e. professional service firms are credence services) (Macintosh, 2009). Recent commentaries identify the need for professional service firms to increase their market orientation (e.g. Macintosh, 2009; Webster and Sundaram, 2009). Indeed, professional service firm's, while starting to adopt marketing principles, are doing so slowly for a variety of reasons, not least, due to a continuing need to operate under ethical and professional guidelines (e.g. Reid, 2008; Simon, 2005) and the associated tensions between professional commitment and business development (Quader, 2007).

Sweeney et al. (2011) believe that understanding how professional service firm’s approach their marketing is important for many reasons. Firstly, the sector is a significant component of Western economies. Second, the sector has expanded rapidly. Professional service provision and consumption represent an increasingly important component of the global economic environment, with Bello et al. (2016) identifying it as one of the most rapidly developing sections of the world economy. Third, there are industry characteristics influencing marketing practice which represent challenges for practitioners. Lastly, whilst the nature of professional service is generally highly specialized or technical, the process in which the service is delivered relies heavily on human relationship factors.

Sonmez and Moorhouse (2010) state that “efficient and effective purchasing of professional services is a critical and paramount matter for both the buyers and providers of such services,”.

Kotler et al. (2002) and Gummesson (1979) argue that all professional service firm’s practice marketing in some form, whether or not the activity is styled as such, whilst the marketing function (if one is present) is often executed by professional and lay personnel.

Familiarity with contemporary marketing trends and methodologies can improve decision-making regarding choice of marketing mode and style best suited to professional service businesses.

Formal marketing practice can yield significant benefits for service organizations, including identifying client needs and enhancing delivery of value-adding services. Clow and Stevens (2009) maintain that marketing emphasizes the value of rational management and the need for congruity of policy with regard to fees, communication, services, and availability.

Reid (2008) observes that both small and larger professional service firm’s focus on both service market development and acquisition of new clients, with larger organizations placing greater emphasis on client retention and development of sustainable relationships.

To ensure that the professional service firm remains a viable business concern, it must continue to supply relevant, expert support, creating added value and receiving profit over time.

The professional service firm must consistently demonstrate this to the client target market through its marketing strategy and marketing mix (Cant, 2010). A marketing orientation must be adopted and internalized by corporate leaders (Young, 2010) in order to strengthen their business strategy and increase the probability of winning prospective clients (Day & Barksdale, 2003).

Concerning professional service firms, Gummesson (1979) identified possible activities within the area of marketing, concentrating on promotional activities i.e. the various ways of communicating with, and influencing, the market (Table 1).

**Table 1- Promotional activities used by professional service firms**

<b>Personal selling including market research</b>
Sales calls on own initiative
Sales calls on inquiry
Proposals
Current contacts with certain important customers and prospects
Controlling time-consuming negotiations
Controlling suppliers or others who may influence sales
Surveying activities and events in the market
Developing know-how on individual prospects
<b>Advertising</b>

Advertisements in daily newspapers
Advertisements in trade journals
Other types of advertisements: telephone directories, year books, etc.
Direct mail
Participation in advertising arranged by trade associations
<b>Public relations and other promotional activities</b>
Conferences, symposiums, seminars, courses, etc. arranged by the professional firm
Participation in conferences, etc. arranged by a trade association or someone outside the professional firm
Participation as lecturer, seminar leader, etc.
Membership of associations
Dinners, lunches and other forms of entertainment
Invitations, e.g., to the professional firm's office
Exhibitions
Reference assignments
References to persons
Participation in professional contests
Arranging contests
Awarding fellowships
Publication of articles
Reprints of articles
Publication of books
Product sheets
Annual reports
Publishing a magazine for clients
Slides, films, etc.
Billboards and name-plates
Press releases
Press conferences, interviews
Gifts
Christmas greeting, anniversary greetings, etc.

Source: Gummesson (1979)

There is good cause to believe that formal organized marketing in the professional service's industry is a necessity in the face of competitive economic reality. Marketing is beneficial both to professional service businesses and to their clients and customers. The importance of keeping abreast of emerging influences and modern trends in marketing must be emphasized. Newberry and Jackson (2010) suggest that current and future marketing directions will affect the way that professional service marketing is formulated and implemented. Lees et al. (2014) believe that in the professional environment, service organizations that have clear marketing direction will have more chance of succeeding. professional service firm's can no longer assume that their services will sell themselves. To many professionals the concept of marketing their services was alien, suspect, and consciously avoided. Many others, however, have adopted certain principles of marketing, mainly promotion, in order to gain attention in the market.

With the presence of the Internet over the past decade, one has seen the emergence of an increasingly sophisticated consumer who is capable of making more advanced demands with more readily available information (Karam, 2003).

In response, service firms are placing greater emphasis on understanding buyer behavior to guide their strategic decisions for attracting, managing and keeping customers. Despite growth in consumer demand for services, there has not been an adequate increase in the

development of marketing skills in service industries, particularly professional services (Ettenson and Turner, 1997).

Given that marketing is primarily based on value, rather than sales, the biggest challenge that professional marketers face, is how to make the most of the online communications channel that is the Internet (Ramsey and McCole, 2005). Marketers cannot afford to ignore it as a key ingredient of the modern marketing communications mix as it has become an inescapable part of every marketer's life (Uncles, 2001).

In this regard, professional services, which are characterised by high levels of interpersonal interaction, have the ability to benefit from the Internet due to the fact that a large component of the service product is related to providing information and expertise. For these services the Internet would serve primarily as an accessible information source rather than a distribution channel: "Therefore the Internet has the potential to fundamentally change the way in which consumers interact with professional service providers" (Hogg, Laing and Winkelman, 2003).

Many still consider the marketing of professional services unethical and inadequate (Grant, 2005) and regard marketing as "a set of promotional and selling tools rather than a strategic, organising and integrative function within the organisation" (Crane, 1993).

While competitive pressures increase, consumer needs and expectations are also changing. In this regard, McLaughlin (2005) states that although for many service buyers, personal relationships remain the major driver of purchase decisions for professional services, behavioural changes in the consumer buying process are becoming increasingly apparent.

Furthermore, the Internet is becoming a more popular research medium for many consumers in search of a suitable service provider.

The Internet can therefore provide potential consumers with convenient access to information even if the actual transaction will take place offline (Langrosen, 2005) and in the 21st century this information is accessible to consumers literally at their fingertips, via their cell phones. This is coupled with the fact that for the early majority of Internet users, the Internet has become an established communication and research medium (Jayawardhena, Wright and Masterson, 2003), with Internet access from home being the natural way of communication amongst the upper social classes, including young professionals.

Coupey (2001) states that the Internet improves not only the efficiency of the development and implementation of marketing activities, but can also improve on the wealth of the content and activities. To remain competitive in global and local markets, Internet-enabled capabilities are therefore believed to be imperative.

The Internet opens up a whole new world of opportunities for service marketers worldwide to create new online service products, but also to enhance their current marketing mixes (Dann and Dann, 2001). For instance, a marketer can provide information about a product/service more effectively and efficiently to a customer than creating a brochure or catalogue. This also allows them to react to competitive forces faster and easier by adapting flexible elements to the marketing mix in order to stay ahead of the competition. Also, the advertising of a service on the Internet can gain the attention of a potential client across the globe, "allowing for the physical distance exerting a minimal effect in the negotiation of a transaction" (Coupey, 2001). The Internet is also a more interactive medium than many traditional marketing channels. This interactivity means that firms can communicate in real time with their consumers to provide specific, desired information. As a result, such tailored communication may result in more efficient and satisfying transactions.

Professional services, which are characterised by high levels of interpersonal interaction, have the ability to benefit from the Internet due to the fact that a large component of the service product is related to providing information and expertise. Therefore, for these services the Internet would serve primarily as an accessible information source rather than a distribution channel; which means that "the Internet has the potential to fundamentally change

the way in which consumers interact with professional service providers” (Hogg, Laing and Winkelman, 2003). Essentially, by advertising and providing services on the Internet, firms generally offer customers value through the firms’ presence and the means to develop long-term, one-on-one relationships with the firm (Mathur, Mathur and Gleason, 1998).

This is complemented by the fact that in an Internet-literate society, the majority of prospective clients will possibly visit a company’s Website before they attempt any personal contact; “often even despite a referral at hand” (McLaughlin, 2005). As a result the Website visit needs to be regarded as the prospect’s first step to enter into a business relationship with the professional service provider. This creates an opportunity for professional services to make a positive first impression that can differentiate them from their competitors and possibly open the doors for a follow-up call. McLaughlin (2005) concludes that “although a Website cannot substitute the power of personal interaction with clients, it can initiate and sustain customer relationships, as well as re-enforce commitment to clients”.

Roxas et al (2000) found that the main reasons for accountancy firms developing their own Websites are: firstly, to attract new clients (because of general interest in the Internet) by complementing their current marketing activities; secondly, to improve service to the firm's current clients; and lastly, to portray credibility and technological advancement (Roxas et al, 2000). The study advocates that Websites have not necessarily attracted new customers, but have generally been successful in promoting the firms' image, as well as improving their services to existing clients. In other words replacing the more conservative advertising tools, such as office brochures and business announcements, with a Website showcase and e-mail communication. It is added that the research has shown that accounting firms’ promotional activities should focus on communicating their experience (through their partners' and employees' qualifications, professional affiliations and years of service), areas of specialisation, range of services, reputation, available resources, location and availability (Roxas et al., 2000).

However, it should be noted that relatively little literature on marketing in professional service firms exists (Barr, McNeilly, 2003; Enerson et al., 2016; Cerruti et al. 2019). Literature is more easily available on the marketing of goods rather than services marketing, with even less on professional service marketing. While a great deal has been written regarding what firms could and should be doing, there is little literature that reports what they actually are doing (Barr and McNeilly, 2003). This study gives insight into the marketing of services in today’s economic climate with a focus on the professional service industry. In summary, given the situation challenges, the difficulties in marketing credence services such as professional service firms and the task of integrating technical expertise with a relational approach, it may be investigated how do professional service firms market their services or more specifically how professional service firms practice marketing.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology is based on the quantitative analysis. The research is based on an empirical analysis, conducted through the survey method sent to 914 management consulting firms registered with the Chamber of Commerce in 2016.

The consulting companies were selected based on activity criteria and geographical. In particular, the consulting firms selected are those that have an Ateco Code 70.22.09 - Business and other management consultancy activities. These are consulting firms located in Central Italy, namely Marche, Abruzzo, Emilia Romagna, Lazio, Tuscany, Umbria and Veneto.

18.342 consulting companies were extracted from the archives of the Chamber of Commerce.

A semi-structured online survey was sent to the sample, formulated in such a way as to leave a certain freedom to the answers of the interviewee, although in pre-structured grids by the researcher (Molteni, Troilo, 2007).

The survey for consultancy companies is divided into two parts: the first aims to understand the general profile on the firm while the second part is aimed at investigating the level marketing and communication processes of the consulting firm, including the acquisition and retention of customers.

In order to increase the response rate, a follow-up activity was carried out in order to solicit initially non-responding companies.

914 consulting firms fully responded to the survey with a 5% response rate.

#### 4. Results

The sample is composed by 914 management consulting firms and are located (Table 2) in Emilia-Romagna (23%), Veneto (20%), Lazio (19%), in Tuscany (17%) and Marche (11%) followed by Abruzzo (6%) and Umbria (4%).

In terms of employees, 78% of the sample is composed by 2 employees, 18% between three and nine and 4% of consulting firms has more of 10 employees.

**Table 2 – Profile of management consulting firms**

<i>Region</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Abruzzo	53	6%
Emilia Romagna	210	23%
Lazio	175	19%
Marche	104	11%
Toscana	156	17%
Umbria	38	4%
Veneto	178	20%
Total	914	100%
<i>Number of employees</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
0-2	709	78%
3-9	162	18%
More than 10	43	4%
Total	914	100%

Shifting attention to the marketing and communication strategies implemented by the consulting firms as well as to the activities carried out, it emerges that 53% of the responding companies develop marketing and communication activities for their business (Table 3). This happens above all for consultancy firms with more than 10 employees (72%) even if there is a significant commitment (more than 50%) even in smaller consulting companies. In addition, 80% of consulting companies carry out marketing activities before planning them (Table 4).

**Table 3 Management consulting firms that carry out marketing activities based on number of employees**

	<i>0-2</i>	<i>3-9</i>	<i>More than 10</i>	<i>Total</i>
No	48%	44%	28%	47%



Yes	52%	56%	72%	53%
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**Table 4 Management consulting firms that plan marketing activities based on number of employees**

	<i>0-2</i>	<i>3-9</i>	<i>More than 10</i>	<i>Total</i>
No	22%	17%	10%	20%
Yes	78%	84%	90%	80%

Consultancy companies that do not carry out marketing activities (Table 5) do so because they have no time (49%), do not have dedicated human resources (31%), because it is considered to be a useless activity (24%), because it costs too much (11%) and because they do not find someone who can advise them professionally (9%).

**Table 5 Reasons why management consulting firms do not carry out marketing activities**

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Lack of time	207	49%
Lack of human resources	133	31%
It is considered a useless activity	102	24%
It costs too much	45	11%
I can't find anyone to advise me professionally	40	9%
Other	42	10%

At a dimensional level (Table 6), the reasons for not investing in marketing activities do not differ from the aggregate data, confirming that companies do not carry out these activities mainly because they do not have enough time available, do not have human resources and because they consider them essentially useless activities.

**Table 6 Reasons why management consulting firms do not carry out marketing activities based on number of employees**

<i>Reasons</i>	<i>0-2</i>	<i>3-9</i>	<i>More than 10</i>	<i>Total</i>
Lack of time	46%	56%	67%	49%
Lack of human resources	30%	39%	25%	31%
It is considered a useless activity	25%	23%	17%	24%
It costs too much	11%	10%	8%	11%
I can't find anyone to advise me professionally	9%	13%	8%	9%
Other	11%	9%	0%	10%

However, most consulting firms (568 companies or 62% of respondents) already carry out a business communication activity (Table 7).

**Table 7 Management consulting firms that carry out communication activities**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
No	346	38%
Yes	568	62%
Total	914	100

At a dimensional level (Table 8), companies with more than 10 employees are those that invest most in communicating their business (81%) compared to those of a smaller size.

**Table 8 Management consulting firms that carry out communication activities based on number of employees**

	<i>0-2</i>	<i>3-9</i>	<i>More than 10</i>	<i>Total</i>
No	39%	37%	19%	38%
Yes	61%	63%	81%	62%
Total	709	162	43	914

The main communication tools (Table 9) are: the website and social media (72%), brochures and depliant (50%) and participation in conferences as speakers and the organization of events (45%). Videos, blogs and online communities are the least used promotional activities.

**Table 9 Communication tools used by consulting firms**

<i>Communication tools</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Publications	142	25%
Conference reports	256	45%
Brochure and depliant	285	50%
Blog and online community	140	25%
Web site and social media	411	72%
Events	255	45%
Newsletter	223	39%
Video	69	12%
Other	64	11%

The size of the consulting companies has an impact on the business communication activities. Companies with a maximum of 2 employees, in line with the aggregate data (Table 10), communicate their business mainly through their website and social networks (70%), brochures and depliants (46%), relating to conferences (44%) and participating in events (40%).

**Table 10 Communication tools carried out by consulting firms based on number of employees**

<i>Communication tools</i>	<i>0-2</i>	<i>3-9</i>	<i>More than 10</i>	<i>Total</i>
Publications	22%	29%	54%	25%
Conference reports	44%	51%	46%	45%
Brochure and depliant	46%	58%	83%	50%
Blog and online community	24%	28%	26%	25%
Web site and social media	70%	78%	86%	72%
Events	40%	56%	71%	45%
Newsletter	36%	53%	46%	39%
Video	10%	14%	31%	12%
Other	11%	11%	17%	11%

Service companies with up to 9 employees invest most in their communication activities on the website and on social media (78%), on brochures and depliants (58%), on participation in events (56%) and sending newsletters to its customers and potential customers (53%). Finally, consulting companies with more than 10 employees primarily promote their business through the website and social networks (86%), brochures and depliants (83%) and participating in events (71%) as well as through publications (54%).

The online presence of consultancy companies is mainly characterized by the website (65%), a LinkedIn profile (47%) and a Facebook page (34%) (Table 11). Among the other channels in which consulting companies are present amount to 2% there are Instagram and YouTube. However, it is noteworthy that 24% of consultancy companies are not present on the network and 27% are companies with 2 employees.

In terms of size (Table 11), almost all of the larger consulting companies have a website (80% and 88%). A further element to note is that consulting companies with more than 10 employees are equally present on Facebook and LinkedIn (54%) while smaller companies seem to be more likely to be on LinkedIn than Facebook. For example, 31% of consulting companies with up to 2 employees are present on Facebook and 46% on LinkedIn; 41% of service companies with a number of employees between 3 and 9 are present on Facebook and 48% on LinkedIn.

**Table 11 Online presence of management consulting firms**

<i>Online presence</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Web site	595	65%
Facebook	307	34%
LinkedIn	425	47%
Blog	82	9%
Google plus	119	13%
Twitter	150	16%
None	215	24%
Other	22	2%

**Table 12 Online presence of management consulting firms based on the number of employees**

<i>Online presence</i>	<i>0-2</i>	<i>3-9</i>	<i>More than 10</i>	<i>Total</i>
Web site	60%	80%	88%	65%
Facebook	31%	41%	54%	34%
LinkedIn	46%	48%	54%	47%
Blog	9%	11%	7%	9%
Google plus	12%	19%	14%	13%
Twitter	15%	22%	26%	16%
None	27%	11%	12%	24%
Other	2%	2%	5%	2%

Social networks are used by consultancy firms to develop relationships (69%), to promote their skills and services (68%) as well as to acquire information on topics of interest for 40% (Table 13) .

**Table 13 Purposes pursued by consulting firms thorough the online presence and use of social networks**

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Promote skills and services of the consulting company	475	68%
Identify and / or select the personnel to be hired	100	14%
Develop relationships	479	69%
Share opinions and content with other consulting companies	121	17%
Acquire information on topics of interest	277	40%
Other	10	1%

Micro-sized professional service firms use social networks to develop relationships (70%), to promote their skills (67%) and to acquire information on topics of particular interest (41%). The consulting companies with up to 9 employees, on the other hand, seek to promote their skills (70%), develop relationships (60%) and acquire information (34%) through the network.

Finally, the consulting companies with more than 10 employees mainly aim to promote their skills and develop relationships (82%) as well as 42% to acquire information on topics of interest (Table 14).

**Table 14 Purposes pursued through the presence on the net and the use of social networks based on the number of employees**

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>0-2</i>	<i>3-9</i>	<i>More than 10</i>	<i>Total</i>
Promote skills and services of the consulting company	67%	70%	82%	68%
Identify and / or select the personnel to be hired	11%	24%	29%	14%
Develop relationships	70%	60%	82%	69%
Share opinions and content with other consulting companies	19%	12%	21%	17%
Acquire information on topics of interest	41%	34%	42%	40%
Other	1%	2%	0	1%

Concerning the relationship with customers, there are few consulting companies that periodically carry out market research in order to identify their potential clients (Table 15) or only 30% of the companies surveyed. These are mainly those with a number of employees greater than 10 (42%) (Table 16).

**Table 15 Market research carried out in order to identify potential customers**

<i>Market research</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
No	644	70%
Yes	270	30%
Total	914	100%

**Table 16 Market research carried out in order to identify potential customers based on the number of employees**

<i>Market research</i>	<i>0-2</i>	<i>3-9</i>	<i>10 +</i>	<i>Total</i>
No	72%	67%	58%	70%
Yes	28%	33%	42%	30%

In addition to word-of-mouth, the consulting company acquires new customers through requests from customers via email and phone calls (52%), direct actions of the firm (44%) and organization of events on topics of interest equal to 31% (Table 17). However, it is interesting to note that 29% of management consulting firms focus exclusively on word of mouth to acquire new customers.

**Table 17 Methods of acquiring new customers**

<i>Customer acquisition</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Direct actions (phone calls, mailings)	399	44
Online advertising	132	14
Customer requests via email or phone calls	473	52

Customer requests via website	193	21
Events organized by the consulting company and by other subjects to which the company participated as expert / supervisor	281	31
Social network	178	20
Other	41	5
No one other than word of mouth	263	29

In terms of dimensions (Table 18), the methods of acquiring new customers do not show particular divergences with the aggregate data, confirming that the requests from customers via email and phone calls, the direct actions of the firm, and the organization of events on topics of interest are the main activities carried out by consulting firms to acquire new customers.

In addition, it emerges that the consultancy companies that mostly focus on word of mouth are mainly (30%) those of small size while the service companies with more than 10 employees invest more on their online presence or online advertising (40%) and on social networks (35%) and responding to requests sent by customers via the website (35%).

**Table 18 Methods of acquiring new customers based on the number of employees**

<i>Customer acquisition</i>	<i>0-2</i>	<i>3-9</i>	<i>More than 10</i>	<i>Total</i>
Direct actions (phone calls, mailings)	44%	40%	58%	44%
Online advertising	13%	15%	40%	14%
Customer requests via email or phone calls	51%	53%	61%	52%
Customer requests via website	19%	29%	35%	21%
Events organized by the consulting company and by other subjects to which the company participated as expert / supervisor	29%	36%	49%	31%
Social network	19%	20%	35%	20%
Other	4%	6%	14%	5%
No one other than word-of-mouth	30%	28%	12%	29%

Once the customer has been acquired it is necessary to implement activities aimed at retaining it. 67% of consultancy companies that perform customer loyalty activities (Table 19) do so by meeting them individually for updates (70%), making regular phone calls (59%) and sending periodic newsletters as well as inviting them to events for 38% (Table 20).

**Table 19 Development of customer loyalty activities**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
No	306	33%
Yes	608	67%
Total	914	100%

**Table 20 Methods of customer loyalty**

<i>Customer loyalty</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Individual meetings for updates	428	70%
Periodic newsletters	236	39%
Periodic calls	360	59%
News on the site	132	22%
Invitations to events	231	38%

Meetings with groups and clients	156	26%
Other	25	4%

In terms of size there are divergences in the methods of building customer loyalty (Table 21): companies with up to 2 employees use individual meetings for updates (72%), periodic calls (60%) and invitations to events (34%), while companies with between 3 and 9 employees use, in addition to individual invitations (63%), newsletters and periodic calls (57%) also to invitations to events (47%). Finally, companies with more than 10 employees in addition to individual meetings for updates (68%) invite customers to events (65%) as well as send newsletters and contact customers by telephone (56%).

**Table 21 Methods of customer loyalty based on the number of employees**

<i>Customer loyalty</i>	<i>0-2</i>	<i>3-9</i>	<i>More than 10</i>	<i>Total</i>
Individual meetings for updates	72%	63%	68%	70%
Periodic newsletters	33%	57%	56%	39%
Periodic calls	60%	57%	56%	59%
News on the site	19%	30%	29%	22%
Invitations to events	34%	47%	65%	38%
Meetings with groups and clients	24%	26%	44%	26%
Other	4%	6%	6%	4%

## 5. Conclusion

In the economic and social context in which the professional services move are undergoing profound changes determined mainly from two phenomena: the globalization of professional services and the digital revolution or the advent of the Internet and new technologies.

As it emerges in the literature marketing professional services is pretty simple, and yet management consulting firms, have slowly and cautiously incorporated marketing into their strategic plans.

The study presented results of survey where the main purpose was to understand if management consulting firms carry out marketing and communication activities and how consulting firms build and maintain relationship with customers. The sample under investigation was represented by 914 consulting firms located in central Italy.

The first research question was a preliminary one aimed to investigate if management consulting firms consider marketing as an activity realized by management consulting firms and to understand the reasons why they say they do not deal with it.

The consulting firms that carry out marketing and communication activities represent the 53% of the sample and lots of them with a previous planification (RQ1).

However, there are still professional service firms that do not carry out marketing activities because of the lack of time and of human resources as well as it is considered a useless activity.

The second research question, more deepened, wanted to investigate an activity that cannot avoid doing in the service industry, which is the communication activity.

The consulting firms carry out communication activities thorough websites and social networks, brochures and participation in conferences as speaker (RQ2). In terms of dimensions, the largest and most structured realities resort to techniques that require more

time, skills and resources such as the making of videos, publications and the organization of events.

Regarding the presence on the web, management consulting firms through the website and the Facebook and LinkedIn page aim to promote their skills and their services as well as to develop new relationships.

Individual meetings for updates, newsletters and periodic phone calls are instead the main ways to retain customers of small service companies while larger ones invite customers to specific events.

As part of marketing's activity, the study has tried to understand how management consulting firms build and maintain relationships with clients.

Concerning the acquisition of new customers (RQ3), consultancy firms do not periodically carry out market research in order to identify potential customers. This aspect is particularly accentuated in small companies.

This means that there is no strategic approach to customer search,

Another methods to acquire new customers are organize or participate in events in which management consulting firms are present as speakers or experts on a topic, they answer the emails and phone calls of potential customers and contact them through massive mailing activities.

Finally, it emerges that activities aimed at managing and maintaining the relationship with customers are carried out. In addition, these professional service firms do not have a systematic use of the marketing, they do not have a holistic and strategic perspective of the marketing, but they practice it anyway.

The contribution provides some managerial implications that could be particularly useful for service providers with high knowledge content such as to adopt a systematic and strategic approach to communication developing a complete and integrated digital communication strategy as well as rethink its business model in order to achieve it.

Another implication could be to organize events on topics of major interest (also in collaboration with organizations, trade associations or other management consulting firms) that allow to develop cross-channel relationships.

All professional service firms need to use marketing in their efforts to maintain and build their client bases. Better understanding the wants and needs of their customers, both current and potential, and taking care to build and maintain relationship with those customers are strategic marketing issues.

These strategies, with focus on the customer, are implemented through many possible marketing tactics.

In this case, management consulting firms should be investing on the internet marketing starting from being on the internet and being more active on the social network in order to able to capture firms and their needs as well as new customers.

In this sense it could be useful to carefully plan a digital marketing strategy, especially for smaller management consulting firms, that goes beyond the mere publication and sharing of contents (Gabbianelli, Conti, 2018).

In planning marketing and communication activities, the management consulting firms should carefully evaluate all the peculiarities of the individual communication tools distinguishing in:

- identity and image tools that allow you to communicate your identity, your values and the distinctive features of the professional firm.
- tools of reputation used in order to make it known management consulting firm to new potential clients.
- loyalty tools aimed exclusively at customers of the professional service firm with the aim of consolidating the relationships established.

the Internet phenomenon has contributed to evolve the concept of communication related to the world of professional services.

The website, especially for certain types of targets, it represents one a transversal tool that is able to pursue a multiplicity of objectives. Most of the management consulting firms use the Internet for their own updating and training professional as well as an external communication tool.

It emerges the relevance to have an attractive and functional website, to be present and active on social networks in order to be able to intercept businesses and their needs.

This study provides some initial understanding into the tactical and strategic use of marketing by management consulting firms. While insightful, the findings are not without limitations.

The sample is limited to the center of Italy and could be extended to the entire Italian territory.

Moreover, the study needs more statistical analysis both qualitative and quantitative in order to deepen the topic.

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