

CLIENT SERVICE DEPARTMENTS IN ADVERTISING AGENCIES BETWEEN PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The present work aims to identify the main features of the activity of the Client Service department in advertising agencies in Romania during the pandemic and post-pandemic period. After a theoretical presentation of the role of this department within an agency, the paper focuses on the applicative approach, consisting of two parts: a qualitative content analysis of the sites in the field to identify the potential changes that have taken place and continue to take place in advertising agencies in our country, from the beginning of the pandemic until now, with an emphasis on possible changes in customer relations according to the specialized media; and a qualitative research carried out through interviews with advertisers from the Client Service departments of two Romanian agencies, as well as with advertisers with management positions from six other advertising agencies in Romania, intending to identify how the pandemic influenced the activity of advertising agencies advertising, especially of Customer Service departments, and what will be its potential post-pandemic changes.

Keywords

advertising agencies; client service department; pandemic; post-pandemic.

Introduction

Client service departments are important links that connect clients to advertising agencies, and without which the agencies would not survive: "Client service is the department responsible for the client relationship and for the administration of each account (i.e., each service for each client)" (Balaban, 2021, p. 14). In Romania, starting in 1990, the advertising industry flourished; in a short time, this activity became comparable to that in the West. In March 2020, advertising agencies faced a significant challenge: the COVID-19 pandemic. The cancellation of cultural and sports events led to the blocking of marketing and advertising budgets, with no chance of unblocking in the next period: "If television, which remains the main source of public information and the favorite support of advertising clients, benefited from advertising orders in March, the other media supports (print, online, radio and outdoor) have registered

contractions of investment in communication since the beginning of the crisis" (Barbu, 2020). According to the International Advertising Association (IAA) Romania, only maintaining the advertising budget can ensure the rapid recovery and solidity of the brand in the long term: "Advertising has a multiplier effect, but, like any similar element, it needs investment to work, and the best way to ensure the long-term growth of the brand is to maintain the level of advertising expenses" (Forbes Romania, 2020).

Starting from this picture, we aim to find out how agencies, especially Client service departments, reacted to this unprecedented crisis, adapted their way of working, and convinced clients to turn the crisis into an opportunity. In addition, we want to identify the transformations the pandemic has produced in agencies and which persist post-pandemic.

The advertising agency is a knowledge-based organization. Customer Service is at the border between the agency and the client

Advertising agencies can be considered intensive-cognitive organizations because they are built around the competence and skills of the staff, they have adaptable organizational forms, and the activity is customer-oriented. In addition, they work with symbols (plans, ideas, concepts, images, etc.), have a high degree of ambiguity resulting in a subjective assessment of the quality of employees' work, and problems are most often solved through extensive communication (Leovaridis, 2008, p. 93; Alvesson, 2011, p. 1646).

The advertising agency as an organization depends on selling to customers, so the evaluation process rests primarily with the customer. Advertising professionals often have difficulty convincing clients of their know-how. It is vital that advertising professionals draw on various symbolic resources to persuade themselves, clients, and others that they have something specific to offer regarding their expertise, skills, and talents and that they have superior abilities in advertising and similar forms of communication. So flexibility, verbal skills, persistence, and empathy are very important. Impression management is essential, as determining knowledge objectively is very difficult in advertising (Alvesson, 1994, pp. 543-544). "Within the new intensive-cognitive adhocracies, whose performance and efficiency are directly proportional to the creativity of employees, direct, hierarchical, authority-based managerial control becomes completely inadequate, being replaced by a cultural management, based on the formation of a common corporate identity, of a set of shared values aimed at the loyalty of professionals-employees" (Leovaridis & Răchită, 2019, p. 16).

Advertising agencies design and produce advertisements, do market research, make media plans, buy advertising space and TV airtime, increasingly use social media, and use online tracking and data collection techniques. The structure of agencies has been and is constantly changing. The modern agency has mainly emerged in response to client demands, as establishing agency-client relationships is still the touchstone for winning new business. How agencies respond to this challenge can secure their future and make a difference (Hackley, 2005, p. 80).

Advertising agencies must develop an organizational structure that meets clients' needs and, at the same time, their own internal requirements. Most medium and large

agencies are structured as either departmental or group systems. Under the departmental system, a separate department is designed for each agency's functions that fulfill its specialty and serve all the agency's clients. Some agencies prefer the departmental system because it allows employees to develop expertise in serving a variety of clients, and in this case, the main departments in a full-service agency are Client Service, creative, production, media, planning-strategy, traffic, financial, etc.; some agencies use the group system, where people from each department work together in groups to serve specific clients. An account executive leads each group and has one or more media people, including media planners, and a creative team that includes copywriters, art directors, artists, and production staff. Many agencies prefer the group system because the employees become very well-informed about the client's business, and there is continuity in serving it (Weigold & Arens, 2018, p. 130). Some agencies have adopted innovative structures to put the agency-client relationship on a new footing. St Luke's agency uses "brand rooms," shared spaces between the agency and the client, which, in their opinion, work as a more effective spatial mechanism for the client's relationship with the agency. This arrangement is based on the feeling that each is integral to the other's success (Powell et al., 2009, p. 20). Another agency, DLKW, coined the "red agenda," a shared agency-client agenda whereby they work as a team with a unique set of goals, values, and work processes (Powell et al., 2009, pp. 20-21).

Companies realize their most important asset is not their capital equipment, research capability, or product line. "In the global market, their most important asset is the customer and their relationship with that person or organization. Protecting this asset has become the new marketing imperative for the 21st century. To do a better job of relationship marketing, companies understand that they must be consistent in both what they say and what they do" (Arens, 2011, p. 53). The Client Service Department is responsible for liaising with the agency's clients, managing their accounts, and transmitting information extracted from communication with them to other departments (Belch, 2020, p. 430). Located at the border between the agency and the client, the client service department has the dual role of supporting the client's interests and objectives while promoting the agency's activity to them. The activity of this department is carried out in the interest of the agency and the client equally. The importance of this department is crucial; without orders from clients, there is no activity in the agency.

Most clients prefer risk-free agencies. Once they realize an agency is trustworthy, they will be unlikely to switch it. Trust starts with customer service and is the basis of a good client-agency relationship and efficient and relaxed work (Solomon, 2016, pp. 10-11). The most effective results are achieved when the agency-client relationship is strong, based on clear lines of communication, and is long-lasting. "Continuity in these relationships provides time each time to understand the other and the business" (Hackley, 2018, p. 128). Over time, mutual trust is established in this relationship, which, along with longevity, is the key to success: "The customer is effectively the invisible member of the account team" (Hackley, 2018, p. 128).

Depending on their size and advertising budget, one or more account managers are assigned to a client. The account executive interprets the client's marketing and advertising needs to agency staff, presents the agency's proposals, obtains client approval, and coordinates advertisements' planning, creation, and production (Belch &

Belch, 2018, p. 83). As the focal point of the agency-client relationship, the Account Manager must know a great deal about the client's business and be able to communicate this to agency specialists working on the account. Ideal Account Managers are good strategic thinkers with business intelligence, a strong marketing foundation, and a deep understanding of all phases of the advertising process. In addition, they can coordinate activities and relationships in marketing communication, such as direct, digital, and social media. Solving complex communication issues highlighting the agency and its capabilities is all the responsibility of account managers. They liaise primarily with a client-side brand manager to ensure frequency and consistency of contact and communication. Often referred to as acting as the "voice of the client in the agency," it is his responsibility to manage the development of the campaign from the moment the client's message is brought to the agency through to final execution, on time and on budget (Hackley, 2005, p. 89; Russel & Lane, 2003).

Any project begins with a meeting with the client, informing the Client Service department of his marketing and communication objectives concerning the initiated project and communicating a budget within which the project must fit. Client Service professionals are informed about the product, what it brings new, target market, and competition, but also about the customer's feelings, preferences, and expectations. Next, the information from the customer is supplemented with other sources such as market studies, consumer behavior, competition, etc. Corroborating all this data, the Client Service draws up the Client's Brief, which clarifies all aspects useful to the creative team, the production departments, the media, or any other departments involved in the project. Based on this, the Creation Brief is drawn up after all the questions of the involved departments have been clarified. From here, it is the job of creatives to realize the creative concept and creative directions that will be subject to agency management and client approval. The presentation of the project in front of the client is essential; he must be convinced of the attractive, unique character of the advertisement and the fact that it meets all aspects of his needs. The client's approval starts the production; disapproval means that the whole process described previously must be repeated (Balaban, 2021, pp. 71-72). Having the client agree on the basic direction of the campaign and being in constant contact with him, making him feel valued as part of the team, makes him more receptive at the time of the presentation (Bonnie & Jerome, 2008, p. 298).

The large number of competing agencies can lead to an "asymmetric" character of the relationship between them and clients. Although criticized on both sides, the pitch is the foundation of establishing agency-client relationships and remains the primary form of winning new business. Statistics show that only 5-10% of new companies internationally are made without a pitch (Powell et al., 2009, p. 22). Although clients are the ones who draw up the terms and conditions, this does not mean that agencies are powerless. The innovative ways agencies respond to this challenge can future-proof them and make a difference. "Going forward, as the consumer becomes harder to reach, the agency and client must become closer in terms of skill sets and working styles if they are to combat this and other challenges, but instability has characterized client-agency relationships since their inception and will continue to remain a focal point of deliberation and discussion" (Powell et al., 2009, pp. 22-23).

Pandemic and post-pandemic changes in advertising agencies – qualitative content analysis based on specialized websites

Research methodology

The main objective of this qualitative content analysis is to identify the changes determined by the pandemic in the advertising activity, according to the online specialized press. The secondary objectives are to identify the alternations of the relationship between advertising agencies and their clients, both from the advertising professionals as well the clients' perceptions. The content analysis is based on the articles from the specialized online press (iqads.ro, Forbes.ro, Revistabiz.ro, Capital.ro) from April 2020 – March 2023. There are 36 articles on the researched topic, divided as follows: nine on the Iqads.ro website, twenty on Forbes.ro, six on revistabiz.ro, and one on Capital.ro.

The main research questions that formed the basis of this qualitative content analysis were: "What were the first measures taken by the agencies when the pandemic broke out?", "How did the activity of the agencies adapt to the new situation?", "How did the relationship with customers during this period?", "What changes have occurred at the level of the Client Service department with the pandemic and post-pandemic?", "What is the opinion of advertising professionals about the post-pandemic advertising industry?", "How has the relationship between client-firms and advertising agencies in pandemic and post-pandemic, from the point of view of clients?".

Data analysis and interpretation

The first measures taken by the advertising agencies in Romania during the state of emergency

Customer Service Director and Managing Director Mercury 360 say they are used to working from home, flexibility in the schedule, and the use of the online platforms Teams, Skype, etc.: "It was harder to accept afterward that for a while this would be the norm. In a few days, we developed client-agency crisis teams where we started looking for communication solutions, just like most colleagues in the industry" (Matei, 2020). Another immediate change was in the strategy and planning: "We are rethinking the online communication strategy, revisiting the annual plans that were already delivered turnkey, we are working with multiple scenarios for the immediate period (next month) and for the summer and autumn projects. We are still working hard and going through situations we have never encountered before, but it is incredible what extraordinary power a team that focuses on development, leaving aside the anxiety of uncertainty, can have" (Matei, 2020).

The McCann agency adapted to the new situation just as quickly, reports Chief Creative Officer at McCann Worldgroup Romania: "We did not see this period as a closing of the office but as a simultaneous opening of hundreds of home agencies all over Bucharest. In the first week of working from home, each colleague announced on social media the opening of his/her home office: McCann Obor, McCann Armenească, McCann Berceni, or McCann Titulescu, etc. These home agencies weren't just a social media stunt. They came up with a special proposals to reorganize the work routine to improve our efficiency" (Săndulescu, 2020a).

For the general manager of Pastel, the priorities during the pandemic were the safety of the team and its integrity. After a very good period for the agency, when it was looking to expand the team, efforts were made to avoid staff cuts. But online work was not a problem: "We held our positions, responded and adapted with an absolutely astonishing speed" (Guțu, 2020b).

How has the agency's activity adapted to the new situation and online work?

The way of working is constantly changing at Minio. The solution could come from digital: "There are many business processes that change (...). I expect the overall market to go down. There is an interest in increasing the digital component, but still at the experimentation level", says CEO Minio Studio (Guțu, 2020a).

A little differently, the Chief Creative Officer of McCann Worldgroup Romania believes that the traditional ways of working are no longer valid; digital methods have already been found to maintain quality and constitute an advantage, not a compromise: "We saw the period as an opportunity to digitize this experience and step forward to have a more open and collaborative industry. So we launched McCann TV - a digital content platform open to everyone" (Săndulescu, 2020a). The work schedule was reorganized to be efficient in the new conditions: "In the morning, we have a Check-In period where we make the plan, briefs are taken, and we discuss what we have to deliver that day. Then there's a period of Airplane Mode designed to avoid being inefficiently on calls all day. Thus, people can focus on work, not only on planning. Then, at the end of the day, we also have a Check-Out Time when the discussions that close the day take place. This has the purpose of delimiting personal time from work time, something we all struggled with during this period" (Săndulescu, 2020a).

Managing Partner of 23Communication also explains the radical changes in the way of working: "There were very few pitches last year. Most of the new business budgets came from the same clients. Also, for a very long time, commercials could not be filmed. Now, at all the filming of commercials, there is a person in charge of Covid, so to speak, a man who must make sure there are masks, face masks, disinfectant, who changes the masks every three hours, and all the people take tests" (Barbu, 2021a).

The same direction of change is also presented by Owner Perceptum, talking about the activity of his agency in 2020, which was completely different from the one up until then: "We have rethought all the communication plans, together with our clients we have aligned them to the new normality and proved to each individual audience that the brands are by their side in good times, but also in bad times, that they are truly part of their lives and, if they succeed, they succeed together. We work online, communicate with our customers online, and implement online campaigns" (Matei, 2021). The effort he had to make was to integrate all projects and events into digital. In 2020, they had to offer strong, credible virtual alternatives: "We moved event concepts online, increased the interaction between the public and brands, and integrated new elements such as Augmented Reality, VR, virtual robots, and gamification into the digital experience we offered to target audiences. Online is extremely attractive, and if you find the best mix between information, interactivity, entertainment, and innovation, you can turn it into the most effective channel for brand communication, loyalty, and lead generation".

The Executive Creative Director at Publicis Romania calls the new way of working *the remote paradigm*: "It was necessary to adapt quickly to the change so that the clients did not feel any syncopation or loss of rhythm. The new paradigm has given more responsibility to each individual creative – since we no longer work in a common space, where ideas and executions are refined every moment by the whole team. We gave the work process a slightly different flow, but in the end, we obtained the same results with which both we and the customers were satisfied" (Săndulescu, 2020b).

With the online, the way of working has changed quickly and profoundly. However, the quality remained the same in the agency, says the Chief Creative Officer at Leo Burnett: "The brainstorming meetings, the presentations, everything moved to Zoom. But the most important thing was that the good ideas didn't stop coming. The work environment has changed, but the quality of work has remained at the same level, without losing anything" (Săndulescu, 2020c).

The Managing Director of FCB Bucharest describes that a reorganization of the activity and complicated decisions were needed: "We re-profiled some people, we gave up some collaborators. There were many decisions to make this year, and they were quite complicated. I cut many expenses. We somehow tried to become agile so that we could adapt" (Guțu, 2020c). For the Managing Director of Saatchi & Saatchi + The Geeks, the change was to adapt the procedures and principles, which have remained the same, to the online environment: "We've become very digital at the moment, so everything happens 99% online. To top it off, I gained some efficiency and lost some things. I lost a bit of the social side, of friendship, that more fun part of the advertising world" (Guțu, 2020d).

For the CEO of Lowe Group, the main objective was to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic on employees: "by an active concern for well-being and creating conditions in which they feel supported, connected with each other and motivated to perform. We made sure that we were in constant communication with our teams so that we were aware of their needs, concerns, and expectations" (Barbu, 2021b).

How has the relationship with customers changed during this period?

According to Tonica Group's director of marketing and communications, the agency's challenge was to convince clients that speeding up communication at critical moments is beneficial; 2020 was a year "in which the solidity of the agency-client relationship was tested, because there were financial problems, I mean everyone, there were situations with partners and suppliers. It was very important to be close to the customers so they don't stop campaigns or communicating. Where there is a problem, there is also an opportunity (...). You must always be present in the minds of consumers" (Forbes Romania, 2021).

The Managing Director of FCB Bucharest believes that the agency has improved its relationship with clients during this period: "The adaptation to the context, the fact that all things were new and the briefs had to be approached using more communication strategy than before, strengthens the new position of advertisers towards brands and companies" (Guțu, 2020f).

CEO Stefanini Infnit divides the advertising agency's clients into three categories: "There are clients who communicated as if nothing had happened. On the other hand, their competitors rethink their work and adapted their messages, focussing on making everything safe for consumers. And the third category is those who effectively remained 100% silent" (Guțu, 2020e). The agency's role in this situation was to understand the companies and help them move forward. "Speed doesn't matter anymore. It's important to move, not to stop." (Guțu, 2020e). He concludes with a plastic expression: "Voices that communicate in a crisis are heard ten times more than those that remain silent" (Guțu, 2020e), referring to the clients of the advertising agency. The same idea is supported by the Lowe Group CEO, who believes that "brands that will communicate in the short term, but also in the long term, will have a faster recovery from this crisis. We must look at customers as partners in this crisis" (Guțu, 2020f).

Different from the others, the Client Service Director and Head of Brand Activation, RED Agency believes that the change consists of how to meet clients with new means: "The needs are the same, but without innovation in our industry, without adapting to the changes around us, to the way these changes are reflected in the new generations of people working in marketing and advertising, to the dynamics and complexity of communication channels, but especially in the way we understand those with whom we communicate, we will fail to anticipate our customers' needs" (Iqads, 2022a).

The Chief Strategy Officer of Publicis agrees: "The clients' need for consulting and maturity has been felt since the first days of the lockdown." Understanding the needs of each individual client in the context of the rapid changes taking place, they found new approaches and ideas together with them: "We wanted the effect of our solutions to the business problems generated by the crisis to be doubled by concrete actions and not it just be reduced to a strong campaign" (Oprea, 2022a).

In the same sense, Minio Studio's CEO prioritizes understanding the clients' goals: "We try to understand how the clients are impacted and affected by the crisis. In the end, the development of your company depends a lot on you; that is, you look at the context, you take the context into account, but the plans and decisions are still in line with your goals, where you want to go" (Barbu, 2022c). Client Service Director of Saatchi & Saatchi + The Geeks believes that during this period, it has been reconfirmed that partnership based on mutual trust with any client and a shared mission to contribute to the best result is as important as strategy or creation: "Without a concrete plan, the risk is to lose that magic in the process" (Oprea, 2022b).

The founders of the Ideologiq agency believe that transparency is the secret that transforms the client-agency relationship into a partner-partner one in crises (Placintaru, 2022). They had to fight with the fear of clients to communicate in this context: "What was shocking was that people and companies did not understand from the beginning that in difficult situations, at the national and global level, a greater involvement is needed, from everyone, and that crisis situations can present themselves as opportunities to do good, to contribute, to grow" (Placintaru, 2022).

Strategy Director and Managing Partner of Handsome Advertising states that the most important thing for this agency is to keep clients: "We thought less about the

profitability of the agency and more about keeping clients' businesses. We doubled the effort, reduced the hours of sleep, but billed less" (Ardelean, 2021).

Changes produced at the level of the Customer Service department with the pandemic and post-pandemic

The Client Business Management department at Publicis has strengthened during this period, says the Client Service Director: "We even plan to complement the structure with several new positions to reflect the continued expansion of the client portfolio. On the one hand, we have kept and will continue to keep the agency's team structure intact. On the other hand, we are constantly improving our internal capabilities and ability to flexibly and real-time allocation of resources to reflect real-time changes in our customers' needs" (Oprea, 2022c). Similarly, Client Service Director of Saatchi & Saatchi + The Geeks explains: "The pandemic period has been prolific for us - we have brought in new clients who have joined even in the most uncertain times and with whom we have been able to build partnerships very strong. We've been close to them through all the changes, and we think that's been a catalyst for every relationship" (Oprea, 2022b).

The representative of Cohn&Jansen's Customer Service department describes this department's recent changes: "The customer service department has turned into a department of all departments." For those from the Client Service department of Cohn & Jansen, the activity is based, as always, on "understanding, partnership, innovation, intuition, solutions adapted to each individual situation." But there are also changes: "I think the focus is now on integration and building, rather than the wow of a certain campaign. I believe that both clients and agencies are looking for stable partnerships and creative solutions anchored in people's needs. Also, it becomes increasingly challenging to find solutions that meet the need for communication and solve a problem" (Oprea, 2022d).

Digital & Data Account Director at Saatchi & Saatchi + The Geeks says that with the pandemic, the share of digital services has increased and diversified: "We are also happy that, in addition to the usual formats of Facebook and Instagram, initiatives on less used media are also making their way, and that we go a long way with creative proposals using new technologies, and customers are much more receptive now to this approach" (Oprea, 2022b). Wopa also moved towards digital and technology; during the pandemic, the mobilization was excellent, and solutions were found for all departments, says the Senior Account Manager: "We witnessed a boom in terms of video content, social platforms, but also technology, which I think offered more courage maybe to the customers, too. After a while, the need to create a real connection with the people in the team, whom you may have known only virtually, returned" (Matei, 2022).

What do advertising professionals think about the post-pandemic advertising industry?

The opportunities created by the pandemic are underlined by the CEO of Cheil Centrade: "Advertising has always been about the empathy that brands have towards the consumer, and the pandemic has turned empathetic thinking towards the public into a necessity." The change in how the pandemic approaches campaigns has its downsides. However, it also created new opportunities where there were none before:

"And who came up with the most ingenious solutions had to win the attention of the public eager to escape from reality on which we live" (Plăcintaru, 2021).

CEO Ogilvy is concerned about the adaptation of the business to the general context determined by "the pandemic, and the war influenced the consumption habits of the population, the new configuration of the labor market, maintaining strong organizational culture under the conditions of a hybrid way of working, etc.", but also for the agency, because "the communication industry is a faithful mirror of society and very clearly reflects most of its actions, both from a social and economic point of view." Therefore, she believes that the duty of a modern agency is to "build real change for businesses, society, and the planet, creating impact and acting at the intersection of creativity and technology" (Barbu, 2022a).

Lowe Group CEO anticipates a more conservative attitude among many advertising agency clients. But such periods create the premises for innovations that can capitalize on such a moment: "After the *new normal* generated by the pandemic, we can see the establishment of a new new normal, with a state of geopolitical uncertainty, in addition to which there can be confidence in the economy and the future of business, trust that comes with investments and growth" (Barbu, 2022b).

The Managing Partner of The Mansion Advertising explains about the creative industry in Romania: "It is in a period of stabilization after several more difficult years, but there is an increase in investments and an improvement in the quality of products and services." Agencies must find creative and innovative solutions for clients and "create campaigns that connect emotionally with target audiences in a still uncertain economic environment" (Varga, 2023a).

For the Managing Partner at Activ Ad, the current trend is "a kind of return to the nature of advertising and brands. Starting from 2023, there will be a return to brand-building activities in terms of marketing and advertising". He believes that AI must be "programmed to deliver precisely from the creative content generated for decades by humans (planners, strategists, copywriters, content creators, artists, graphic designers, directors, operators, etc.)" (Varga, 2023b).

How has the relationship between clients and advertising agencies evolved during the pandemic and post-pandemic, from the clients' point of view?

In the beginning, the lack of predictability slowed down the initiatives, but the "on the spot" adaptation to the new context accelerated the dynamics, reports the Growth Head of Consumer Healthcare at Sanofi Romania: "The pandemic determined the reinvention of the relationship strategy between companies and agencies; causing the latter to develop new skills to increase the speed of reaction to customer needs" (Barbu, 2022f).

Telekom Romania Mobile Brand and Communication Director discovered the power of adaptation and reinvention of agencies and companies and regarding the agency-client relationship: "Client-agency teams based on respect, unity, and common effort do not need to be physically together or to they spend whole days in meetings and workshops, to deliver well, on time, and perform" (Barbu, 2022g). The vice president of marketing, e-commerce, and communication at Mega Image has a similar opinion: "The agencies

immediately folded and offered a lot of support in the digital area; they became extremely brave and daring. I feel like it was a change for the better. And here I am speaking mainly through the lens of the agencies we collaborate with" (Barbu, 2022h).

The rapid adaptation to the new conditions in the agencies supported the brand, reports the Head of Marketing at Henkel Laundry & Home Care: "The agencies we collaborate with have been able to adapt to the new conditions and have supported us in the implementation of our projects with new ideas, adapted to current needs of consumers. Both media, creative, and digital agencies have shown increased flexibility and adaptability, which has helped us to react appropriately to market changes" (Barbu, 2022d). The Chief Marketing Officer at Orange Romania also appreciates the experience with media and advertising agencies during this period of challenges: "We appreciated their ability to quickly adapt to the new context and the requirements from us, in which we focused more on digital communication" (Barbu, 2022m).

The Chief Digital Marketing Officer at L'Oréal Romania appreciates the support offered by the agencies: "The agencies, whether media, advertising, digital, etc., were even closer to us than before" (Barbu, 2022k). The Marketing Director at ADPharma - Dr.Max Group agrees: "During this period, creative agencies focused more on understanding the business model that the client has, thus offering services not just advertising, but even business consulting services" (Barbu, 2022i).

After a short period of interrupted communication, the marketing director at Regina Maria noticed "how much the flexibility of the agencies has evolved. The pandemic was a mentor that gave us a more dynamic digital environment, content developed more carefully and in a more vigilant way, but also a reinvention of the event industry and brand activations" (Barbu, 2022e). The main adaptation of brands and agencies to the period we are referring to was flexibility, claims the Head of Marketing and Digital Management, Henkel Beauty Care: "I think that both we, Henkel, exponent of the big companies, and the agencies have become in the last two years closer, warmer and authentic in relation to consumers" (Barbu, 2022n).

"The unstable context and uncertainty have a direct impact, both in business and in communication, and only a close relationship between the marketing department and partner agencies can ensure solutions in real-time," says the marketing director at Premier Restaurants Romania. Marketing departments and agencies have learned "that business needs and communication are very strongly linked" and "that the effort behind campaigns must respond to concrete business needs" (Barbu, 2022j). Head of Corporate Communication at Engie Romania tells how a campaign was carried out during the pandemic and how the dynamics of relations between the company and the Cheil | Centrade agency are changing: "The Energy Creators Platform was planned to be filmed in the spring of this year, based on another set of scenarios. Meanwhile, the context changed, and we needed to focus on other priorities, such as helping hospitals and those on the front line in the fight against the pandemic" (Săndulescu, 2020d).

The Marketing Director at Coca-Cola Romania concludes that the experience of the pandemic has matured clients and agencies: "The entire arsenal of experiences we were exposed to - from rethinking messages and campaigns to extraordinary mobilization in times of crisis to adapting to work from home and the acceleration of

digitization have brought us all to a more complex context from which we emerge stronger, more attentive to what really matters and more empathetic" (Barbu, 20221).

Conclusions of the content analysis

With the outbreak of the pandemic and the establishment of a state of emergency, the first measure taken by advertising agencies in Romania was to switch to online work, aiming at the employees' safety. The research reveals that agencies have adapted very easily to working from home, as employees are accustomed to digital. It was also necessary to rethink all projects to adjust to this work style. The plans were rethought in very short terms and adapted "on the spot" to changes in the sanitary situation. Few projects were canceled, most were delivered on time, and some were modified for the digital environment. New campaigns have also emerged, most expressing empathy and solidarity. Although the crisis was severe, with agencies feeling tremendous financial pressure, many clients understood that promoting brands during this period ensured survival, and agencies promoted clients' interests to be visible in the new context. Thus, based on mutual trust, stable and sustainable relations between clients and agencies have been created. Post-pandemic, the advertising industry continued to develop, emphasizing the digital environment and being the link between clients and consumers. According to experienced advertisers, success will continue to be ensured by combining creativity with solid business strategy. From the client's point of view, agencies have seen flexibility, adaptability, and the ability to find quick solutions in the new context, guiding brands and generating closer and more mature relationships with their audiences.

Regarding the general objective of this content analysis, the research showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused important and rapid changes in the work of advertising agencies. However, they have adapted quickly, and it can be said that, in addition to the sanitary effects and economic negatives, the pandemic also had relative positive effects, namely accelerating the evolution towards digital, to put relationships with clients and consumers on new foundations. We believe that the results of this analysis confirm the theoretical aspects presented in the first part of the paper, namely that advertising agencies are knowledge-based organizations with a great capacity to adapt to economic and social changes. The major importance of the customer service department, both for the customer and for the agency, was highlighted in the crisis.

Customer Service departments in advertising agencies, between pandemic and post-pandemic: a qualitative research

Research methodology

This research aims to identify how the pandemic has influenced the activity of advertising agencies, especially the Client Service departments, and its potential changes post-pandemic. The specific objectives of this research are: to identify changes in the structures of advertising agencies during the pandemic and post-pandemic trends; the changes that occurred in the structure and activity of the Customer Service departments from the beginning of the pandemic until today, and what are the current trends; changes that occurred during the pandemic in customer relations and how they evolve post-pandemic; the evolution of team relations in advertising agencies during the pandemic and post-pandemic.

The research methodology is qualitative and is based on a semi-structured interview with professionals holding both management and executive positions in the Client Service departments during the pandemic and until now. Four people answered from A1's Customer Service department, and three people answered from A2's Customer Service department. A1 is a large agency, and A2 is a small advertising agency from Romania. As a complementary batch, the interview guide was also sent to people with management positions in Romanian advertising agencies; we received six responses from them. Interviews were collected between March and May 2023.

Data analysis and interpretation

Evolution of agency structure since the beginning of the pandemic and the post-pandemic trend

Regarding the evolution of the agency structure since the beginning of the pandemic and the post-pandemic trend, most respondents in Client service indicated that there have been changes at the level of projects or employees. A few specified that there were no changes at the level of the structure. However, they also mention the reduction of the number of projects, employees, and the volume of work: "During the pandemic, the volume of work decreased drastically, but we recovered later, with the completion of the pandemic" (A. M., Account Manager, A2). Regarding the post-pandemic trend, opinions are very different, but they all mention the transfer to the online. M. C., Account Director within the A2 agency, reveals that a post-pandemic trend has not been established: "At the moment, directions are still being drawn, mechanisms are being tested. We have noticed the flow of customers/consumers who went online during the pandemic and stayed there. This niche will continue to be used for communications". A. M., Account Manager at A2, mentions that after the pandemic, the team grew "being a big workload," and the activity in the agency "recovered 100%" and is going better and better. People from Client Service A1 mention a much stronger balance between professional and personal life and greater freedom to change jobs.

Respondents in the group with management positions in agencies mainly indicate that the structure has not changed, but there have been significant changes in the way of working. Communication actions have shifted a lot from BTL to the online environment. Only one agency, A6, decreased from a team of 8 people to 7. The trends are toward digitalization, "this component existed before, but now it is developing more" (L. B., Account Director, A8), towards hybrid work, "they manage to pay more attention to their costs and security" (D. M., Managing Partner, A7) and to integration "integration, freelancing and AI disruption" (AI Executive Director, digital agency, A4).

Both groups of respondents show that, in general, in agencies, the structure has not changed. However, there have been rapid and drastic changes in the way of working, some of which are still being maintained today: digitization, hybrid work, and moving the activity online.

Changes to the structure and activity of the Client Service department since the beginning of the pandemic

In Client Service, there were no changes in structure during the pandemic, according to all respondents from these departments of agencies A1 and A2, but they all introduced

the hybrid work system. M. B., Integration Director at agency A1, found they are more efficient from home because they concentrate better. But working from home, the workload is greater. A. M., Account Manager within the same agency, emphasizes the reorientation towards ATL.

The same opinion is also held by the persons with management positions in the agencies. L. B., Account Director at A8, states that "the internal structure of the agency has not changed in any way. Apart from the three months of lockdown, the flow worked as it did before the pandemic", and D. M., Managing Partner at A7, says: "for us, being a mix between online and offline, we were able to fully switch to online campaigns (including events online, such as online press conferences or live meetings, live demos, etc.)."

Post-pandemic changes in Customer Service departments

An overwhelming majority of the members of the departments of the two agencies interviewed and the people with management positions believe that the Client Service departments will not undergo any more changes but that some of those that appeared during the pandemic have been maintained. Only M.C., Account Director at the A2 agency, believes that changes are possible "given that we are still calibrating to the new reality," and A.I., Executive Director at A4, says that more changes are possible and he cannot express a concrete opinion on this matter.

Pandemic and post-pandemic evolution of agency-client relationships and current trends

Most respondents in Client Service believe that customer relations have been maintained during and after the pandemic. D. A., Client Service Director at the A2 agency, answered differently, considering that relations are closer with clients because "the traditional face-to-face meeting has moved online." Easier access through the online environment leads to a "higher frequency of dialogue" with them and creates a tendency to "keep a closer bond." Two people from agency A1, L.H., Business Director, and B.M., Account Manager, believe that relations with clients have evolved positively and that currently, the relationship is closer; they have more interaction with clients than in the past. M. B., Integration Director at agency A1, believes that "the effect is relative," as some customer relationships have deteriorated and others have improved. Nowadays, "customers also work a lot from home; they also want work-life balance."

Advertisers with management positions responded in the same sense that customer relations have been maintained and the trend is for improvement. They are "combined with offline interaction when really necessary" (D. M., Managing Partner, A7) or "are even exclusively online" (A. Z., General Manager, A6). A. I., Executive Director of A4, believes that the relationship with customers is closer, based on "more demand, innovation, creativity, traceability." L. B., Account Director at A8, specifies the strategy by which they preserved the relationships, "that of keeping the human component as much as possible and the discussions as close as possible so that there is no gap in communication."

How team relations have evolved in the pandemic and what is the current trend

In the Client Service department of the A1 agency, all respondents felt the lack of physical interactions: "It was more difficult to form more lasting bonds and connections," says M. G., Senior Account Manager. L. H., the Business Director, shows that "many employees focused on their families and distanced themselves from co-workers." The tendency is to re-get closer, to know, and deepen relationships. Only one person believes that although they see each other as often as possible, they are "slightly more reluctant to have more personal relationships" (M. B., Integration Director at agency A1).

At the A2 agency, things happened differently: although I feel the need to interact more physically, the pandemic period brought people together and made them talk more with each other, thus forming a family: "Although we all worked remotely, not we were together before in the same headquarters, there was a period when we got closer, we communicated more in the agency group. I was sending many messages of a personal nature with the situations encountered then," says M. C., Account Director. This family has maintained itself post-pandemic and is trying to do as many things as possible together, this time with more face-to-face communication.

Generally, the managers are all of the opinion that during the pandemic, it was extremely difficult to socialize due to the lack of physical interaction. After the quarantine period, the approaches were different. LB, Account Director, says that at A8, the team continued "the same natural flow," working in a physical format with a full-time presence in the office immediately after the pandemic period ended. At A7, "during the pandemic, there were employees who came to the office every day because that's what they wanted, and they were able to be much more efficient. Everyone has the right to work in the way they want. However, it's important that the team is united and efficient", says D. M., Managing Partner. Representatives A3, A4, A5, and A6 believe that team relations have deteriorated a little in the pandemic. At A3, "the team stayed in positions, even if we see each other much less often. We keep the team and communicate online very closely" (A. D., Associate Partner), at A5 currently, team relations are good (T. A., General Manager). At A4 and A6, efforts are still being made to restore team relations to the level before the pandemic.

The conclusions of the interview research

Referring to the identification of changes in the structures of advertising agencies during the pandemic and post-pandemic trends, the results highlighted that in both agencies there were changes in the structure at the level of projects or employees. Only two of the respondents indicated that there had been no changes within the agency. According to the interviewed Client Service employees, the post-pandemic trends relate to the number of employees, work-life balance, flexibility to change jobs, working from home, and budgets. Only one person at the small agency A2 stated that a post-pandemic trend has not yet been charted for their agency. Respondents with management positions state that, in general, the structure has not changed in their agencies. However, there have been rapid and drastic changes in the way of working, some of which are maintained even now: digitization, hybrid work, and moving the activity online. Although they agree that there have been significant changes, Client

Service employees identify them in structure, while advertising managers place them at the business organization level.

Concerning the changes in the structure and activity of the Client Service departments from the beginning of the pandemic until today and the current trends, we can say that both interviewed categories unanimously agree that there have been no changes in the structure of the Client Service departments in the agencies they belong to. Agencies do most of their business online, from home. Also, the A2 full-service agency had to move to ATL, even though it is a BTL agency. Regarding the current trends, the results show that most of those interviewed believe there will be no more changes in the structure and activity of the Client Service departments. One of the respondents from A1, a large agency, said that employee retention programs will be implemented; a person from A2, a small agency, believes that there will be changes because they are still adapting to the new reality, and the Executive Director of the A4 agency takes into account that further changes may occur.

Related to the changes that appeared during the pandemic in customer relations and how they evolve post-pandemic, the research results showed that relations with some customers deteriorated, and those that remained became better. Respondents in A2 say they interact more with their customers than before. Like Client Service, agency management roles have maintained and even improved these relationships. The trend is to keep a closer connection with customers, even if they now have a significant online component.

Regarding the evolution of team relations in advertising agencies during the pandemic and post-pandemic, the responses showed that the agencies' employees try to see each other as much as possible with the team and get closer to work colleagues. Most respondents, both from the CS and the management of the agencies, specified that during the pandemic, they felt the lack of face-to-face interactions but that they got closer to each other, being subjected to the same situation of uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Today, although physical interactions are less frequent compared to pre-pandemic, in most agencies, team relationships have been restored, both professionally and personally. The results show the trend towards forming increasingly better and long-lasting relationships. The situation in the small agency A2 is clearly detached, where during the pandemic, the team developed closer personal relationships determined by caring for each other.

Final considerations

With regard to the general objective of this research, namely to identify how the pandemic has influenced the activity of advertising agencies, especially the Client Service departments, and what will be its possible changes after the pandemic, the results showed that all agencies experienced changes, either at the employee or project level. Structure changes result from a continuous adaptation of entrepreneurial thinking in the organization and are inevitably followed by changes in team relations. The pandemic has forced agencies to adapt to the online way of working, change their thinking, and reconsider their relationships with clients and consumers to survive. It is positive that this rapid adaptation to the digital environment, which was bound to happen anyway, is a step forward in the evolution of the advertising industry.

There were no significant changes in the two studied Client Service departments, the only change being the introduction of working from home, which they still maintain today. During the pandemic, from the point of view of advertisers with leadership positions, clients behaved differently. However, those who continued communicating and understood their role and the agencies in the crisis made a common front to overcome the situation. Nowadays, members of Client Service teams try to reconnect by doing as many activities as possible, whether for professional activities or seeing each other in their free time.

The research results through content analysis are confirmed and complemented by the research results through interviews, showing that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused important changes in the activity of advertising agencies, but they have adapted quickly. It can be said that, in addition to the negative health and economic effects, the pandemic also had relative positive effects, namely accelerating the evolution towards digital to put relations with customers and consumers on a new basis. Advertising agencies had to adapt to the online work environment, find solutions to customer changes, and rethink strategies and campaigns. From the specialized media, the idea emerges that post-pandemic, the agencies' activity goes in the same direction, emphasizing new technology.

The limits of the research are given by the small number of responses received from people with management positions in advertising agencies and the fact that some people from the Client Service departments have not been working since the beginning of the pandemic, so they could not answer. Using the two different qualitative research techniques, content analysis and interview, similar results were obtained, confirming the idea of permanent adaptation of advertising agencies to the economic and social. In addition, the two investigations prove that, through their specific characteristics of cognitive-intensive organizations, advertising agencies present a flexibility of entrepreneurial thinking that makes them open to change.

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