

Arturo Gómez Quijano

Case Mamma Mia! Music, marketing and three women

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March, 2022

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Arturo Gómez Quijano

Born in Ferrol (La Coruña) in 1961, he has lived in Madrid since 1979.

Teacher, researcher, and entrepreneur in communication, with more than 38 years of professional experience in the media, agencies, companies and institutions. Founder and managing partner of the consultancy firm *zonawebste!*

He holds a PhD in journalism with a thesis on the history and business model of Spanish free daily newspapers. He holds a degree in Information Sciences from the Complutense University of Madrid and a PDD from IESE Business School.

He currently teaches undergraduate and postgraduate courses at ESIC Business & Marketing School, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, ICEX-CECO Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo, IESE Business School, and Universidad del Sagrado Corazón de Puerto Rico.

He has trained professionals in Spain and in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, the United States, Honduras, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. Author of the books *Comunicación para ejecutivos. Las tres distancias de la comunicación en las organizaciones* (2009); *La prensa más cara del mundo* (2016); *La prensa más barata del mundo* (2017); *Comunicación para ganar* (2019); *Manual urgente de periodismo en tiempos de redes sociales* (2019) and *Piensa, luego insiste* (2021).

His areas of interest are corporate communication, specialized journalism, and market research.

About.me: http://about.me/gomez_arturo

LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/arturogomezquijano>

Twitter: @ArturoGomezQuij (<https://twitter.com/ArturoGomezQuij>)

1. A professor dancing in New York

It was October 2009, on a cold autumn evening in New York. It was not in my plans to be dancing between the seats of an old theatre on Broadway. I had flown a few days earlier from Madrid, to do some commercial research on the participation of American wedding dress companies in trade fairs. Since I had some free time, when I finished interviewing designers at the Waldorf Astoria, I immersed myself in the skyscrapers of that city, soaking up the culture of the world's capital. I visited the MOMA and the Chrysler Building; I walked through Central Park and took the orange ferry to Staten Island to see the city through the eyes of an immigrant on the way back; I crossed the first bridge to Brooklyn, admired the design of the Guggenheim and prayed at St. Patrick's Church. I had foreseen all of this in my travel plans, except for dancing.

Those of us who teach market research say that when you are preparing for fieldwork, you cannot plan everything. You must leave space and be flexible, to take advantage of what may come up, of unforeseen opportunities: interviewing someone interesting, visiting a facility you didn't know about, or tracking down a "golden rabbit" that suddenly runs away. In Times Square, under those ingenious stairs that someone came up with to promote the city and its theatres (the best place to take a selfie on the NY urban stage), there was an office of the Broadway Theatre Development Foundation. Another genius thing to teach our marketing students, I thought as I bought a ticket for the musical *Mamma Mia!* with a 40% discount. *Oh my God!*

The Theater Development Fund¹ (TDF) sells tickets to same-day performances, at significant discount, of Broadway plays. TDF is a non-profit organization dedicated to bringing the power of the performing arts to the world. The theaters make their unsold capacity available to TDF until a day before the show. TDF sells that available inventory in person, for the same day, with a great discount, it makes theatrical and musical shows accessible to other audiences. You cannot always choose the play, the seat, or the time of the show, but you can see interesting works at lower prices. Everyone wins: the theater, filling its capacity; the actors, who have more enthusiastic audiences; the foundation, which generates

¹ <https://www.tdf.org> (last consultation August 9, 2021).

funds for its purposes; the public, who has access to shows they cannot afford. After all, a play is an occupation business, with high fixed costs. This promotion helps to cover them. Under the most famous staircase in New York, I bought a ticket to the musical that everyone was talking about and that I had not thought to go to. The TDF fulfilling its mission. *Great!*

As I danced between the old seats in the Winter Garden Theater,² tears came to my eyes. “What the h*ll was doing there, dancing in New York, while in Madrid everything indicated that they were going to kick my son out of school? What was I celebrating? What did I do there?” This was just absurd.

During these two days my wife had been sending me several SMS with updates on the evolution of our crisis. It was a pity that WhatsApp³ had not yet become popular, the invention that the Ukrainian Jan Koum had launched in February of that same year 2009. I could have seen my wife’s face directly and see her reactions, dealing alone with that problem. When I entered the Winter Garden there were no more messages. My emotions were also going to be part of the show.

Suddenly, I saw myself crying and dancing in the theater, in the middle of those circumstances. “What did that music have to stop sitting in a theater, watching the play and crying my sorrows, and start dancing like crazy? What generated that explosion of enthusiasm, joy and excitement among people so different from so distant parts of the world where the show was held?” What made all those very different people watching the show do exactly the same and start dancing? What generated that explosion of enthusiasm, joy and excitement?

My soul as a journalist, as a communicator, as a researcher, as a writer, as a teacher, became restless. “Where did Mamma Mia’s success come from!?” If I found out I would have another story to tell my friends and students. To learn about business and entrepreneurs; journalism and communication; research and marketing; in short, a story of women and men (in that order) who, with their ideas, decisions and actions, changed the world.

I was left wondering if my son had been kicked out of school. Maybe there was nothing more to say. Maybe the connection was lost, or the time difference made it more difficult. Maybe my wife collapsed exhausted by the tension and fell asleep. I don’t know. I only know that there I was, in a century-old theater in New York, dancing ‘Dancing Queen’ between the seats. Paraphrasing the lyrics of the song that gave the musical its name, “How could I resist?”⁴

² The Winter Garden Theater is a grand theater, part of New York’s performing arts history since 1911. Ziegfeld’s famous “Follies” were performed there, a magic formula by publicist and theater producer Florenz Ziegfeld, based on an idea of his wife. These shows were inspired by those of the Folies Bergère cabaret in Paris and were very popular with the public in the first third of the 20th century, with a mixture of dances and choreography with humor and eroticism. Then the theater hosted other first-rate plays such as *West Side Story* (1957), *Funny Girl* (1964) that made Barbra Streisand a star, or *Cats* (1984), the second longest-running play in Broadway history. Interestingly, before being a theater, since 1896 the Winter Garden building was the American Horse Exchange, a lucrative business when Times Square –not yet called that– was the center of the horse and carriage trade. Then, in 1911, the building was transformed into a theater, while a new business, that of the automobile, put an end to the old business of transport using animals. <https://shubert.nyc/theatres/winter-garden/> (last consultation August 9, 2021).

³ <https://www.whatsapp.com> (last consultation August 9, 2021).

⁴ “How Can I Resist You?”

2. Background: ABBA

A single word to explain success: ABBA

After twelve years, I still remember it perfectly. In the middle of Mamma Mia! show on Broadway I started writing on my smartphone like crazy.

*“This musical is a great idea. How could anyone come up with such a product with something that already existed,” I wrote at the time in my Notes. “The songs already existed: they had been there for 30 years! They had been a hit, yes. But how many things have been a hit and once they have died, nothing more could be done with them? How many generations pay to dance to the songs of the previous generation? There has to be something else. Mamma Mia! is a musical that has been performed on five continents and is still filling theatres all over the world today. Then, based on it, a film was made (2008) that has also filled the cinemas, has been a **blockbuster**⁵ in half the world, and continues to sell like hot cakes on DVD, with an album sung by the actors of the film, who were singing for the first time! In short, a complete and utter success based on the idea of telling a story spun with some of those hit songs”. Those notes written on my old iPhone 3G have been automatically synchronized over the past twelve years on the various smartphones I’ve owned. When I reread them, one word always comes to mind to explain it: **ABBA**.*

Since that fall of 2009 in New York, I have been thinking about the idea of writing a case of Mamma Mia! to share with my students the learnings, successes, and failures of this business. As a teacher who teaches journalism, communications, and market research, I explain that one of the advantages we have now is all the information that is available through the web. We can go directly to the original sources from which the information comes. Always bearing in mind that “every source has an interest”, and that we have to understand that this bias is key when analyzing the information. It was clear that writing a case about Mamma Mia! required starting with ABBA. To do so, nothing better than to know what ABBA says about ABBA, on the group’s official webpages.

Mythology

As my communication students know well, myth is essential. It has been a key element of any story since the beginning of mankind. Storytelling is about strong, clear, seamless characters. A few very marked traits, I always repeat, is the key to effectively reach audiences, especially when it is done through mass media. What we have read on the ABBA website is the myth of ABBA. The reality is much richer, more complex and contradictory; but it does not communicate well. But in a business case, it is different. We need to understand the failures, all about the failures, why things didn’t work. There is a lot of learning in that. We need to know the supporters, the people who surround those who go on stage. Whenever you investigate a success, names start to appear, lots of names. There are many protagonists of a success, but most of the time we only see the tip of the iceberg,

⁵ “Best seller, box office hit” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es7dictionary/ingles-español/blockbuster> (last consultation August 10, 2021).

the public and visible face of the business. The reality is always choral, projects are teams, successes are shared. Four people cannot conquer the world. There are always people, many, many, many, many professionals, behind the scenes, who contribute their knowledge, experience, and relationships, to turn something good into something simply exceptional.

The fifth Beatle⁶

At the beginning, ABBA was three. When someone starts reading Mamma Mia! credits, in addition to Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, a third name comes across: Stig Anderson («and some songs with Stig Anderson»). Of course, “some songs” may seem that there are not many and that they are not important. For example: ‘Dancing Queen’, ‘Mamma Mia!’, ‘Fernando’, ‘S.O.S.’, ‘Knowing Me, Knowing You’, ‘The Name of the Game’, and “some other songs” such as ‘Waterloo’. In addition to being a successful songwriter, Stig Anderson was the producer, manager, and ABBA’s brain. Anderson not only funded Polar Music⁷ Recording Studio, but he made a fortune buying the rights to foreign songs and translating them into Swedish. He wrote thousands of song lyrics. In addition to dominating the business of the music industry, he was a seasoned publicist. His was the idea of calling them ABBA instead of Björn & Benny, Agnetha & Anni-Frid. It was an acronym⁸ with the initials of their names. He was also the one who suggested more commercial titles for the songs or where to include the song title. At first, Björn & Benny weren’t comfortable writing the lyrics. Normally, Stig wrote them very easily, Björn corrected some texts in English and Benny focused more on music. It was in 1977 that Stig stopped writing songs for the group. The business was so big that it required his complete focus on it. By then, Björn & Benny had understood how the business worked and how to build a hit. Stig, in 1966 had seen the potential of the Björn & Benny Company and was able to promote ABBA to become a global success, beyond the Swedish borders. As John Rockwell would acknowledge years later in *The New York Times*, “the group made its way internationally, with the help of intelligent planning by the band’s ‘fifth member’ and frequent co-lyricist, Stig Anderson, after winning the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest in Brighton, England”.⁹ A very good and short definition of Stig’s contribution.

⁶ “The fifth Beatle” is an expression used by the music press that originally referred to those who at some point were part of that band, or had a very special relationship. For example, Pete Best who was the original drummer for The Beatles. Or producer George Martin, or manager Brian Epstein. By extension it is used to refer to a member in the shadow of a musical group, with great influence on their work and successes.

⁷ These recording studios later shared 50% with Björn & Benny, in the days of ABBA, until the break with Stig in 1990 for breach of contract, in which they sold their shares.

⁸ ABBA was the name of a Swedish manufacturer of very popular canned fish. He agreed to share with the group the brand name. The ABBA logo with the first inverted B was created by chance. At the photoshoot in Hamburg in February 1976, Benny fiddled with his corporeal letter B and inadvertently turned it upside down. The official logo was designed by Rune Söderqvist that same year. Rune was the group’s cover designer. “MAMMA MIA! How Can I Resist You? The Inside Story of Mamma Mia! and ABBA songs”, 2008. ANDERSSON, B.; ULVAEUS, B., & CRAYMER, J.: *Phoenix Illustrated*, London, p. 41 (last consultation August 10, 2021).

⁹ http://www.abbaomnibus.net/years/articles/nyt_05031978.htm (last consultation August 11, 2021).