



Effectiveness of content marketing in the perception and promotion of health services in a rural context of Ecuador

Efectividad del marketing de contenidos en la percepción y promoción de servicios de salud en un contexto rural de Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to analyze the effectiveness of content marketing in the perception and promotion of health services at the Type C Health Center in the La Maná canton, Ecuador, during 2023. A mixed-methods approach was employed, using a non-experimental design with a descriptive-analytical scope. Data collection included surveys administered to 368 users and a semi-structured interview with the center's director. The results showed that 65% of users perceived coherence between institutional advertising and the care received, while 78% expressed confidence in the promotional information about medical staff. Additionally, 76% positively evaluated the professional image conveyed by promotional materials, and 68% recognized the health center's participation in community projects. However, between 22% and 35% of respondents reported unfavorable perceptions, mainly associated with the lack of strategic planning and the limited use of digital media. It is concluded that content marketing significantly influences the perception and promotion of health services; however, its effectiveness could be strengthened through planned digital strategies adapted to rural contexts.

Keywords: analysis; marketing strategies; content marketing; health services

RESUMEN

El objetivo del estudio fue analizar la efectividad del marketing de contenidos en la percepción y promoción de los servicios de salud del Centro de Salud Tipo C del cantón La Maná, Ecuador, durante el año 2023. Se utilizó un enfoque metodológico mixto, con diseño no experimental y alcance descriptivo-analítico. La recolección de datos incluyó encuestas aplicadas a 368 usuarios y una entrevista semiestructurada al director del establecimiento. Los resultados mostraron que el 65 % de los usuarios percibió coherencia entre la publicidad institucional y la atención recibida, mientras que el 78 % expresó confianza en la información promocional sobre el personal médico. Asimismo, el 76 % valoró positivamente la imagen profesional de los materiales promocionales y el 68 % reconoció la participación del centro de salud en proyectos comunitarios. Sin embargo, entre el 22 % y 35 % manifestó percepciones desfavorables, asociadas a la falta de planificación estratégica y al uso limitado de medios digitales. Se concluye que el marketing de contenidos influye de manera significativa en la percepción de los servicios de salud, aunque requiere fortalecerse mediante estrategias digitales planificadas y adaptadas al contexto rural.

Palabras clave: análisis; estrategias de marketing; marketing de contenido; servicios de salud



1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, healthcare systems have undergone significant transformations driven by the rapid advancement of information technologies, increasing public demands, and the need to strengthen interaction mechanisms between healthcare institutions and service users (Mauro et al., 2024). These changes have compelled health centers to rethink their management, care delivery, and communication processes in order to improve perceptions of service quality and accessibility (Aldoghiher & Halim, 2025). In this context, strategic communication has become a fundamental element for ensuring more transparent, participatory, and effective relationships (Afridi et al., 2023). Effective communication management not only enables institutions to provide information but also helps build trust, legitimize institutional actions, and promote the timely use of health services, particularly in areas affected by structural constraints (Rauner & Stummer, 2025).

Within this framework, content marketing has emerged as a key tool for healthcare organizations, as it facilitates the creation and dissemination of clear, educational, and relevant information for the public (Popa et al., 2022). Unlike traditional promotional strategies, which focus primarily on the dissemination of one-way messages, content marketing prioritizes the generation of informational value tailored to users' actual needs. This approach helps strengthen the relationship between institutions and communities by fostering closer and more sustained communication over time (Silalahi & Guna, 2024). It also provides guidance to the public on preventive health, self-care, and the appropriate use of services, which is particularly relevant in contexts where access to reliable information is limited.

Health marketing, understood as an interdisciplinary field, integrates principles of social marketing with public health approaches, enabling it to contribute both to the promotion of services and to collective well-being (Liao, 2020). In Latin American countries such as Ecuador, where territorial, socioeconomic, and digital disparities persist, health communication faces additional challenges related to connectivity, digital literacy, and cultural diversity. In this setting, it is essential to design communication strategies that respond to the characteristics of rural environments while considering the population's information consumption habits and the resources available within institutions (Andrango Granda, 2025; Reeves-Huapaya et al., 2025). Inadequate communication management can exacerbate misinformation and weaken trust in the healthcare system (Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024).

In La Maná canton, the Type C Health Center plays a strategic role in providing primary and specialized healthcare services to a predominantly rural population. Nevertheless, despite having qualified staff and a diverse range of services, the institution has limited visibility. This situation is mainly associated with the predominant use of traditional communication channels and the limited planning of digital strategies aimed at promoting content relevant to the community. Consequently, a gap emerges between the institutional message being communicated and users' actual experiences, affecting perceptions of quality, trust, and closeness to the health center.

Although previous studies have examined content marketing in business sectors and urban settings (Shaheen, 2025), empirical research evaluating its effectiveness in public healthcare institutions located in rural areas remains scarce. This limited body of scientific evidence hinders the development of evidence-based communication strategies tailored to specific territorial realities. Moreover, most studies focus on commercial indicators, overlooking variables related to user perceptions, institutional trust, and the promotion of health services. This knowledge gap is particularly relevant in contexts where communication may directly influence access to and use of healthcare services.

Against this background, the present study aims to analyze the effectiveness of content marketing in the perception and promotion of health services at the Type C Health Center in La Maná canton, Ecuador, during 2023. The study seeks to generate empirical evidence that contributes to strengthening institutional

communication management, improving the relationship between the health center and its user community, and guiding decision-making in strategic communication. Furthermore, the findings are intended to serve as a reference for future research and for the design of health communication policies applicable to similar rural contexts.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

The study was conducted in La Maná canton, Cotopaxi Province, Ecuador, during 2023, with the Type C Health Center serving as the unit of analysis. This public institution provides primary and specialized healthcare services to a predominantly rural population. The canton exhibits characteristics of a rural setting undergoing digital transition, where traditional communication media coexist with gradually increasing access to digital platforms. This context made it possible to analyze the effectiveness of content marketing while considering the territorial, cultural, and technological characteristics of the user population. The study area was selected due to the relevance of the health center as the main provider of healthcare services in the area and the need to strengthen its institutional communication.

Research approach and design

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under analysis. A non-experimental, cross-sectional design with a descriptive-analytical scope was used, as no variables were manipulated and data were collected within a single time period. This design made it possible to examine users' perceptions of institutional communication and compare them with the internal management of content marketing. The combination of approaches facilitated the analysis of both objective and subjective data, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings.

Population and sample

The study population consisted of users who attended the Type C Health Center in La Maná canton during the months of highest demand in 2023, with an approximate monthly average of 1,200 visits recorded. Based on this population, the sample size was determined using the finite population formula, considering a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, resulting in a sample of 368 users. Participants were selected through simple random sampling, ensuring population representativeness and an equal probability of participation in the study.

Data collection techniques and instruments

Quantitative data were collected using a survey administered through a structured questionnaire composed of items rated on a five-point Likert-type scale. The instrument was designed to measure users' perceptions of the quality of institutional communication, trust in promotional information, professional image, and the health center's community commitment. The questionnaire underwent content validation through expert judgment involving three specialists in communication and public health. The reliability of the instrument was also assessed through a pilot test, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82, which indicated adequate internal consistency.

Data collection procedure

The surveys were administered in person to health center users, ensuring voluntary participation and the confidentiality of the information provided. Prior to participation, the purpose of the study was explained to participants and informed consent was obtained. For the qualitative component, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the director of the Type C Health Center to explore in greater depth the content marketing strategies implemented, the communication channels used, and institutional

limitations. The interview was organized around previously defined thematic categories and was recorded for subsequent analysis.

Data analysis techniques

Quantitative data were processed and analyzed using SPSS statistical software. Descriptive statistics were applied, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. These analyses made it possible to identify general trends in users' perceptions of the effectiveness of content marketing. Qualitative data, in turn, were analyzed using content analysis, which enabled the identification of discourse patterns, similarities, and differences in institutional communication management. The findings from both approaches were integrated to provide a more comprehensive interpretation.

Ethical considerations and study validity

The study adhered to the ethical principles of confidentiality, anonymity, and responsible use of information, ensuring that the data collected were used exclusively for academic purposes. Methodological triangulation was also applied by integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings to strengthen the internal validity of the study. This strategy made it possible to compare users' perceptions with institutional information, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing the effectiveness of content marketing in the promotion of health services in a rural context such as La Maná canton.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and analyzes the results obtained from the surveys administered to 368 users of the Type C Health Center in La Maná canton, as well as the qualitative information derived from the interview with the institution's director. The data were organized into categories related to the effectiveness of content marketing strategies in promoting health services, considering perceptions of communication consistency, trust in information, institutional image, and community engagement.

3.1. Alignment between advertising and care received

The results show a predominantly positive perception regarding the alignment between institutional advertising and the care received by users. As shown in Table 1, 65% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, indicating that, for most users, the communication message is consistent with their actual service experience. However, 35% expressed varying levels of disagreement, revealing divergent perceptions within the user population. This suggests that, although content marketing strategies are generally well received, communication gaps remain that limit consistency in the perception of the institution.

Table 1. Alignment between advertising and care received

Variables	Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree	37	10%
Disagree	92	25%
Agree	165	45%
Strongly agree	74	20%
Total	368	100%

These findings are consistent with Barón Pulido et al. (2021), who indicate that the effectiveness of content marketing largely depends on the consistency between institutional discourse and user experience. In rural contexts, such consistency is essential for strengthening trust and promoting the continued use of health services (Benitez Pincay et al., 2022).

3.2. Trust in promotional information about medical staff

Regarding trust in promotional information about medical staff, the results reflect a positive assessment among users. According to Table 2, 78% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the information disseminated was reliable, indicating that communication content contributes to strengthening the credibility of healthcare personnel. However, 22% expressed disagreement, suggesting that a segment of users perceives shortcomings in the clarity, timeliness, or depth of the information provided.

Table 2. Trust in promotional information about medical staff

Variables	Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree	22	6%
Disagree	59	16%
Agree	184	50%
Strongly agree	103	28%
Total	368	100%

This finding is consistent with previous studies highlighting that information transparency and clear communication about medical staff strengthen institutional trust and perceptions of service quality (Carrasco Echeverría et al., 2022). Consequently, there is a need to reinforce informational content through more systematic and accessible strategies for the community.

3.3. Professional image conveyed through promotional materials

Regarding the professional image conveyed through promotional materials, the results show predominantly positive acceptance. According to Table 3, 76% of users rated this aspect positively, indicating that the content disseminated projects an appropriate image of the health center. However, 24% expressed unfavorable opinions, suggesting that promotional materials do not have a uniform impact across the entire user population.

Table 3. Professional image conveyed through promotional materials

Variables	Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree	26	7%
Disagree	62	17%
Agree	202	55%
Strongly agree	78	21%
Total	368	100%

From a theoretical perspective, Sánchez-Batallas et al. (2022) indicate that visual quality, the language used, and the cultural appropriateness of content are key factors in strengthening institutional perception. In this regard, the findings highlight the need to modernize communication formats and incorporate digital resources to improve the presentation and reach of institutional messages.

3.4. Participation in community projects and institutional commitment

Regarding perceptions of the health center's participation in community projects, the results indicate a moderately positive assessment. As shown in Table 4, 68% of users agreed or strongly agreed with the statement evaluated, while 32% expressed disagreement. These findings indicate that, although community engagement activities are being implemented, they are not perceived uniformly across the population.

Table 4. Participation in community projects

Variables	Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree	39	11%
Disagree	78	21%
Agree	170	46%
Strongly agree	81	22%
Total	368	100%

Similarly, Table 5 shows that the health center's commitment to community needs was positively assessed by 70% of users, although 30% maintained critical perceptions. This suggests that institutional actions are not always effectively communicated through content marketing, thereby limiting their impact on the development of a strong and community-oriented institutional image.

Table 5. Commitment to community needs

Variables	Number	Percentage (%)
Strongly disagree	30	8%
Disagree	81	22%
Agree	174	47%
Strongly agree	83	23%
Total	368	100%

Studies such as that of Chacha Chacha et al. (2023) emphasize that the continuous dissemination of community activities through clear communication strategies strengthens institutional legitimacy and promotes greater public participation. In the case analyzed, the limited systematization of content reduces the reach of these activities.

3.5. Qualitative findings on content marketing management

The findings obtained from the interview with the director of the Type C Health Center, summarized in Table 6, show that the institution uses various communication strategies, including social media, loudspeaker announcements, posters, and community visits. However, the absence of formal strategic planning and the limited availability of technological and financial resources for sustained campaigns were acknowledged. In addition, a low level of public interaction through digital media was identified, restricting the reach of content marketing.

Table 6. Interview findings on the effectiveness of content marketing in promoting health services in La Maná canton

Category	Main findings
Marketing strategies implemented	Social media, loudspeaker announcements, posters, and community visits are used. Progress in communication is acknowledged; however, systematization and strategic planning are still lacking (Carrasco Echeverría et al., 2022).
Public participation	The community responds more positively to clear and visual messages. A low level of interaction through digital media was identified (Adrianzén Guerrero et al., 2022).
Reach and effectiveness	Face-to-face campaigns have a greater impact than social media campaigns. Effectiveness depends on the type of message and the communication channel used (Sánchez-Batallas et al., 2022)
Available resources	Resources are limited. Although trained personnel are available, technological tools and funding for sustained campaigns are lacking (Bautista Fasabi & Delgado Bardales, 2020).
User perception	Trust in the services has improved, but greater consistency in the dissemination of information is needed to maintain public interest (Chacha Chacha et al., 2023).
Proposals for improvement	Implement more consistent digital campaigns, provide training in strategic communication, and strengthen partnerships with local institutions (Carrasco Echeverría et al., 2022).
Main challenges	Limited funding, insufficient digital culture in certain sectors, and weak integration between the communication area and medical services (Huerta Cruz, 2023).
Evaluación general de gestión Overall management assessment	The staff's efforts to innovate in promotional activities are acknowledged; however, a stronger content marketing strategy with a community-based approach is required (Canto Sáenz, 2021).

These qualitative findings complement the quantitative results, confirming that the effectiveness of content marketing is conditioned by organizational and structural factors. Silva et al. (2024) indicate that the lack of integration between institutional management and the communication area limits the potential of content marketing as a strategic tool in the public sector.

Discussion

The study findings indicate that the content marketing strategies implemented by the Type C Health Center in La Maná canton have had a limited but significant impact on users' perceptions of the quality and promotion of health services. Although most respondents reported positive assessments across the dimensions analyzed, gaps remain in communication planning, the limited use of digital media, and the insufficient systematization of content, which is consistent with the findings reported by Benitez Pincay et al. (2022).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings confirm that content marketing in healthcare should not be viewed solely as a promotional tool, but rather as a mechanism for building trust, educating the population, and strengthening the relationship between institutions and communities (Carrasco Echeverría et al., 2022). From a practical standpoint, the results highlight the need to professionalize communication management in rural health centers, strengthen staff digital competencies, and design content aligned with the actual expectations and needs of the user community.

The main limitations of the study include its restricted geographical scope, as it focused on a single institution, and its emphasis on perceptions without incorporating objective indicators of institutional performance. In addition, the rapidly changing nature of digital platforms may affect the continued relevance of some of the strategies analyzed. In this regard, future research should expand the scope to include other health centers and adopt longitudinal approaches to assess the impact of content marketing on indicators of satisfaction, service use, and institutional positioning, as suggested by Correa-Hidalgo & Vélez-Mendoza (2023).

CONCLUSIONS

The study findings indicate that content marketing significantly influences users' perceptions of the quality and promotion of health services at the Type C Health Center in La Maná canton. Most users reported positive assessments regarding the consistency between institutional communication and the care received, trust in promotional information, and the professional image conveyed, indicating that the current communication strategies generate a favorable, although still uneven, impact on public perceptions.

However, the analysis revealed structural limitations that restrict the effectiveness of content marketing, including the absence of systematic strategic planning, the predominant use of traditional media, and the limited integration of digital tools. These weaknesses create communication gaps that affect a considerable segment of users, particularly with regard to the visibility of community projects and the level of institutional commitment perceived by the population.

From an institutional perspective, content marketing should not be conceived solely as a dissemination mechanism, but rather as a strategic tool for strengthening trust, educating the population, and consolidating the relationship between the health center and its user community. The implementation of clear, consistent, and context-sensitive content, together with the strengthening of staff digital competencies, is essential for improving institutional perception and optimizing the promotion of health services in rural settings.

Finally, the study provides relevant empirical evidence on the application of content marketing in public healthcare institutions in rural contexts, an area that remains relatively underexplored in the scientific literature. Although the findings cannot be generalized to other settings due to the geographical limitations of the study, they provide a solid foundation for future comparative and longitudinal research assessing the impact of content marketing on indicators of satisfaction, service use, and institutional positioning.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the subject matter of this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization and investigation were carried out by García Rivera, A. F., who also contributed to supervision and writing the original draft of the manuscript. Data curation, project administration, and software development were the responsibility of Loor Chavarria, M. S. Formal analysis and visualization of the results were performed by Luna Mindiola, S. K. Methodology and validation were carried out by Pico Sánchez, R. D. Funding acquisition and the provision of resources were managed by García Rivera, R. R. Finally, review and editing of the manuscript were jointly performed by García Rivera, A. F., Loor Chavarria, M. S., Luna Mindiola, S. K., Pico Sánchez, R. D., and García Rivera, R. R.

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