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How to Improve the Media Image of Seafarers

ABSTRACT

In my Ph D thesis about the image of the Spanish Seafarers in the printed media, some of the most relevant conclusions were that little news on the Merchant Navy is published in Spanish newspapers, and when newspapers do it, most of it is bad news, and that the image given of the profession is negative.

After that research, I made a survey conducted among the Spanish merchant marine in 2014 on the perception that they have on their public image in the media. This survey intended to assess whether the image that the seafarers have of themselves corresponds to the image that is offered in the media about the professionals of the sea.

As a conclusion of that survey I found that the 55% of the Spanish seafarers think that the image of the profession in the media is neutral and a 38% of them think that is negative. Also, a majority of them, a 75%, think that seafarers are treated better abroad than in Spain.

With this paper, and keeping in mind those researches, I'll try to find a path about how to improve the image of the seafarers in the mass-media and which actions could be most useful for this goal, explaining the convenience of each one and how to implement them in Spain.

Among these possible actions we can highlight the following ones: preparation of a press advertising campaign to improve the image of the profession; training journalists reporting on topics of ships to do it better; edition of a publication for journalists on the world of ships and shipping; creation of an annual award of nautical journalism that rewards for the best report of the profession; and sending to the media, periodically, articles or reports on topics of Merchant Navy written by experts from the profession.

Keywords: Spanish, Seafarers, media, image.

Introduction

After finishing my Ph. D. thesis about the image of the Spanish Seafarers in the Spanish printed media, I published a paper about this subject in “Maritime Policy & Management” (Sánchez-Beaskoetxea & Coca 2015). In that paper I explained the following conclusions:

- Little news on the Merchant Navy is published in Spanish newspapers, and when newspapers do it, most of it is bad news.
- Bad news is often published in the most important pages.
- The subjects given most emphasis are the most negative ones.
- The Captain and ship are the main protagonists in the news, but normally in a negative sense.
- Journalist and others writing about these events are not experts on maritime questions.
- Journalists often express their own opinion, and often this opinion is not very well researched.
- Negative words are the most used.
- The image given of the profession of merchant sailor is negative.

According to these conclusions, the journalists, in most cases, do not have the necessary training to evaluate the information that they receive from different sources objectively, and they publish this information without checking it with other sources.

In addition, the main conclusion reached is that it seems that in the Spanish newspapers the image given of the Merchant Navy in general, and of professionals of the sea, especially, is negative, and this is what is transmitted to the public, which is informed of these events by the mass media.

To sum up, the information that the public receives is incomplete and this is one of the reasons because people in general have such poor knowledge of the Merchant Navy. The public is given a slanted, negative image which, in many cases, does not correspond to the reality of the professional world of the Merchant Navy.

After that research, I made a survey conducted among the Spanish merchant marine in 2014 on the perception that they have on their public image in the media.

The survey was released in different forums, web pages, specialized online media and in professional associations of the Spanish Merchant Navy so it would reach the highest possible number of seafarers. The survey was kept active for one month. The survey was viewed by 828 people of whom 269 responded.

After analysing the obtained data, I reached some interesting conclusions. Of them, the most relevant were these one:

- A majority of Spanish seafarers (55%) think that the image of the profession in the media is neutral, although it is notable that 38% of them think it is negative against only 4% who say that it is positive.
- Among those who think that the image of sailors in the media is negative, 95% believe that it may be true that the journalists do not know what they write and use stereotypes about sailors.
- 81% of them believe that it may be true that cinema and literature have created a stereotype of the marine adventurer, little serious and unprofessional.
- On the other hand, 71% believe that it may be true that the external image of the Seafarers, compared with the aviation pilots, is neglected and does not denote professionalism.
- Regarding possible actions mentioned in the survey that can be done to improve the image of the seafarers, a majority of Spanish Seafarers consider useful to educate journalists reporting on issues of ships to make it better and send periodically to the media articles or reports on topics of Merchant Navy written by professionals linked to the profession. Also there are many who would support a publication for journalists on the world of ships and the Merchant Navy.

Possible Actions

About these possible actions, and others, let us see what can be done to improve the image of the seafarers.

- To train journalists reporting on merchant marine.
- Design courses for journalists.
- Edit publications on the world of ships and merchant marine specially focused on journalists.
- Develop a policy by sector entities and by the European administration that highlights the strategic dimension and the great contribution of our profession to society.
- Improve the information that people have on the real difficulty of the maritime profession and, also, on the real work and responsibility of a sailor on a ship.
- Arrange a press advertising campaign in Europe to improve the image of the profession.
- "Sell" stories to the press to publish reports on the profession and its positive aspects; economic data on the importance of the sector; stories about life on board; reports on the technical aspects of navigation; Motorways of the sea; antipollution efficiency of new ships; university studies...
- Send the media regularly opinion articles and reports on marine issues signed by different persons and associations linked to the sector, as ship

owners, captains, University teachers, public figures who may be related to marine context, etc.

- Create an annual award for the best journalistic work report of the profession.
- Equate the image of seafarers to the airline pilots: use of uniforms, etc.
- Getting people to differentiate what the merchant marine is with respect to fishing and military navy.
- Encourage making films, TV series or reports on the seafaring profession and their day to day aboard.
- Use social networks to bring the profession to the general public.

All these actions, well planned together, could help in few years to get the goal of improving the image of the seafarers in Europe

Conclusions

Maritime organizations, as the International Maritime Organization (IMO), are concerned about the future seafarer shortage problem, as shown in the campaign to attract young people to nautical studies (Go to Sea!), in which an improvement of the image of shipping in general was called for; or the fact that in the Final Act of the Conference of Parties to the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, held in Manila in June, 2010, it is said expressly that:

“It is recommended that Administrations, shipping companies, shipowners, ship managers, seafaring organizations and any other entities concerned do their utmost to promote a career at sea among young people and to retain existing seafarers within the industry by:

- 1. engendering a more favourable public perception, in particular among young people, of the maritime industry;*
- 2. promoting a greater awareness and knowledge among young people of the opportunities offered by a career at sea;”*

Also, the European Transport Workers’ Federation mentioned in an article published in his website in June 2010 the bad image associated with maritime professions associated to the retention of sea workers.

In the Annual Review 2012 of the Seafarers’ Rights, the international centre for advancing the legal protection of seafarers, we can read this comment about the image of the profession: *“Global shipping has an image problem. It is not seen as an obvious career choice for today’s talented younger generation. Too frequently it has a bad image; perhaps worse, it has no image”*.

In Spain, the Association of Spanish Shipowners (ANAVE) has expressed publicly that *“the mass media and the administration have helped to spoil the*

public image of the profession", and that one of the reasons for this is the *"unattractive image of the merchant navy in the mass media"*.

The subject of the image, directly related to the seafarer shortage problem, was also mentioned in another paper in *Maritime Police & Management* about the situation in Singapore.

So, it is clear that it is convenient for all to improve the image of the seafarers. The mentioned actions in this paper could be a starting point to reach the final goal.

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