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Title: Synergy and social orientation as quality dimensions for the future communication policy

Year: 2009

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Vos, M. (2009). Synergy and social orientation as quality dimensions for the future communication policy. In A. Rogojinaru, & S. Wolstenholme (Eds.), Current trends in international public relations (papers presented at the Euprera Congress 2009) (pp. pp. 83-94). Tritonic.

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Vos, M. (2009), 'Synergy and social orientation as quality dimensions for the future communication policy'. In Rogojinaru, A. & Wolstenholme, S., *Current trends in international public relations; papers presented at the EUPRERA Congress 2009*, Tritonic, Bucharest, pp. 83-94.

SYNERGY AND SOCIAL ORIENTATION AS QUALITY DIMENSIONS FOR THE FUTURE COMMUNICATION POLICY

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Abstract

In this paper it is argued, that nowadays synergy as a quality dimension for communication management needs to be balanced with social orientation. The inner-directedness needed for synergy should not lead to a rigid control. It needs to be balanced with outer-directedness in a continuous dialogue for the organization to be able to connect to the multiple stakeholders that are important for its functioning in today's society. This balance is a value in framing the future communication policy.

Key words:
Synergy, social orientation, communication as a functional area of management, integrated communication, quality control.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is one of the *functional areas* that contribute to the organization (Vos and Schoemaker, 2005). Other functional areas include finance, marketing, human resource development, R&D and production. It will depend on the organization and its context which functional areas are important for its functioning. This may explain why communication has developed only relatively recently, when the environment of organizations became more turbulent. Communication supports other functional areas and has responsibilities of its own.

Top managers need a good understanding of all functional areas to be able to apply an integral approach in decision-making. Input from the various functional areas comes together in the board. By looking at organizational problems from the perspective of communication, managers focus on interaction in networks and relationship management. According to Cornelissen (2004), from an organizational perspective the interest is in knowing how the management function of communication can be used to meet organizational objectives. This calls for a helicopter view on what communication can offer organizations.

In organization studies a systems model is used to analyse activities in an organization. The model contains input, throughput and output processes (Alblas and Van de Vliert, 1990). These processes are placed in the context of developments in the social environment (Keuning, 1993).

In the light of the model, we can identify the contribution of communication to organizational activities (see exhibit 1).

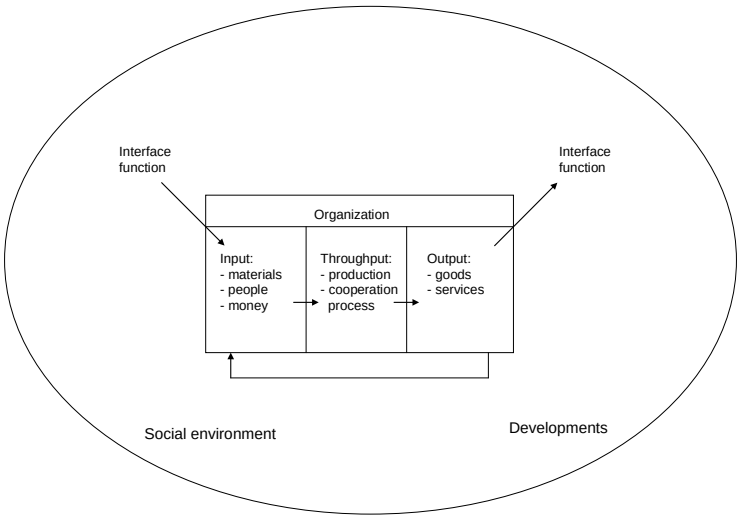

Exhibit 1. Communication supports the input, throughput and output phases, which calls for various approaches and needs coordination

Communication helps an organization to solve and prevent problems in the various areas. This way it supports input, throughput and output processes.

a. Input
Organizations need the support not only of financiers, shareholders or investors, but also that of suppliers and good employees. The dominant domain in this area is corporate/ concern communication. Reputation, image and public debate are the key concepts here, and the literature is oriented towards the social sciences.
b. Throughput
The division of labour within organizations presupposes information exchange, and innovation and change processes within the organization need much attention too. The dominant domain in this area is internal communication. Involvement and identity are the key concepts, and the literature is oriented towards business studies and human resource development.
c. Output
Organizations need to increase awareness of their products and services, while they also want to reinforce existing buying behaviour. The dominant domain in this area is marketing communication. Branding is a key concept, and the literature has a marketing orientation.

The three-phased model means that there should be synergy between the various communication domains, although each may have a different background and scope. Synergy will be discussed in the next chapter. The interface function connecting the

organization with the environment (Cheney and Christensen, 2001) relates mainly to the input and output areas. The latter will be further clarified as the dimension social orientation in a later chapter.

SYNERGY

The value of synergy for the communication policy of organizations has been discussed for decennia. Synergy can be defined as the overarching goal of organizational design, as functional silos have become a barrier to strategy implementation, to become more than the sum of its parts individual strategies must be aligned and linked (Kaplan and Norton, 2001). Synergy is relevant for organizational strategies but also for communication in particular. Fragmented communication is not effective, and organizations may want to use integrated communication to avoid a fragmented reputation (Sholes and Clutterbuck, 1998). The fact that communication takes many forms, and that in practice exists a subdivision into many areas, has lead to an impression of organizational fragmentation; which is why organizations are making efforts to improve the coordination of their communication (Van Riel, 1995). The need for coordination was first felt within the area of marketing (Proctor and Kitchen, 2002), but later also in corporate branding and communication management as a whole.

It seems that the concept of integrated communication does not describe a professional area, but rather refers to a strategy. The strategy aims at making communication more effective by improving coherence in various ways (Floor and Van Raaij, 2002). This is not seen as something that only the communication department should be aware of, instead, *integrated communication* can be seen as involving an attitude of all inside the organization. The corporate identity is expressed by the organization's employees and the corporate image is defined by people's experiences of the organization and its employees (Howard, 1998). This is inspired by the concept of *integrated marketing* that not only refers to synergy between the elements of the marketing mix (product, price, promotion, place), but is also advocated as involving an attitude relevant to anyone in the organization (hence the P for people that was later added to the marketing mix). Marketing has implications for other functional areas in the organization and an integrated approach can lead to better policy decisions (Leeflang, 1989). The same can be said for integrated communication and the importance of synergy among the various functional areas of an organization.

Cornelissen (2004) defines integrated communications as the act of coordinating all communications so that the corporate identity is effectively and consistently communicated to internal and external groups. He advocates a holistic view, linking communication strategy to corporate strategy and objectives (Cornelissen, 2004). Integrated communication is *broader* than integrated marketing communication, as it developed from a rather bounded and specialised activity to an organization-wide issue and concern (Christensen et al., 2008). The concept of corporate communication is closely related.

Van Riel (1995) defines *corporate communication* as 'an instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonised as effectively and efficiently as possible, so as to create a favourable basis for relationships with groups upon which the company is dependent'. Integrated communication may be considered a strategy, as Van Riel (1995) states, while corporate communication is about presenting the organization as one coherent identity, integrated communication may be regarded as the ongoing endeavour to achieve that goal.

Communication is not only the task of specialists, but everyone in the organization contributes to it. This is especially true for boundary spanners, individuals within the organization who function as a liaison and maintain external relations (Baskin and Aronoff, 1988). Here communication specialists have an educative role for other employees and spokespeople (Van Ruler et al., 2000). So, similar to integrated marketing, integrated communication may also involve advocating an *attitude* relevant to anyone in the organization.

The meaning of the concept of integrated communications seems to have changed with time. Initially *synergy* on the level of communication means or activities, e.g. within campaigns and multimedia projects, received much attention. Later the emphasis shifted towards harmonising the various fields of communication policy, such as internal and external communication, marketing communication and corporate communication, and the communication policy of the various business units. The concept subsequently expanded further and synergy between communication policy and organizational policy received attention, including coherence with respect to business networks and conglomerates (Christensen, 2002), and joint ventures and public/private partnerships (Vos and Schoemaker, 2005). Communication also has relevance for other functional areas, and an integrated approach can strengthen organizational policies.

Thus, integrated communication can be seen conceptualised on the following levels (Vos and Schoemaker, 2005). On the (micro) level of operational activities it means consistency within one area of communication activities, e.g. harmonising the points of view expressed by various spokespeople in media relations, and an integral approach to (the planning of) multi-media projects and campaigns, aiming at effective communication with public groups.

On the (meso) level of the communication policy it is important to establishing a strong connection between the communication activities initiated at various places within the organization. This way, the communication policies of the business units and also the policies of the various communication domains have a common denominator. For the (macro) level of the organizational policy it can be noted that the communication policy needs to be well embedded in the organizational policies as a whole. Furthermore, there needs to be coordination between the various functional areas in the organization, and within the supply chain or other networks in which the organization operates. The three levels strengthen one another and synergy can be seen as harmonisation on all levels.

Some authors assume that coordination is only possible when all the communication activities are done by one department (Wightman, 1999). On the other hand, Cornelissen (2001) found that in practice there is no tendency towards setting up an overall consolidated or integrated communication department. So, apparently the structure of communication departments, whether one of centralisation or de-centralisation, depends on the situation and centralisation is not the dominant way to create coordination.

De Pelsmacker (2001) suggests actively sharing information, to overcome the perceived complexity of planning and coordination when more departments are involved. For this purpose it is essential that there exists a shared vision of the functions of communication and that the organization's communication policies share a common denominator. Van Riel (1995) suggests common starting points for departments and an internal steering committee for coordination purposes. Coordination may also be needed with other functional areas and in alliances or partnerships.

Synergy refers to consistency and a strong connection between communication activities and the organization's policy as a whole. As such it might cause a too great concentration on the internal environment of the organization. As nowadays the external environment is very dynamic, an organization can't afford to lose sight of what is happening and for this it needs a strong social orientation too.

SOCIAL ORIENTATION

Another dimension of communication policy is the orientation towards the receiver/ social environment. To better understand this dimension we will further investigate the interface function of communication (Cheney and Christensen, 2001). For this we look closer at the organization in the context of its social environment: the organization operating in a field of power (see exhibit 2).

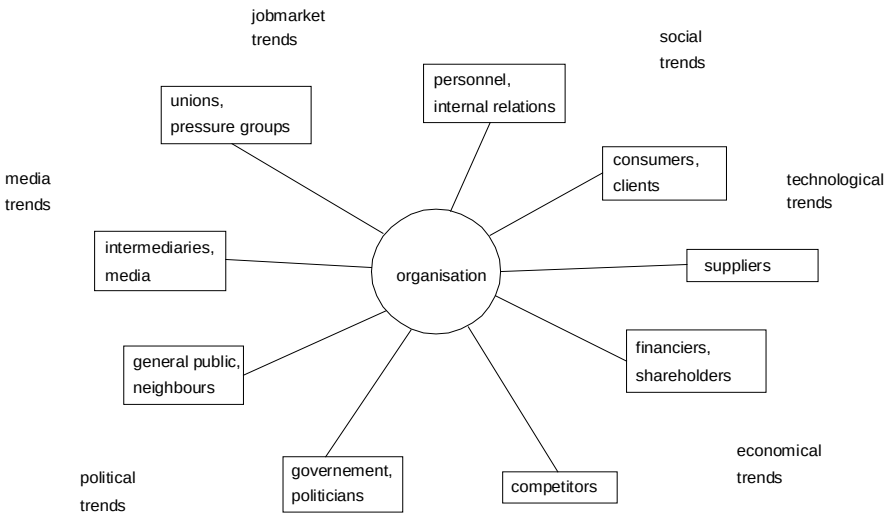

Exhibit 2. The field of power in which an organization operates (Keuning, 1993)

The idea of the field of power comes from business studies (Keuning, 1993) and refers (unlike in Bourdieu) to a diverse environment that functions as an *arena* in which cooperation and competition both occur. In the inner circle are the various stakeholder groups mentioned, while in the outer circle are the developments prevailing in society at large. The model shows that relationship management is vital for organizations. The model is a simplification because an organization operates in various networks and it is not always situated in the centre of these networks. Also the picture gives a more static impression than is the case in reality.

In society, power balances change continuously, and thus internal and external organizational environments are characterised by their *dynamics.* Developments might make parties more or less important in a network. Some parties might become more interesting to cooperate with and others less. The market changes and new client needs and preferences arise. New issues also come along and become more or less related to the organization. Organizations monitor various issue arenas and markets (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2009). An orientation towards the social environment is a prerequisite for organizational strategy-making.

A similar shift as described in the way of thinking about synergy was visible in social orientation, a shift from a receiver orientation in communication means to a more general *orientation to the social environment*. Initially, the receiver orientation was emphasized on the (micro) level of operational activities in an effort to produce more effective communication means. Then relationship management became a key activity at the (meso) level of the communication policy. And now orientation to the social environment is needed on the (macro) level of the organizational policies. 'Receiver orientation' indicates that the organization as sender takes the initiative; 'social orientation' is a more contemporary way of viewing communication, as it implies an outside-in approach, monitoring of developments in the social environment, and arranging a continuous dialogue with multiple publics.

The organization might anticipate or react to opportunities and threats in the external environment in various ways. It may decide to change its own operations and in that case communication can support *change management*. Being responsive does not restrict the organization to a strategy of adaptation. The organization may also try to change the conditions for its functioning e.g. by venturing into negotiations or public affairs activities. In that case communication can arrange for the participation of the organization in the *public debate* on relevant topics. Proactive communication means becoming involved in the definition and construction of reality, which might continue to be rather self referential (Cheney and Christensen, 2001). On the other hand, one might find win-win solutions in which the general well-being of society is also taken into account.

Strategic planning should allow for reflection and interaction with stakeholders. Sholes and Clutterbuck (1998) argue that listening to stakeholder groups includes inviting them to comment on products and activities, and involving stakeholders in auditing how

the organization adheres to its policies and values. Here, public groups are not seen as targets, but rather as partners in the generation of meaning; this requires playful engagement, networking and negotiation (Christensen et al., 2005).

An organization may decide to *adapt* to some developments in the social environment and to actively influence others, combining these strategies (Sutcliffe, 2001). The choice will then depend on the situation, feasibility and policies of the organization.

Organizations need continuously to monitor public perceptions and changes in the social environment. Initially this was a *reactive* approach to criticism and was mainly geared towards the needs of the organization. Nowadays a more *open* monitoring of public perceptions is advocated, to identify developments that might not yet be related to the organization but might lead to future opportunities or threats (Vos and Schoemaker, 2006). Organizations function in complex environments. Diversity within the organization makes it easier to detect and react flexibly to various external signals (Christensen et al., 2008). Diversity facilitates redesign and learning, increasing the ability of the organization to enact its environment (Weick, 2001).

Monitoring social developments and market trends may have consequences for the communication policy of the organization and may also lead to advice to managers on organizational policies in other areas. This is one way in which integrated communication supports the functioning of the organization and its interaction with the social environment.

A BALANCE

The two dimensions of synergy and social orientation are complementary, a balance is needed. Too much emphasis on synergy might result in centrally controlled messages that add to top-down regulation procedures and stifling bureaucracies (Christensen et al., 2008). This would hinder a flexible reaction to changing circumstances. On the other hand, too much emphasis on social orientation might result in an unclear identity of the organization. Christensen et al. (2008) argue for a combination of some characteristics of a tightly coupled system with those of a loosely coupled system, for interplay between centralised and decentralised practices.

Synergy is about basic values and common starting points, needing horizontal communication between departments and managerial support to overcome departmental barriers, while social orientation calls for bottom-up communication and a flexible response to developments. The ideal of the responsive organization is reflected in the concept of integrated communication (Christensen, 2002). But next to being responsive to changes in the social environment, an organization also needs to be *self-conscious*. It needs a clear identity that will distinguish it from others (Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004). This is a precondition for maintaining its position in the networks in which it operates.

Here a balance needs to be found between synergy that needs inner-directedness and social orientation that reflects outer-directedness. These may also be referred to as closeness and openness, and should be seen in dialectical interdependence (Cheney and Christensen, 2001).

This may be similar, in a way, to the balance between the inside-out and outside-in approaches, advocated in marketing communication (Schulz et al., 1994). In marketing the two dimensions synergy and social orientation seem closely related. Integrated marketing communication is defined as a holistic and strategic approach to brand communication planning, involving database building and management of consumer information to develop, plan and evaluate synergistic brand communication programmes (Kliatchko, 2005). This points to the dimension synergy, while the driving force behind it, is said to be a reorientation from transaction-based marketing to relationship marketing (Fill, 1999; Reid, 2005). Smith (1998) states: think consumer first and build relationships. And Fill (1999) defines integrated communication as "a coordinated dialogue with various internal and external audiences", this way connecting synergy directly to social orientation.

Considering that client orientation is the driver behind synergy, it could be argued that the concept of integrated marketing communication includes not only synergy but also social orientation. This could be a more fruitful approach to integrated communication than promoting synergy alone. But this needs further research and anyhow, separating the dimensions of synergy and social orientation makes sense, as a balance between the two is needed.

CONCLUSIONS

Two dimensions of communication policy were discussed: synergy and social orientation. The meaning of these concepts has changed in time. Initially synergy on the level of communication means received a great deal of attention. Later, the emphasis shifted towards harmonising the various fields of communication and on coordinating the communication of the organization's various business units. This in turn led to a strong connection between communication and organizational policies. A similar shift was visible from a receiver orientation in operational activities to relationship management in communication areas, and a social orientation and dialogue in policy issues. This was described on the micro, meso and macro level. The three levels add to one another.

The dimension synergy refers to consistency and a strong connection between activities and policies of communication and those of the organization. Communication is one of the functional areas that contribute to the success of the organization. Top managers need a good understanding of all functional areas to be able to use an integral approach in decision-making. Communication supports input, throughput and output processes in the organization. This involves various communication domains each of which has a somewhat different background and scope. Furthermore, complex organizations also contain various business units that need to coordinate their communication efforts. Hence, integrated communication calls for a shared vision of the functions of communication, a common denominator for the different organizational communication policies and an internal steering committee for communication purposes (Van Riel, 1995).

The dimension social orientation refers to the interface function of communication (Cheney and Christensen, 2001). An organization functions in a dynamic field of power. It

anticipates or reacts to opportunities and threats in various ways. It may adapt to developments in the social environment or it may seek to influence its surroundings by expressing its views in the public arena. Therefore, the organization needs to monitor public perceptions and changes in the social environment.

The inner-directedness needed for synergy should not lead to a rigid control. It needs to be balanced with outer-directedness needed for social orientation. Hence, synergy and social orientation, as dimensions of integrated communication, should both be reflected in the communication policy of the organization.

Implications for practice and research

The interdependence of synergy and social orientation deserves more investigation. Christensen et al. (2008) suggest that many integrated communication projects have not been successful because of a top-down approach in which diversity and flexibility have not been taken into account. Case studies might shed light on this. Practitioners may reflect on this and discuss how to find a balance between synergy and social orientation.

Furthermore, the two dimensions of synergy and social orientation, may function as quality criteria for the communication policy of the organization. These may provide a basis for an ongoing dialogue among practitioners and managers about the added value of communication for organizations. Some attempts were made to turn such criteria into performance indicators that serve as a strategic feedback system, but this needs to be developed further (Fleisher and Mahaffy, 1997; Hering et al., 2004; Rolke and Koss, 2005; Vos and Schoemaker, 2004; Zerfass, 2008). Along these lines, future research may clarify how the dimensions synergy and social orientation could be anchored in a quality cycle for communication policy. This is important as finding a balance between synergy and social orientation is a value in framing the future communication policy.

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