

The Strategic Role of Communication in Management

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The concept of strategic communication represents a significant shift from that of corporate communication and, as several scholars have argued (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Vercic and Zerfass, 2017), represents a new paradigm useful for interpreting the broadening content of communication and the evolving role it plays in complex organizations. Role which becomes strategic as it increasingly tends to support top management and directors of other business functions in achieving their overall strategic goals. In fact, the concept of corporate communication is used to identify the set of different communication activities that aims to achieve specific audiences and/or objectives such as avoiding or overcoming crises, engaging internal or external stakeholders, improving the visibility of brands, people, products or services. The overall goal that corporate communication aims to achieve, through the set of its initiatives, is to develop and consolidate the organization's reputation.

The concept of strategic communication is broader, in the sense that it encompasses all corporate communication initiatives and objectives, and it emphasizes that the real goal of communication is to help strategize and support the achievement of the organization's overall goals including both financial, political, social and other dimensions. According to D. Vercic and A. Zerfass (2017) "*Strategic communication deals with the intended and emergent use of communication for building, presenting and supporting strategies of organizations to enhance their overall performance. This includes defining and redefining goals and positioning, leading major initiatives and managing key resources*". In other words, strategic communication involves relevant objectives such as advising, and supporting the decisions of, top management and of the various organizational functions and contributes directly to the achievement of the organization's economic results and success.

On the other hand, Chester Barnard, in the late 1930s, had already predicted that communication should become a structural component of organizations, even to the point of assuming a strategic role in their governance. "Communication technique shapes the form and internal economy of the organization (...) In a comprehensive theory of organization, communication would occupy a central place because the structure, size, and field of activity of the organization are almost entirely determined by communication techniques" (Barnard, *The Functions of the Executives*, 1938).

However, it was not until the end of the first decade of this century that the new paradigm of strategic communication was defined by some

of the most relevant communication scholars internationally (Hallahann *et al.*, 2007) as “the use of communication by managers and members of the organization aimed at achieving the organization’s mission”. According to this approach, the most relevant aspect of strategic communication lies precisely in its nature as a constitutive activity of organizations’ management. In fact, strategic communication focuses its attention on how the organization presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, managers and communication professionals. This process is ideally reciprocal since it demands engagement and involvement from all the stakeholders.

And it was in 2008, at EUPRERA’s international congress *Institutionalizing Public Relations and Corporate Communication*, that communication scholars attending from around the world witnessed, with the results of their research, the advancement of the process of institutionalizing communication within complex organizations. *“Corporate communication has undergone a profound evolution, which has increased its strategic importance in the governance and success of complex organizations. This evolution has created the basis for the ongoing process of institutionalization where the role of communication is ever more important and strategic, because it contributes to the strategic management of organizations and increases their overall value”* (Invernizzi *et al.*, 2009).

Finally, the publication in 2014 of the Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication, edited by D. Holtzhausen and A. Zerfass, highlighted how strategic communication is aimed at co-constructing the organization and supporting strategic business decisions aimed at adding value to all business processes. *“Strategic communication also faces a challenge in truly embracing processes of meaning-making beyond the transmission of messages and in bringing about and measuring behavioral outcomes that are aligned with the strategic goals of the organization”*. And, in 2022, the publication of the new Research Handbook on Strategic Communication occurred, edited by Jesper Falkheimer and Mats Heide, where almost 50 authors developed ideas and sub-fields of strategic communication which has now been established in research and communication management practice all over the world.

The evolution from corporate to strategic communication thus highlights a growth, which began in the early years of this century, in the impact of communication on economic performance and, more generally, on the success of the organizations. Indeed, in recent years the communication function, and particularly the Chief Communication Officer, have been called upon to participate in decisions concerning other corporate functions and the company’s Management Committee, of which the CCO himself is increasingly a part. The reason is that every business activity, from products to sales policies, communicates and therefore it is appropriate and necessary for the communications function to advise and participate in the decisions of top management and other business functions (in the same way that the Chief Financial Officer participates in all business decisions that have financial implications). It is no coincidence that the Chief Communication Officer is increasingly part of the management committee of companies, as evidenced by the ongoing

process of institutionalization of communication in companies, and his or her advice is increasingly sought and used by top management

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The aim of this special issue is to investigate how communication can support the definition and deployment of corporate and business strategies, shaping both strategic and operational managerial decisions from the very first moment. This special issue also has the objective of examining how communication can lead processes to incisively make their effects felt on the companies' bottom line (economic performance) as well as on society as a whole, and finally of helping leaders drive transformation and change processes.

In recent times, the role of communication has become more crucial as witnessed by the increasing number of dedicated organizational functions as well as specialized professionals operating within companies. This phenomenon is driven by several factors, among which we can mention two main ones. On the one hand, corporate citizenship has become the key to the sound development and survival of any company, since it connotes a firm's obligation towards society as a requirement for doing business. Critical to corporate citizenship are actions that are visible, consistent, distinctive, transparent, and authentic, in other words communicated effectively.

On the other hand, following the pandemic, the role of internal communication has gained importance in companies and is today in perfect harmony with that of external communication. This is because not only corporate leaders, but also employees, have an ever-greater responsibility for creating corporate narratives that define deep-seated identity values and companies should clearly express the existing alignment between presiding identity values and mission/vision/business strategy. These elements must be ingrained in communication strategy which must then emphasize their coherence and consistency over time.

The papers presented in this special issue contribute in very different ways to the theme of the role played by strategic communication in the management of organizations and businesses. We will present the 14 papers, chosen from the many that were submitted, starting with those that have a broader approach to the topic of strategic communication and continuing with those that deal with more specific and particular aspects of it. However, as specific as they are, all the communication initiatives presented here share the characteristic of affecting the sustained success, and the economic performance, of the organizations in which they are implemented.

Mirko Olivieri, Lala Hu and Alessia Anzivino in their paper *The role of strategic communication in driving marketing decision-making* aim to investigate the role of, and to what extent, strategic communication influences the marketing decision making process and the definition of its strategies. The results of this study highlight that strategic communication covers an increasingly central role in the marketing-decision making process of companies. First, and more importantly, it emerged that strategic communication influences the product policy; second, strategic communication favors the innovation of marketing communications. The results of this analysis present an important implication for communication

professionals, and in particular for corporate communication directors, identifying the potential of their role in the strategic decision-making process of organizations.

Elias Weber and Ansgar Zerfass in their paper *Business intelligence in communication management: A framework for data-driven listening and internal consulting* aim to explore how communication professionals can use BI methods based on digital technologies to incorporate insights into managerial decision-making processes. They found that to deliver valuable advice to management in a deeply mediatized world, communication practitioners must draw on data-driven insights on public opinions, social developments and relevant stakeholders. Business intelligence concepts support this by collecting and processing data using digital technologies to support decision making. It enables practitioners to bring the communicative dimension into managerial decisions and align organizations with their “social context and with the most relevant expectations of most relevant stakeholders”. The outlined processes enable communicators to act as internal consultants and ensures that managerial decisions can consider communication-related opportunities and risks.

Cecilia Casalegno, Chiara Civera, Elena Candelo and Raoul Romoli Venturi in their paper *Bridging corporate communication and marketing narratives for organizational success: how collaboration happens* aim to describe the relationship between corporate communication and marketing and to explore whether and how synergistic collaboration between the two functions is needed and works in multinational enterprises. The paper’s findings outline the strategic relevance of corporate communication in guiding corporate strategies and actions and the support of corporate communication to marketing in reformulating advertising campaigns according to a multi-stakeholder perspective. The paper provide practical suggestions to establish proactive and long term collaborations between corporate communication and marketing by aligning the strategic planning of marketing actions to the corporate communication perspective.

Francesca Conte, Paolo Picciocchi, Alfonso Siano and Alessandra Bertolini in their paper *Data-driven strategic communication for brand identity building: the case study of Capital One* aim to investigate the role of strategic communication, supported by the data-driven approach, in the process of building brand identity. The proposed theoretical framework could orientate top management decisions and strengthen the strategic role of communication and brand managers in brand identity building in the digital age. Thanks to strategic communication according to a data-driven logic, managers could develop new value propositions for innovative business models, improve competitive positioning and build personalised relationships. Moreover, the inclusion of data in corporate culture, as well as a synergistic co-existence of various managerial skills, facilitates performance excellence.

Ginevra Testa, Luca Giraldi and Simone Splendiani in their paper *The role of strategic communication in facing paracrisis: a multiple case approach in the lab-grown meat industry*, aim explores the strategic role that communication can play in preventing crises and minimising their negative effects in the cultured meat industry. The results of the study show

that the strategies most used by the four companies analysed were able to create good engagement with the public and stimulate optimism in public comments. These strategies emphasised the companies' commitment to leading the challenges of this sector, educating the public, conveying transparent information, and creating synergies to broaden the audience. The study provides many implications for managers and professionals in monitoring online debate and discussion to contain the negative narratives spread by detractors and develop communication strategies to highlight the positive contributions made by the company's activities.

Martina Frizzo and Daniela Corsaro in their paper *Antifragile crisis communication: an exploratory study*, aim to explore the concept of antifragility and its application to crisis communication in the contemporary business environment marked by perpetual disruptions and uncertainty. The study identifies six critical factors for antifragile crisis communication: experimentation, option generation, stress, redundancy, subtraction, and creativity. These factors contribute to an organization's ability to thrive in the face of ongoing disruptions, aligning with the principles of antifragility. Organizations can enhance their crisis communication strategies by integrating the identified factors, promoting adaptability, and leveraging uncertainty to thrive in the new business environment.

Rossella Gambetti, Silvia Biraghi, Angela Antonia Beccanulli and Stefania Vitulli in their paper *Brand activism in search for an ethical communication leadership: Vivienne Westwood and the clashes between person and brand*, aim to shed light on how the cultural tensions of being a socio-political activist and an iconic fashion entrepreneur in the current scenario of consumer movements and collective agitations are constructed and amplified in social media platforms. The study highlights a series of clashes that arise when an activist leader does not act as a true ethical leader of meanings and does not use communication as a strategic lever to transform society through listening to, engaging and fine-tuning with stakeholders, but rather indulges in a self-referential attitude aimed at giving full expression to her changing moods, needs, and desires. This paper highlights the challenges of being an activist leader and brand in contemporary woke society. In so doing, it provides strategic guidelines on how communication should be conceived in the company to achieve ethical leadership and overcome cultural tensions.

Agostino Vollero and Alfonso Siano in their paper *Strategic communication and greenwashing. Theoretical reflections and managerial implications* aim to provide a comprehensive reflection on the role, research directions and managerial implications of a strategic communication approach designed to prevent greenwashing. The study reveals a notable gap in the consideration of strategic communication perspectives within the context of greenwashing. Despite the ongoing emergence of new forms of greenwashing, research predominantly focuses on the supposed benefits and harms resulting from discrepancies between corporate talk and action. This paper argues that more attention should be given to understanding and managing the underlying processes that lead to such misalignments. Recommendations for decision-makers, aimed at preventing accusations of greenwashing and mitigating the negative associated consequences,

include adopting a systemic approach to strategic communication, enhancing transparency and fostering genuine stakeholder engagement.

Angelo Miglietta, Emma Zavarrone, Martha Friel, Vittorio Ottaviani and Andrea Sangermano in their paper *Crafting clarity: a textual framework for optimizing strategic communication in Italian Banking Foundation Mission Reports* aim to investigate the communicative practices of the most relevant Italian banking foundations examining how they use mission reports to balance regulatory obligations with engaging community narratives. The study reveals a dichotomy in their communication approach since some foundations view mission reports as regulatory obligations while others draw reports as strategic communication tools for community involvement and societal impact. The findings can guide efforts in strategic communication practices of non-profit organisations, offering insights into enhancing the transparency, accessibility, and inclusivity of mission reports.

Iza Gigauri, Maria Palazzo and Antonella Ferri in their paper *Linking strategic communication and sustainability reporting. Exploring corporate websites of Georgian Banks* aim to analyse the existing link between strategic communication and CSR/Sustainability in the banking sector in an emerging country. The study shows that banks in Georgia invest heavily in CSR and Sustainability programs to demonstrate their social and ecological orientations. Special attention is devoted to education, charity, and ecological projects. However, the strategic communication lacks the comprehensiveness and coherence since the financial companies tend to communicate information on their websites about CSR just in terms of programs and results. Nevertheless, CSR and sustainability communication of Georgian banks is significant because it implements their reputation and brand image, promotes sustainable practices and contributes to the economic and social development of the country.

Martha Friel, Grazia Murtarelli and Vittorio Ottaviani in their paper *Unlocking the power of strategic communication: a deep dive into industrial tourism and engaging company openings* aim to explore the potential of strategic communication in the context of industrial tourism open-door events, investigating how effective storytelling by companies can positively influence visitors' perceptions. The analysis suggests that open-door events are a valuable platform for companies to communicate their brand stories and enhance internal communication processes. Visitors who perceive companies positively during these events are more likely to make purchases and recommend products. This study contributes to the literature by exploring the intersection of strategic communication and industrial tourism. It reveals how effective storytelling during open-door events positively influences visitor perceptions, engagement, and actions, shedding light on innovative communication approaches within this underexplored context.

Marta Maria Montella in her paper *The strategic role of communication in management and the contribution of corporate museums*, focuses on corporate museums' contribution to the strategic role of communication in management, approaching the topic from theoretical and empirical perspectives. The study shows that while there is a high and widespread

awareness on the part of corporate museum management about the potential of these institutions to direct all stakeholders for the benefit of the enterprise, differences emerge regarding the implementation of the most effective strategies and tools to optimize their achievable value. The paper aims to highlight the strategies and actions that should be implemented to improve the performances of corporate museums in terms of strategic communication.

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Chiara Valentini in her paper *Charting the 'Lunar Alignment' in today's media landscape: exploring perceptions of Italian strategic communicators and journalists in a mediatized world*, aims to explore how Italian strategic communicators and journalists perceive their own and each other's identities and functions in the current Italian media landscape. It investigates how these professionals respond to mediatization and how this, in turn, has supported mutual positive relationships. The study highlights to what extent perceptions of professional identities and roles in strategic communication and journalism have evolved, while the growing mediatization of practices among strategic communicators has enhanced journalists' perceptions of relationships. There is noticeable convergence in the skills and competencies of these professionals, alongside a mutual recognition of the importance of high-quality information.

Ganga Sasidharan Dhanesh in her paper *Connecting with visually acculturated audiences: A hypermodern perspective*, aim to examine drivers behind the emergent communication preference of audiences towards visual media in a social-media saturated age. It also offers recommendations for organizations to adapt their engagement strategies with visually oriented audiences. The study, using the theoretical lenses of hypermodernity and organizational identification, suggests that organizations can enable identification with visually acculturated audiences through co-creating identity through individual rhetors who are driven by creating extraordinary and unique identities based on experiential, emotion-rich consumption, and their love of the spectacular. Communicators in organizations can strengthen their audience engagement strategies through co-creating organizational identities that are likely to resonate with these hypermodern audiences.

At the end of the presentation of this Special Issue, as guest editors, we would like to thank the Editor in chief and the co-Editor in chief, prof. Marta Ugolini and prof. Alberto Pastore, for the opportunity they gave us and for their guidance during the process, and we would like to thank all the authors who contributed to this Issue, enriching the debate on strategic communication as a discipline of management, and giving their input to illustrate how and to what extent a wide variety of communication initiatives can contribute to the sustained success and economic performance of organizations.

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