



Communication as Innovation Driver

Author: Boris Mackrodt, Member of the Executive Board at Fink & Fuchs
Public Relations AG

A new age of energy is dawning, and the usual communication systems are undergoing change. If both aspects are to be dealt with successfully, we will need a new holistic approach.

The new energy era with its change-over to renewable energies has been accompanied by a long and vigorous debate across society. As new concepts replace the old structures and the old certainties, new conflicts are inevitable. In that process, it will not only be a question of continuing the familiar principled debate about, say, atomic energy. The new green technologies will also generate resistance, as we can already see in the arguments setting off wind farms against bird protection and power transmission lines against landscape protection. Similarly, the divide between the die-hards and the pioneers will not remain as clear-cut as previously thought.

All the major energy suppliers are working on sustainable concepts – in the field of energy storage, for example – while the genuinely new energy producers cannot sidestep issues such as the right design and redesign of the current grid infrastructure. It is a situation where new uncertainties will emerge, possibly paralyzing the change process. If change is to be successful, then trust on the part of citizens, consumers and the business community is an absolute *sine qua non*.

To encourage trust and discourage anxieties, a reliable regulatory framework is needed, of course. But on the one hand, the corporations will have to adjust to a new communications scenario if they wish to participate successfully in the immense growth opportunities available on these new markets. On the other hand, Ulrich Beck's



"reflexive modern society" will have to develop new value systems if – against all the logic of industrial modernity – less is indeed to become more and saving energy is to become more seductive than consuming it!

The energy revolution has come at a time when the usual communication systems and the expectations on the range of communication channels are also radically changing. Conspicuous in this respect is the increasingly discursive power of the internet and the social media platforms. A one-dimensional sender-receiver communication model is simply doomed to fail in this world of networked and interactive structures. Once again, to re-coin **Marshall McLuhan's** phrase, the new media seem to be the message and the message is ... participation.

Participation is the message

Without the sufficient and early involvement of the stakeholders concerned, large-scale engineering projects will no longer be feasible with any kind of efficiency. Communication itself will thus become the driver of innovation while any neglected or late communication process will become an obstacle to innovation.

For a communication process to be defined as successful, other criteria will be decisive: the credibility of one's own position, an acceptable form of mediation and a sustainable readiness to enter into dialogue. For industry, this will mean a rethink of old ideas and the creation of a new attitude toward dialogue and participation as well as new structure and workflow organizations *throughout* the company and not just in the corporate communications department. This is already being successfully practiced within the field of Open Innovation. Or in the field of product development, participation is making its mark in the form of "customer integration" or "lead user" concepts.



In terms of tool-kits, then, corporations will have to come up with further ways of entering into a dialogue with the public – alongside the conventional but by no means defunct press departments. Offline, this will entail the planning and implementation of formats such as citizen forums and other forms of mediation ahead of any big investment decision. Online, this will entail the use of contemporary internet tools – i.e. signing up to the social networks. Ultimately, amid a slowly eroding media landscape, this should lead to opportunities for the creation of new editorial formats: from the small-scale Twitter through Facebook sites to the integration and interaction of all new formats in a social media newsroom (aka "mash-up").

Social Media Governance

Above all, senior management will be faced with the challenge of finding new ways to deal with a still relatively new topic often introduced haphazardly anyway. The need for systematic reflected strategies and corresponding regulatory frameworks for social media activities is greater than ever. A conclusion backed up by the findings of a recent study entitled *Social Media Governance – How Corporations, the Public Sector and NGOs Handle the Challenges of Transparent Communication on the Internet* as conducted by Fink & Fuchs PR in conjunction with the University of Leipzig. Although 54% of the organizations surveyed confirmed the use of social media, only 16% have at their disposal any of the required basics for a strategic approach in the sense of social media governance.

This conceptual log-jam needs to be cleared away. For the readiness to engage in dialogue and new levels of transparency will not be decided solely on the sales market but also on the procurement side. After all, the most important resource of any high-tech company is the workforce – i.e. the current employees and the employees to be recruited. On a demographically constrained market



with a declining number of skilled workers, it is obvious that the successful companies of the future will be those who, in addition to offering attractive products and services, best understand the language and expectations of the target groups.

The following statistics show what potential Facebook has for the corporate communications and human resources departments. In Germany alone, the network currently counts just under 17 million members, most of who are younger than 35. Easily the most popular brand on the German Facebook is FC Bayern Munich with something like over one million "likes". The most successful DAX company, ranked at number five, is the German / English service provided by Lufthansa with 180,000 fans. What is striking, though, is the fact there are no classical industrial companies to be found in the top fifty (Source: <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-pages/>). Given Facebook's global outreach to the younger target groups, this situation will soon change. Anyone ready by way of "employer branding" to assume the role of first mover and position themselves as an attractive employer is sure to secure a competitive advantage.

Companies should act now

It is precisely the innovative technologies that require new approaches and new tools in the whole field of communications in order to achieve success. Indeed, in addition to the usual press office work, a new and holistic style of communications management is now called for. Worth looking at here is a number of things: the degree of networking with partners, potential employees, supporters, politicians and even rivals; the intelligibility of the strategy itself and of the arguments used both internally and externally; the readiness to enter into dialogue; and, not least, the underlying attitude at the company.