

COMMUNICATION DIRECTORS, WHAT FUTURE ?

Echoing our first event of the year, but in a non-luxury specific framework, Sciences Po organized on 2 July a round table on the theme 'Communication Director: what future?'. Considering the success of our meeting in February, it seemed interesting to post a brief summary of the discussion.

Speakers

The round table gathered:

Louise Beveridge, Director of Communication at Kering and member of the Group Executive Committee, **Elisabeth Coutureau** (CRH 00), President of the Corporate Delegation of the AACC and Co-President of CLAI, **Béatrice Mandine**, Executive Director in charge of brand & communication - Orange Group **Laurent Sacchi** (SP 87), Deputy Director at the Presidency in charge of communications, public affairs and crisis management for Danone.



The BCG - Science-Po-Stratégies magazine Observatory

Prior to the debate there was a short presentation by Olivier Abtan - Partner at Boston Consulting Group who shared with the audience the results of a barometer conducted by the BCG for Sciences-Po in partnership with Stratégies magazine (based on interviews with 400 directors of communication).

This study highlights the strategic importance of the function with 70% of respondents who are on the executive Committee. If the strategic importance of the function appears to be essential and will be most probably be further enhanced, it doesn't mean that the operational side of it is absent.

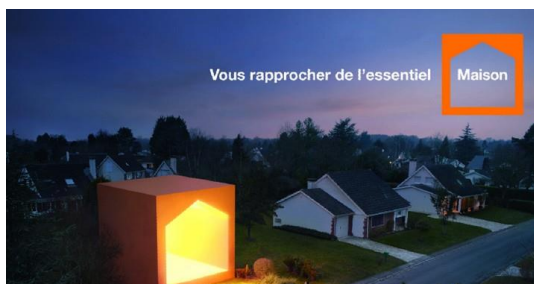
Quite the contrary, priorities of the communication directors such as they describe them are rather operational (control of communication activities, design of communication tools come first), and the balance between these two poles seems to be hard to reach.

Moreover, they are the front line on digital issues, with a specificity for the current generation: they are mostly not 'digital natives', and therefore they need to rely on their team's competence or, in many cases, bring in external expertise. Digital is also the only budget that is on the rise, even if the majority of communication directors have doubts about the effectiveness of their strategy with an average score of 6/10.

This digital transformation changes the job's tempo which is accelerating, posing three major challenges to the industry players: the need to be always informed about the latest technologies, innovations, media, etc ..., to have the right skills on board, and finally the necessity to define the metrics that will allow to evaluate the effectiveness of communication campaigns in a fast moving environment.

The tension between strategic and operational visions

The discussion initially focused on the tension between strategic and operational visions and the three speakers agreed on the fact that there is not necessary a conflict between strategic vision and operational actions. The strategy sets the course (so it is a medium/long term timeframe) then one has to manage the day to day. Having set an objective allows to sometimes seize the opportunities arising from unexpected events.



For Beatrice Mandine, who recently had to manage Orange crisis communication, communication directors have to love the unexpected, it is part of their job: it is then necessary for them to follow the roadmap while adapting to exceptional circumstances. By detailing the recent crisis with Israel, she has shown how great the challenge is when the information, that is nowadays spreading very quickly, is not consistent with the reality of the situation and of the message originally issued. Obviously she loves this kind of challenge!

Did digital technologies change the Communication Director's job?

It is emphasized that what changed the digital is that two thirds of the contents in relation with corporations are produced by outsiders and, what could be perceived as a loss of power by communication directors, strengthens their role in the end. For Louise Beveridge, digital is not responsible for the evolution of the job that is the result of greater openness, a reinforced dialog between the company and its customers and other parties.

Digital can greatly enrich the content of this dialog, and if the issue of 'contents' is laid it is because the role of communication is to find the balance between what can be published and what cannot. Indeed, we have moved from a 'shareholder' to a 'stakeholder' economy; this means that it is but success needs to be found in other areas such as social, cultural, environmental,... areas as well.



In this context, the communications director acts as the warrantor of the meaning of corporate communications and plays role of the orchestra conductor with all concerned parties, and this has strengthened its power. Louise Beveridge used the sports metaphor to say that the communication director is a midfielder who can be both offensive and defensive, but in all cases is the one who passes the ball.

What about the structures?

For Beatrice Mandine, digital destroyed silos, it has raised awareness of the need to change organizations. Regarding Orange, the 'Division of Digital' has been abandoned in favor of two defined units according to the time dimension attached to them:

- The "warm" time, concerning immediacy, typically press relations unit, the service also manages everything related to social media.
 - The "lukewarm" or "cold" time, longer time, which manages the image, website, etc ...
- Kering also formed two poles so quite similar:

- Information: Press, journalists, social networks like LinkedIn, Twitter
- Image: branding, events, website, 'image' social networks (Facebook, Instagram, ...)

Louise Beveridge insists on the fact that if the structure is vertical, intelligence is played horizontally, and the teams meet on projects that they manage jointly.

Elisabeth Coutureau added that all the companies have not yet solved these organizational matters and many silos remain.

Managing the CEO's image

For Louise Beveridge, François-Henri Pinault is the spokesperson, the flag bearer of Kering group. The question is to assess the relevance of an intervention (media, conference ...) and its interest in the context of limited time resource. It is therefore the management of scarcity, a concept very much in line with luxury...



Laurent Sacchi, for Danone, also evokes the question of dosage. With three leaders in 50 years, the group demonstrated a great stability, and the image of its leader is built in the long run. So for him the question is to assess the context in which the CEO is lead to speak, what may be said, and the choice is to speak only when the leader can avoid jargon (but he confesses that is sometimes necessary to speak even if in a constrained framework).

Finally at Orange, no one ignores that Stephane Richard has a strong personality, the communication director has to manage the positive of this personality and what is less positive. But the company policy is to avoid too much personalization by regularly putting forward other executives to promote the image of a managerial team, and more globally of team work that is very much at the heart of the company's strategy.

Measuring Performance

From the outset, Laurent Sacchi declares himself strongly opposed to the ROI obsession. He explains that communication has the ultimate goal to change attitudes and behaviors and that these changes are not instantaneous, therefore the success of communication cannot be measured in the short term, but over time.

Beatrice Mandine is more nuanced. For her, the virtue of KPIs is to provide facts in order to discuss actions that can otherwise give way to irrational judgments. Louise Beveridge has actually some doubts about the usefulness of KPIs, but emphasizes that social networks may allow to assess the relevance of an action in real time.

Elisabeth Coutureau evokes traditional indicators (including the valuation of the space equivalent) that have become completely obsolete in the digital context; for her there exists some indicators to be kept, specifically those measuring engagement, but the question of indicators is above all the one of the objectives assigned to communication and this is why they cannot be totally overlooked.

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