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Handledare: Howard Nothhaft
Examinator: Howard Nothhaft

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Putting the Communication Value Circle to the test

*A multistage exploratory study of the framework's practical
applicability*

NICOLAS MOREAU

Lunds universitet
Institutionen för strategisk kommunikation

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Acknowledgements

Taking part in this unique degree programme has been a remarkable experience, for which I am most grateful.

A lot has happened since our first team-building activity, Derek Hodge's notorious crash-course on how to design paper bridges. In Stirling, Scotland, we were introduced to PR as an academic field of study, but also explored the Highlands and concluded that most Scots are genuinely warm-hearted individuals. The next part of the degree led us to Helsingborg, Sweden, where Howard Nothhaft provided an equally remarkable introduction on ways of cultural adaptation.

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Abstract

Putting the Communication Value Circle to the test

This study explores the practical applicability of the Communication Value Circle (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017), a recent theoretical framework that describes value creation through communication in 12 dimensions drawn from four generic corporate goals. The research objective is to evaluate whether key claims from the CVC hold up in practice. Hence, a multistage research design comprising two rounds of interviews and restructuring work by the researcher enabled to assert the meanings that three chief communication officers (CCO) ascribe to the framework.

The outcome of this process confirms the CVC's general applicability and highlights some of its most relevant functions. Moreover, the study shows that organisational factors can make the framework difficult to implement or unsuitable. In addition, the findings add an important dimension to the field of communication management: it is suggested that the degree to which practitioners are appealed by theoretical frameworks such as the CVC varies, mostly as a result of distinct types of reasoning. While CCOs who think in systems are likely attracted by the CVC, it may prove less helpful to those prioritising a judgment of communication based on human empathy. Consequently, the study pleads for a greater emphasis on types of managers. Furthermore, in its deliberate choice to evaluate an existing contribution, rather than to propose a novel one, the study hopes to pave the way towards similar efforts which will create a more consistent understanding of communication value.

Keywords: Multistage exploratory study, Zerfass and Viertmann, Communication Value Circle, practical application, corporate communication management

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1. Introduction

For more than 40 years now, demonstrating and assessing the value of communication has occupied practitioners and academics alike (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Volk, 2016). Following the general agreement that one of the key functions of corporate communication is to serve the overall strategic goals of a company (Argenti, 2016; Goodman & Hirsch, 2015; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017), linking communication to corporate strategy appears crucial when discussing its value. According to Zerfass and Viertmann (2017), this task however “continues to be one of the key challenges for communication professionals around the globe” (p. 68).

To demonstrate the contribution of corporate communication to organisational effectiveness, different strands emerged over time:

- A) Calculations in monetary terms;
- B) Claims dismissing the assessment of communication value;
- C) The provision of a common language shared by managers and communication officers.

First, certain authors express a preference to calculate communication efforts in financial terms, mainly by transposing valuation concepts drawn from business administration to the field of communication (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). This includes adapting formulas such as return on investment (e.g. Rolke, 2004; Schultz, 2002; Pfannenber, 2005) or incorporating balanced scorecards as performance tools (e.g. Fleisher & Mahaffy, 1997; Hering, Schuppener & Sommerhalder, 2004; Kaplan & Norton, 1996;

2004; Zerfass, 2004; 2008).

Second, authors such as Wehmeier (2006) reject this approach, stating that it merely fosters “the illusion of controllable communication processes” (p. 218) in public relations.

A third strand focuses on explaining the influence of corporate communication through providing a terminology of value drivers and performance indicators. Most contributions aim to demonstrate the effects of messaging on stakeholder attitudes and behaviour, evoking concepts such as stakeholder awareness, the creation of intangible assets (e.g. reputation, brand) or the reflexive function of communication (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). This approach, the provision of a common language shared by managers and communication officers, is located somewhere in between of the aforementioned strands. While aware of the complexity linked to measurement in net economic value, it proposes an understanding that remains committed to the idea that communication work can be assessed. A recent example of this approach can be found in the “Communication Value Circle” (CVC) established by Zerfass and Viertmann (2017).

Measurement related to the adaptation of business and management valuation concepts proves problematic, mainly “due to the complexity of communication processes, the close nexus with other functions and activities, and a lack of transparency about costs and investments for communication in most corporations” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 71). Moreover, in times of an increased demand to justify investments in communication based on hard facts (Zerfass, Verčič & Volk, 2017), rather than on intuition or experience (Watson, 2012; Yin, Krishnan & Ean, 2012), claims related to communication being hardly measurable (cf. Wehmeier, 2006) are not helpful to practitioners. Drawing on the

problematic character of both aforementioned strands, and given that the question of how strategic communication creates business value is nowadays inevitable for practitioners (Yin et al., 2012), elaborations on intermediate approaches are deemed of future relevance in both practice and academia.

Hence, this qualitative study sets out to analyse an intermediate understanding of how corporate communication creates business value. For this purpose, the communication value circle (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017), which links communication to corporate strategy and provides a systematisation of value drivers and performance indicators, is deemed most suitable. The novelty and relevance of the framework lies in the fact that as opposed to previous propositions, not communication objectives but rather the unique corporate strategy of the focal organisation is put at the core of value creation. In addition, the CVC associates different theoretical answers which in the past were seldom combined or recognised by each other (Dühring, 2015).

More specifically, the research objective is to evaluate if a number of claims formulated by Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) with regard to the CVC framework hold up in practice. Exploratory in character, this study aims to provide a first indication on whether the CVC is helpful to practitioners in structuring how corporate communication contributes to achieving corporate goals. The following research question will thus guide the study:

To what degree do practitioners experience the CVC as fulfilling its aims as a conceptual framework (e.g. link and align communication to corporate strategy, demonstrate value)?

To answer this question, the aims of the CVC first need to be extracted from the publication in which the authors present it. Second, the individual meanings that

professional communicators ascribe to the CVC need to be explored. In this regard, since value creation is tackled on a strategic level, only the heads of a corporate communication department are qualified to discuss the framework's relevance.

Therefore, from an interpretive research tradition, three chief communication officers (CCO) were interrogated on how communication creates values. Upon completion of this process, the researcher restructured the obtained information using the communication value circle as a guideline. The outcome of this work was then presented to the participating CCOs and feedback was obtained through a second interview. Findings on the undertaken research stages, as well as on the framework's applicability, will be discussed.

It is important to note that the outlined multistage research design poses constraints. Access to top communicators proves difficult, especially when asked to discuss sensitive matters of communication strategy and to intervene on two occasions. Since each case requires significant effort, a limited number of three CCOs could be considered.

Though modest in its exploratory objectives, this study will contribute to a more sophisticated body of knowledge in the complex of strategic public relations, corporate communication and strategic communication. The relevance is threefold: first, verifying the claims of an innovative theoretical framework is a useful enterprise in terms of scholarly advancement; second, if proved helpful, insights regarding the application of the CVC may lead to a further professionalisation of the field and the institutionalisation of the communication function (Zerfass et al., 2017); and lastly, since the CVC is likely to be included in student textbooks, this study may indicate a future generation of

communicators how to apply the framework and demonstrate the value of communication.

Furthermore, the study wishes to address a remarkable contrast in communication management: although the discipline focuses on human empathy (e.g. understanding target groups to design messages), the demonstration of its value seems strongly driven by systematic rationales. In this light, it will be explored if the CVC equally appeals to both empathising and systemising CCOs.

To conclude in more general terms, additional relevance of the study arises from the fact that communication management is addressed on an overarching level. Although niche research that develops unique methodologies (e.g. city branding, reputation management) resonates among certain professionals, the field of strategic communication can only progress if its generic underlying principles are researched. The study at hand strives precisely after this goal.

2. Literature review

As outlined in the introduction, different strands to demonstrate the contribution of corporate communication to organisational effectiveness emerged over time. The purpose of the literature review is to contextualise these strands, by providing an overview of the value creation debate in corporate communication.

Regarding terminology, it is for the purpose of this study deemed unnecessary to work with an overly fine-grained differentiation of communication disciplines (cf. strategic public relations; corporate communication; strategic communication). Indeed, although subtle differences may be justified in certain contexts, the present work tackles value creation in communication at large. However, to stay in line with the authors of the CVC, the encompassing term of *corporate communication* is preferred throughout this work.

2.1 Adapting business valuation and management concepts

A first strand to document value creation expresses a preference towards net economic worth. Predominantly, concepts of business valuation and management are adapted to the field of communication (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). In this regard, two main approaches emerged: the adaptation of the return on investment formula (ROI) and of strategy performance management tools such as the balanced scorecard (BSC).

2.1.1 Return on communication investment

Many scholars and practitioners to date have proposed ways to calculate the return on investment (ROI) in communication (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Concerning a financial

measure, this formula relates to the “overall expenditure on a communications activity and the benefits to the organization or one of its business units derived from the activity” (Likely, Rockland & Weiner, 2006, p. 3). These benefits can be expressed in ways such as revenue generation, cost reduction and cost-avoidance through risk reduction. In essence, ROI calculates and expresses the percent of return for every invested financial unit (Likely et al., 2006).

Although a multitude of adaptations on ROI were formulated over the last 40 years – some sticking to pure financial data, others integrating also non-financial factors in the profitability equation – it seems that no methodology providing valid and reliable data has arisen (Watson & Zerfass, 2011). As stated by Meng and Berger (2012), calculating ROI in communication remains “a complex phenomenon requiring careful examination on many levels” (p. 351). In line with Ambler and Roberts (2008), Schultz, Cole and Bailey (2004) and Taylor (2010), Meng and Berger (2012) point out regarding ROI that though useful in linking communication to financial results, it is “unlikely to let a single metric to fully capture communication efforts and related outcomes” (p. 351).

To conclude on ROI and to illustrate the reasoning behind adapting it to the field of communication, it is helpful to briefly contextualise a practical example. As such, Rolke (2004) designed the so-called “Communication Control Cockpit” (CCC), which represents an indicator system that enables measurement of the correlations between communication performance, image value and corporate success (Communicationcontrolling.de, 2017). Since Rolke (2004) believes long-term corporate success to be dependent on the ability to create cooperation benefits with relevant stakeholders, the company's image and reputation is put at the heart of the communication

value creation. Drawing on this conceptualisation and focusing on four target groups (customers, shareholders and analysts, employees, media), Rolke (2004) created a set of indicators that express image values in relation to economic value added and employed budget. This way, it is possible to track several components in net economic terms, such as a company's total image value (“ImEx”) or the ratio of corporate value created in relation to the communication budget employed (“Return on Communications”). In a similar vein, other examples of metrics accounting for the value of communication in financial terms were formulated by a.o. Schultz (2002) and Pfannenberg (2005).

2.1.2 Balanced scorecards in communication

A second influence of business administration in the field of communication is observable through the adaptation of strategy maps and scorecards (Zerfass et al., 2017). In this regard, most contributions of practitioners and scholars attempt to transform and implement the balanced scorecard in communication practice (Wehmeier, 2006).

The BSC is a tool developed by management accounting scholars Kaplan and Norton (1992; 1993) which provides managers with a set of measures that give “a fast and comprehensive view of the business” (Kaplan & Norton, 1992, p. 71). It is structured around four perspectives (financial, customer, internal business, innovation and learning). According to the authors, the novelty of their approach lies in combining both financial and operational measures, as well as putting strategy and vision, and not control, at the centre (Kaplan & Norton, 1992).

In a later stage, Kaplan and Norton (2004) extended the application of the BSC by including so-called intangible values. With regard to communication, this involves that an organisation’s worth is not just the combined value of sales and operations, but also of

its intangible brand identity. Although the BSC in the first place reflects the values of an organisation and aims to assert value beyond financial indicators, the application of it often results in non-financial aspects being evaluated in monetary terms. In communication for instance, brand valuations (e.g. brand equity) are likely to be preferred when interpreting intangibles such as brand identity.

To improve the managerial capabilities in performance assessment of communication, several BSC adaptations were proposed in recent years. Fleisher and Mahaffy (1997) drew on the example of a corporate publications department and formulated specific measures to assess all four perspectives of the BSC. This includes, for instance, cost per issue and reader (financial) and percentage of readership of new columns (innovation). Along these lines, Ritter (2003) worked out BSCs that measure a.o. media & internet presence and internal communication for the case of Siemens Argentina. Finally, as noted by Wehmeier (2006), the corporate communications scorecard by Zerfass (2004; 2008) is “more complex and ambitious as it tries to map the entire corporate communications continuum” (p. 215). Departing from the corporate strategy, it identifies crucial performance indicators and their value drivers, as well as measurements and parameters of these value drivers. This in turn makes it possible to assess the effectiveness of communication programmes (Zerfass, 2004; 2008).

To conclude on adaptations of balanced scorecards in communication, it can be argued that similarly to return on investment (ROI) they share a preference towards demonstrating and assessing communication value by linking activities to financial indicators.

2.2 Rationality and control as a myth

A second strand to thematise the value of corporate communication questions the adaptation of concepts drawn from business valuation and management. Several authors criticise the tendency to bind communication “to a management framework that fosters a doctrine of quantification, measurement, and control” (Wehmeier, 2009, p. 266). Pal and Dutta (2008), for instance, question the entire management orientation in public relations and aim to interrupt it. Another notable contribution is provided by Wehmeier (2006), who characterises the pursuit of measurement and control in communication as a “myth to achieve social legitimacy” (p. 213).

To grasp the reasoning that underlies one of these antagonistic views, it is worth briefly discussing Wehmeier’s (2006) perspective. The author draws on the case of public relations and takes a critical look at the implementation of balanced scorecards (BSC) in the discipline. Wehmeier first accentuates that from a functionalist conception, public relations appears as dealing with “planned, controlled, and mostly, proactive designed communication” (p. 214). In contrast, by approaching public relations as a social process, organisational analyses point to the shortcomings of rationality and plannable decision-making. The author here refers to a study by Schimank (2003), who demonstrated that “organizational decision makers just pretend to make rational decisions and sometimes even cherish the illusion as if they would do so” (p. 267). Drawing on a neo-institutionalist perspective which argues that societal expectations frame and constrain action, Wehmeier (2006) accordingly contends that organisations “do not just develop formal rational structures in order to deal efficiently with problems” (p. 214), but also to achieve legitimacy through symbolic interaction.

In this regard, the BSC is conceptualised as “an example of the myth of rationality” (Wehmeier, 2006, p. 216), since its adaptation in public relations essentially displays commercial organisations’ desire to gain social legitimacy and their affinity with techniques of numerical measurement. However, as public relations is anchored in the complex structure of the public sphere, the discipline appears “hardly measurable or monetary ascertainable” (Wehmeier, 2006, p. 217; Berger, 1984). Hence, Wehmeier (2006) concludes that in quantifying dimensions that cannot be governed, tools such as the BSC only provide organisations with a pseudo-objectivity of rational decision-making. Moreover, this in turn can become counterproductive, as employees faced with the presence of rationality tools are often less encouraged to think on their own initiative (Falk & Kosfeld, 2005; Wehmeier, 2006).

To conclude, while this second strand on value creation proposes a critique to numerical measurement and control (first identified strand), it essentially highlights an understanding of organisations and publics as complex, dynamic systems. In doing so, the work of Wehmeier (2006), but also of Bentele and Wehmeier (2007) and Nothhaft and Wehmeier (2007), pleads for the acknowledgement of complexity and suggests that quantifying methods may not be suitable to assert communication value.

2.3 Providing a common language

Finally, a third strand focuses on the influence of corporate communication through providing a terminology of value drivers and performance indicators. While measurement techniques are to date available for most of the performance indicators discussed below (Zerfass et al., 2017), this strand essentially creates a common ground of understanding for top management and heads of communication. Scherer (1995) and Zerfass (2005)

therefore refer to term “instrument of speech” (German: Redeinstrument)¹, since approaches from this strand can assist managers in decision-making processes, yet do not offer a “one best way solution” (Zerfass, 2005).

In this regard, a number of sub-approaches are identified by Zerfass and Viertmann (2017). The majority of them provide an explanation of how corporate communication messaging influences stakeholder attitudes and behaviour.

A first possibility is to conceptualise value at the operational level. Here, the aim is to track links between communication and stakeholder attitudes, focusing for instance on changes in customer preferences or employee motivation (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017).

A variety of models that relate communication messaging to stakeholder attitudes were developed to date, most of which cluster “communicative outcomes into different chunks and levels of effects, such as media output, stakeholder awareness, attitudes, etc.” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 70). To cite only one, Lindenmann (2003) proposes guidelines for measuring the effectiveness of PR programmes that focus on outputs (exposure of messages), outtakes (how messages are received) and most importantly outcomes (opinions, attitudes and/or behaviour changes).

Second, value can be conceptualised strategically as a resource or immaterial capital, as embedded in the notion of “intangible asset”. Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno and Tench (2015) note that practitioners often refer to this dimension when explaining the

¹ “Instrument of speech” is a free translation by the author N.M. Furthermore, it should be noted that Zerfass (2005) refers to this notion with regard to his Corporate Communications Scorecard. Although following Zerfass (2005) in this conceptualisation, namely that his scorecard does not offer a “one best way solution”, it was for this work opted to locate all adaptations of scorecards in point 2.1, since they are seen as linking communication value with financial indicators, rather than as providing a common ground of conversation.

value of their work to superiors, evoking concepts such as reputation, social capital or brands. In line with the conceptualisation of value at the operational level, raising awareness and changing stakeholders' attitudes are believed to drive the creation of intangible assets for corporations (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017).

A third conceptualisation of value centres on the potential for future success. Recent contributions highlight that communication work encompasses more than integrated messaging platforms and strategies (cf. Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). Hence, Macnamara (2016) stresses the importance and benefits for organisations to build so-called "architectures of listening", which include key elements such as a culture and policies for listening, but also the articulation of listening to decision-making. Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) remark that this underlines communication professionals' ability to drive performance among all members of an organisation, by "widening their understanding of communicative prerequisites and the consequences of strategic decisions in the public sphere" (p. 71). In this regard, organisational listening can inform aspects that are directly linked to corporate success, such as change, innovation or crisis management.

To conclude in more general terms, it becomes evident that the aforementioned conceptualisations provide explanations that highlight the relevance of communication investments. However, they do not offer an all-encompassing solution to the value creation debate. Rather, these forms of discourse provide a common language shared by managers and communication officers. As observed by Zerfass and Sherzada (2015), this corresponds to the idea that "overlapping perceptions might facilitate the influence and quality of corporate communications" (p. 304).

In offering a systematisation and visualisation of value drivers and performance indicators, the communication value circle performs the same function. Although measurement techniques can be coupled to it, the CVC first and foremost depicts a conceptual tool that facilitates a common understanding between the managerial and communication level. Therefore, within the broader debate on value creation, the CVC can be linked to other approaches producing an “instrument of speech”. These approaches in turn appear as somewhat intermediate: while aware of the complexity linked to measurement in net economic value (see 2.1), they remain distanced from the idea that communication cannot be assessed (see 2.2).

2.4 Concluding summary

From a review of this literature, it can first be concluded that the evaluation and measurement of corporate communication has greatly occupied practitioners and academics for the past 40 years (Volk, 2016). Several approaches that thematise value creation emerged over time, which are here clustered in three major strands². In this regard, it becomes evident that the communication value circle, which is central to this study, provides *one way* to document value. Conceptualisations that prioritise other components coexist (cf. 2.1 and 2.2).

Second, it can be stated that although numerous attempts were proposed, no consistent and comprehensive answer to date exists to the question of how communication creates value for organisations (Zerfass et al., 2017; Volk, 2016). Indeed, numerical approaches prove problematic due to the complexity of communication processes and positions such as the one outlined by Wehmeier (2006) are not helpful to practitioners. Furthermore,

² It is important to note that this classification derives from a personal understanding. Other ways of clustering were formulated, see for instance Zerfass (2005).

Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) emphasise that researchers tend to stick to their specific field of knowledge and seldom combine conflicting views. Therefore, in proposing an intermediate approach that shifts the focus towards corporate strategy and encompasses elements that in the past often remained isolated, the CVC is deemed of future relevance.

Third, and most notably, a review of the literature highlights that evaluating the relevance of theoretical frameworks remains a rare enterprise among scholars. At present, concepts often resonate in practice and they are implemented within an organisation, which leads to the formulation of reports in anthologies and journals (e.g. Ritter, 2003). Given the multitude of proposed models and frameworks however, research that evaluates claims in a systematic manner is lacking. It is precisely this gap that the study at hand wishes to fill by verifying claims from the CVC. Consequently, the next chapter will introduce the framework and identify its major claims.

3. The communication value circle

As previously stated, the present study will evaluate whether claims related to the communication value circle hold up in practice. Therefore, this section is dedicated to introducing the framework and providing the reader with a thorough understanding of it. In addition, the objectives and central claims of the CVC will be identified.

It is important to highlight that the CVC is at the core of this study, since it forms the starting point to evaluate claims. Therefore, the framework will not serve as a theoretical lens or perspective to interpret possible findings, which is often the case in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Rather, it will be the object of study.

3.1 Origins of the framework

The establishment of the CVC is part of the “Value Creating Communication” project, a large enterprise initiated in 2015 by the Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication in Germany. In this regard, researchers from various countries and universities collaborate on what is described as “the world’s most comprehensive research program for strategic corporate communications” (Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication, 2017). Consequently, the CVC framework contributes to the project’s overall aim to research the key challenges facing communication management, create a consistent image of the profession and emphasise the contribution it can make to a company’s success.

The creation of the CVC is essentially driven by the fact that linking communication to

business strategy remains a key challenge for communicators around the globe. The authors, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017), refer to findings from recent empirical studies (e.g. Macnamara, Lwin, Adi & Zerfass, 2015; Zerfass et al., 2015; Moreno, Molleda, Athaydes & Suárez, 2015) that identify this topic on a global scale “as most or second-most significant issue for the profession in next years” (p. 68). Moreover, empirical studies show that no consistent rationale of how communication adds value exists among practitioners (Macnamara et al., 2015). This in turn can lead to uncertainty among business leaders (Kiesenbauer & Zerfass, 2015).

In line with a lacking consistency among professionals, Likely (2000) and Volk (2016) argue that researchers tend to retain a strong focus on their respective field of knowledge, so that contrasting views are seldom combined (Dühring, 2015). Finally, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) observe that professionals and researchers often focus on “soft factors” (e.g. relationships, brands, reputation) which only correspond to one outcome of communication value and are subjected to factors beyond the control of the communication department. In addition, no standards exist for combining these soft factors and for explaining their connection to organisational strategy (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017).

Drawing on the fragmented state of affairs, it becomes evident that developing a consistent and comprehensive explanation of how communication adds value remains a high priority (Zerfass et al., 2017). Not only will this contribute to a further professionalisation of the field, but also will it enable to overcome the “deadlock” in measurement and evaluation cited by Macnamara (2015).

Hence, the communication value circle wishes to depict a holistic view, rather than one key indicator or equation. Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) achieved this by combining theoretical answers that remained isolated in the past. From a vast review of academic literature, the authors identified four major rationales on the value of communication and subsequently drew them together. The first three approaches explain the influence of corporate communication messaging on stakeholder attitudes and behaviour, namely by 1) tracking links between communication and stakeholder attitudes, 2) creating intangible assets and 3) enabling future success through organisational listening. These rationales are in this work located within the strand of providing a common language (see 2.3). The fourth identified rationale concerns the adaptation of business valuation and management concepts (see 2.2).

3.2 Conceptualisation of communication value

As outlined by Zerfass and Viertmann (2017), most of the above-mentioned rationales place communication processes at the centre of value creation. This circumstance however does not correspond to the supporting function of communication in a business context. Therefore, the CVC deliberately shifts the focus to the requirements of corporate strategy, since they “should define the values to be supported or created” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 72). In doing so, De Beer’s (2014) call to integrate corporate communication into strategic management is followed, so that professionals can illustrate how their work contributes to the creation of value for organisations and society at large.

Since the CVC departs from corporate strategy, it is important to briefly define how value is conceptualised in business terms. Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) note that “value creation describes the transformation of resources into goods or services with a higher

financial value” (p. 72), which supports the overall objective of any corporation “to work efficiently and effectively to create financial value today and enable value creation in the future” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 72). According to the authors, corporate communication forms an integral part of this process. While value-based management³ was in the past often linked to shareholder value⁴, which restricts the function of communication to solely positioning a company in the marketplace or creating a favourable image among investors, it is “common knowledge today that corporate success not only depends on shareholders but also on sustainable relationships with employees, politicians, regulators, customers, mass media, social media influencers, and many other stakeholders” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 72). Consequently, the authors argue that an organisation is anchored in a market, but also positioned within a social and political context.

In the understanding of Zerfass and Viertmann (2017), the primary task of communication consists of strategically managing and measuring this position by using communicative means. This conceptualisation is essential to fully grasp how the CVC is designed, since it goes hand in hand with the belief that communication takes up a transversal role within an organisation. The authors outline that communication therefore is part of primary activities such as logistics, marketing and sales, but also of supporting activities (e.g. HR management, firm infrastructure). In essence, the proposed view widens the communication function from merely reaching out to stakeholders to also enabling organisational listening and learning from the environment.

³ Value-based management puts forward that corporate decisions should focus on increasing a company’s overall value, rather than solely achieving short-term benefits (Porter, 1985).

⁴ From a shareholder value perspective, the ultimate test of corporate strategy is whether it creates economic value for shareholders (Rappaport, 1986).

3.3 Creation of the framework

The authors aimed at incorporating a consistent typology of corporate and communication goals into their framework. Based on the goals for business success defined by strategic management theory, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) identified four generic types of corporate value:

- 1) Tangible assets, which “include financial resources as well as goods and equipment that have a market value” (p. 73). They are required to comply with the demands of all parties interacting with a corporation, such as shareholders, employees, suppliers etc.
- 2) Intangible assets, which “are needed to deal with uncertainty, complexity, and future challenges” (p. 73). They can be based, for instance, in positive brand associations or a worthy reputation.
- 3) Room for manoeuvre, which is “a value in itself since a corporation has to ensure that it gains and retains its license to operate” (p.73).
- 4) Opportunities for development, which are essential for corporations since they “allow them to rebuild their business models and reposition themselves within their environment” (p. 73).

These values represent dimensions that are prioritised and operationalised by corporate strategies, and turned into specific goals that corporate management seeks to achieve. Resulting from their direct relation to corporate strategy, they are placed at the inner circle of the CVC (see Figure 1). It is important to note that these generic values are supported by every function within an organisation, such as HR management, sales, or corporate communication (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Depending on the singular objectives of the focal organisation, a respective importance will be asserted to each of them. Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) mention that it will be more important for a start-up company in the software industry, for instance, to invest in building up intangible assets (e.g. customer base, recognised brand), whereas the tangible asset of generating profits might be less

important at an early stage.

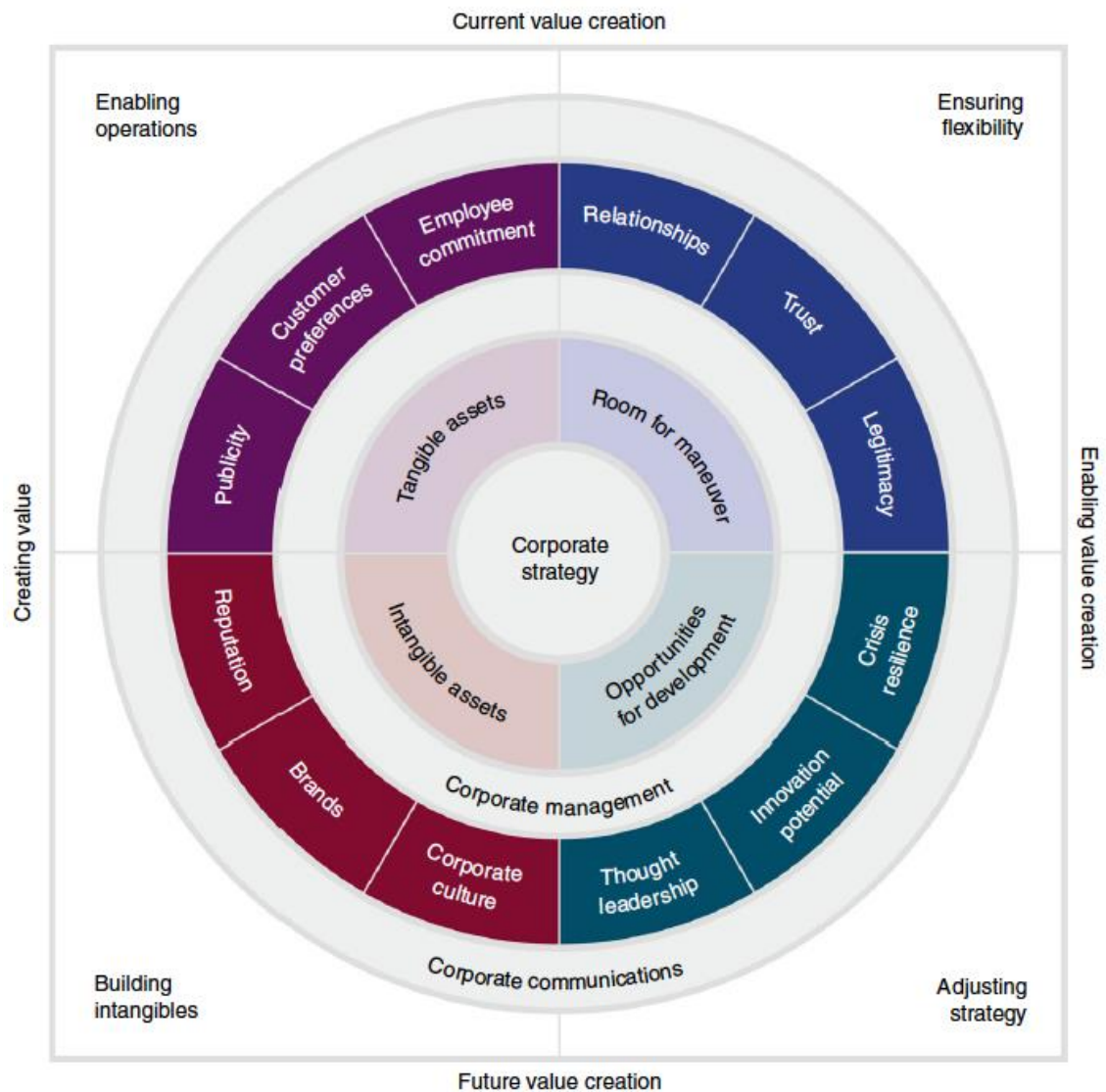


Figure 1: the communication value circle (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017)

As can be observed, the CVC represents a sophisticated visualisation that “explains the process of value creation through communication at the levels of corporate strategy, corporate management, and corporate communication” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 74).

The corporate strategy of the focal organisation is put at the core, which in turn directs the four dimensions of value placed in the inner circle. Accordingly, these dimensions were used by Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) to structure the various communication goals

identified in the literature, leading to 12 generic types of communication value (outer circle, see Figure 1) and “four dimensions of what communication actually does to support a corporation’s value creation: enabling operations, building intangibles, ensuring flexibility, and adjusting strategy” (p.73). These are shown in the outside corners of the CVC and can help to categorise the goals for communication programmes and campaigns (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017):

- 1) Enabling operations:** communication supports business operations both internally and externally, “through stimulating publicity, customer preferences, and employee commitment” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 75). It also contributes to the creation of material assets by ensuring that content and messages are disseminated. In more general terms, communication is at the origin of value creation for key stakeholders, since it enters “into dialogues with employees, suppliers, customers, etc., on a daily basis” (p. 75).
- 2) Building intangibles:** communication contributes to the creation of “intangible assets, such as reputation, brands, or corporate culture” (p. 75). These intangibles are part of the overall value of the company.
- 3) Ensuring flexibility:** communication forges relationships with stakeholders, which ensure that a company maintains its license to operate. This room for manoeuvre becomes increasingly important in crisis situations, when “having relationships that are based on trust or, at least, a perception of the legitimacy of the corporation’s values and actions” (p. 75) is paramount.
- 4) Adjusting strategy:** communication “assists in making strategic management decisions by fostering thought leadership, innovation potential, and crisis resilience” (p. 75). This value proposition essential relies on communication department’s ability to listen (e.g. monitoring public opinion, markets and politics).

Figure 2: the four dimensions of communication value

The CVC is an interdisciplinary framework that essentially reflects a commercial setting (see creation of tangible assets). Therefore, it should be applicable “in any corporation” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 68). However, most value dimensions also apply to non-commercial entities such as publicly held services (e.g. municipalities, healthcare) or NGOs. These also strive for stable and trustful relationships, rely on committed employees and on a certain publicity of their products or brands, and should be innovative to retain their position among competitors. In this regard, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017)

underline that the CVC is not a normative representation and that it is necessary to adapt it to the variables and situations applicable to the focal organisation (field of action, type and size, stakeholders etc.).

The framework can be read either vertically or horizontally: from the vertical point of view, “tangible assets and intangible assets contribute to creating corporate value, whereas room for manoeuvre and opportunities for development contribute to enabling value creation” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 74). From the horizontal point of view, the current value creation is represented by tangible assets and room for manoeuvre, whereas future value creation is fostered by intangible assets and development opportunities.

Finally, it should be noted that the CVC does not represent a *model*, which is in management literature defined as a tool that designates operational procedures and mathematical connections that exist among them (Scherer, 1995). Rather, the term *framework* is more appropriate, since the outcome of applying the CVC is largely dependent on the respective focal organisation and the interests that guide their interpretation (Zerfass, 2005).

3.4 Objectives and claims

As outlined in the literature review, the CVC first and foremost depicts a conceptual tool that facilitates a common understanding between the managerial and communication level. The framework “identifies and systematizes communication goals linked to generic corporate goals” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 68). In other words, applying the CVC should make it possible to link communication activities to corporate strategy. This in turn forms the starting point towards measurement. By comprehensively defining and

categorising the objectives for communication activities, the CVC indeed sets the bar for measuring their outcome. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication will publish the third issue of “Communication Insights” on June 1st 2017. This document defines the 12 generic types of communication value located on the CVC’s outer circle and presents relevant KPIs to assert their effectiveness.

With regard to the actual use of the CVC, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) claim that it can be employed “as a management tool to identify, discuss, structure, and agree on value drivers and performance indicators in corporate communication” (p. 76). Consequently, the authors state that the framework enables to match the priorities of a communication department with the ones from corporate management, which contributes to the so-called strategic alignment of communication (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017).

From the author’s conceptualisation, it appears that the CVC can be used at several stages of communication work. First, the framework can act prior to the execution of communication as “a tool for planning and prioritizing management and communication goals” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 76). Second, it can be used during and upon completion of communication activities to identify links to corporate strategy and demonstrate value. Third, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) outline that it should ultimately be possible to “use the framework to reconstruct empirical settings with the aim of describing specific approaches, identifying gaps, and outlining the best practices for value-creating communication” (p.77). This corresponds to the overall reflections and possible improvements that can be formulated upon completion of activities.

Based on the aforementioned specificities of the CVC, a number of key claims can be extracted. In this regard, the communication value circle (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017):

- 1) “Identifies and systematizes communication goals linked to generic corporate goals” (p. 68), thus making it possible to link communication activities to corporate strategy.
- 2) “Contributes to the *strategic alignment of communication* with overall organizational goals” (p. 76).
- 3) “Enables communication professionals to discuss their work with superiors and business partners” (p. 76).
- 4) “Helps to make corporate communication more transparent and manageable” (p. 76).
- 5) Should ultimately enable to “reconstruct empirical settings with the aim of describing specific approaches, identifying gaps, and outlining the best practices for value-creating communication in a common language” (p. 77).

As can be observed, these claims are drawn directly from the authors’ publication. A final claim identified by the researcher can be added to this enumeration, namely that the communication value circle:

- 6) Should enable students or any other individuals with no substantial experience of communication management to reach a higher level of understanding. Indeed, by linking corporate communication to corporate strategy and providing a systematisation of value drivers and performance indicators, applying the CVC should make it possible to better grasp how communication creates value within an organisation.

The identification of these central claims is at the core of this study, which is concerned with verifying whether they hold up in practice. The groundwork for this enterprise was laid in this chapter. Consequently, the next section will introduce the applied research design and methodology.

4. Research design and methods

As previously outlined, this study puts forward a systematic, controlled evaluation of claims made by the authors of the communication value circle. When conducting such formal research, it is crucial to find the method that best addresses the demands of the study (Blaikie, 2007).

Therefore, this section will first introduce the research approach and thus outline the philosophical worldview and methodological approach followed while conducting the study. Next, the specific research design which includes the gathering and analysis of material will be reviewed. It will be demonstrated that the chosen method serves best to fulfil the objectives of the study. Finally, limitations and ethical considerations will be discussed.

4.1 Research approach and strategy

Knowledge can be added to the field of public relations and communication through social research (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). In this regard, researchers rely on different approaches to examine social phenomena, ranging from qualitative or quantitative to mixed methods (Bryman, 2012).

Since the CVC covers a complex topic which should be reviewed within the specific setting of an organisation, the relevance of the framework can only be determined through an in-depth understanding of the meanings that practitioners hold about it (Creswell, 2014). Hence, the research participants need to forge a nuanced opinion on whether the

CVC is helpful, in what circumstances it can be applied, and how they could incorporate it in their future work.

Capturing this specific set of information is done best through a qualitative research approach, which allows to analyse and understand phenomena in a context-specific setting (Bryman, 2012). This in turn enables to “uncover the views and meanings held by research participants, to understand the world in their terms and therefore to take account of the many, changing ways of understanding what it means to be involved in communicating as a member of a stakeholder group or as a practitioner” (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 7). It is precisely for these reasons that a qualitative approach is judged most adequate to answer the research question.

As well as selecting a research approach, “researchers need to adopt a logic of inquiry, a research strategy, to answer research questions” (Blaikie, 2007, p. 56). In most cases, qualitative researchers adopt an inductive research process⁵, which allows them to work back and forth between the themes and database until a comprehensive set of themes is defined (Creswell, 2014). While this study follows most characteristics of a qualitative approach (see Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2014), it differs regarding the research strategy since a deductive approach is adopted.

The study is indeed conducted with reference to a hypothesis and ideas are inferred from it (Bryman, 2012). This hypothesis testing should however not be conceived in a strictly quantitative manner, but rather as a *verification* of the working hypothesis that the CVC proves helpful to practitioners (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). The term *testing* is therefore

⁵ An abductive reasoning can also be applied within qualitative research (see Bryman, 2012, p. 401).

avoided throughout this study, as it rather concerns an *evaluation* of claims drawn from Zerfass and Viertmann's (2017) publication.

4.2 Research tradition

As Prasad (2005) notes, qualitative research is far from “being a uniform set of techniques or procedures” (p. 3) that serve to collect and analyse data. A qualitative inquiry largely relies on the scholarly discipline it is influenced by and on the chosen ontological and epistemological stances. Ontology refers to the reality that is investigated and epistemology reflects how knowledge of this reality can be obtained (Blaikie, 2007). These stances form different traditions or theoretical paradigms, which will in turn provide guidelines for the research conduct and thus influence its outcome (Prasad, 2005).

According to Prasad (2005), two main paradigms reflecting a philosophical worldview have guided social enquiry for the last years: positivism and postpositivism. Like the majority of contemporary accounts in social sciences, this study is based on a postpositivist worldview.

Postpositivism can be conceptualised as a critical reaction to positivist assumptions which assume reality “to be concrete, separate from the researcher and understandable through the accurate use of “objective” methods of data collection” (Prasad, 2005, p. 4). Rather, postpositivism contends that absolute truth can never be found (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Phillips & Burbules (2000) highlight that knowledge is seen as conjectural and that evidence in research is always conceived as imperfect and fallible.

Hence, the ontological character of postpositivism is rooted in critical realism that views

reality as “imperfectly apprehendable because of basically flawed human intellectual mechanisms and the fundamentally intractable nature of phenomena” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). This orientation thus stresses the importance of human interaction when conducting research in a social context (Prasad, 2005). As outlined by Crotty (1998), meaning is always generated socially and arises from the interaction with a human community. Hence, the epistemological underpinning of postpositivism is based on a modified dualist or objectivist perspective arguing that the investigator and investigated “object” cannot be assumed to be independent entities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The investigator influences the object and he or she is most likely in turn influenced by it.

Since this study involves interviews with communication professionals that centre on the value of communication and communication strategy at large (see 4.3), the gathered material does not reflect phenomena that exist “out there”. Although the discussed strategy reflects plausible constructions that to a certain degree guide resource allocations in reality, the obtained material largely derives from human interactions, in this case between participant and researcher. Indeed, it is most likely that the participants heavily tailor their presentation to the context of the interview. Furthermore, the study can only ascertain whether participants *believe* that the CVC could help in linking communication work to corporate strategy. The aim is thus to formulate true statements about their beliefs, which may not necessarily reflect whether the statements are true (Phillips & Burbules, 2000).

Grasping these intricacies through positivism proves problematic, since “knowledge of the “way things are” is conventionally summarized in the form of time- and context-free generalizations” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109). Postpositivism on the contrary allows

to approach the material with an awareness of the human interaction at play and with the intention to generate true *beliefs*, as opposed to absolute truth. For these reasons, the study at hand is guided by a post-positivistic interpretive-inspired inquiry (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

The interpretive tradition, also referred to as constructivism, assumes that “human ‘actors’ interpret and actively shape their environment” and are “influenced by their social and historical location” (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 102). Reality is conceived as the result of socially constructed meanings which only exist in human consciousness, and not in an outside world (Blaikie, 2007).

This conceptualisation is in line with the present study, which in a first round of interviews deals with practitioners’ representations of their own work. This information is exposed to the researcher, who interprets it and then restructures it using the CVC as a guideline. Hence, the outcome that is sent back to the participants can be conceptualised as a reconstruction of their own social constructions. This outcome is then once again interpreted by the respective participants. Finally, feedback is obtained and interpreted by the researcher. As a consequence, it appears quite evidently that the entire research project takes place on the level of social constructions and reflects the sense making of the researcher and participants, rather than an independently existing outside world. As stated by Daymon and Holloway (2011), “it is the manner in which the investigator interprets the social world that determines social reality because investigators and research participants are involved in constructing social reality” (p. 102). In this regard, the aim of the study is to uncover the meanings that participants ascribe to the communication value circle.

Lastly, it is essential to note that the social constructions at the centre of the study do have an impact on the outside world. The formulation of strategy conceptualised by the CVC indeed guides the efforts of the participants' respective communication departments. This tangible repercussion highlights the relevance of studying the outlined social constructions.

4.3 Research method

Different research methods were considered to determine whether the CVC holds up to its aims. As argued earlier, answering this question requires an exploration of the individual meanings that professional communicators ascribe to the CVC, which justifies the said qualitative approach. Furthermore, since the study tackles value creation through communication on a strategic level, only the heads of a corporate communication department are qualified to discuss the framework's relevance.

An initially considered method would have entailed one round of interviews with chief communication officers. The CVC would have been introduced and the meanings that CCOs ascribe to it could have been evaluated through semi-structured questioning (Bryman, 2012). However, this approach would not have enabled to link the framework to the actual value creation that occurs within a participant's communication department.

Therefore, it was deemed more pertinent to *apply* the communication value circle to the specific setting of participants. As well as enhancing the relevance for CCOs to take part in the study, it in turn enables them to formulate a judgment on the CVC that is based on a concrete application directly related to their work. Hence, the following multistage research design was created:

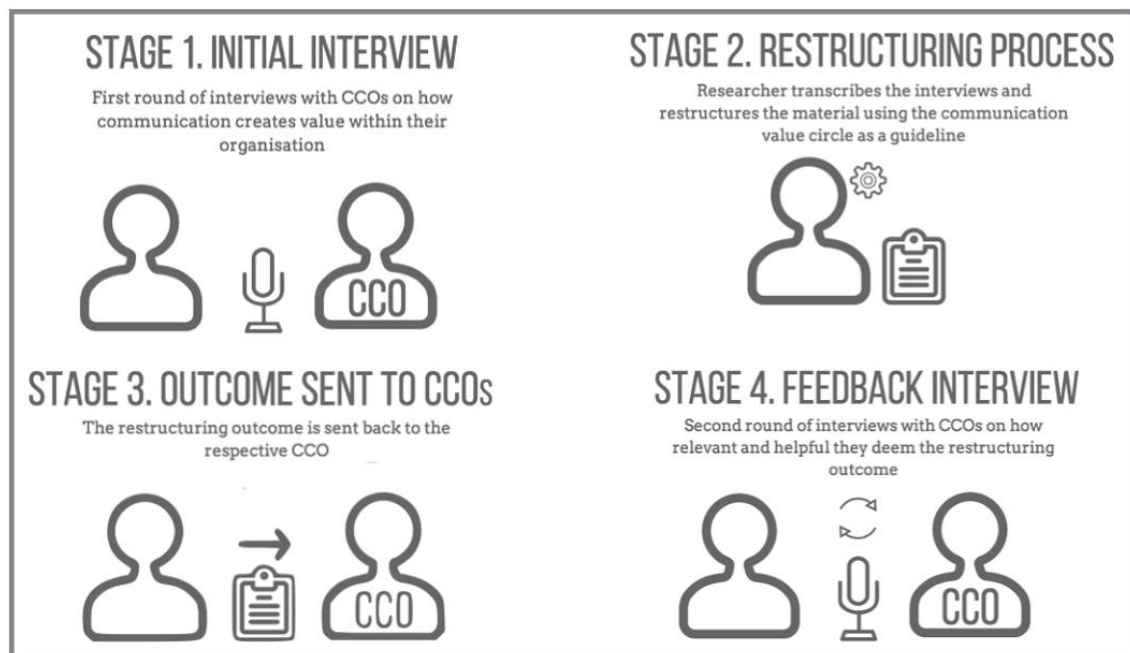


Figure 3: the multistage research design

The stages as shown above present the research method adopted for this study. All stages play an integral role in formulating an answer to the research question. While the final stage addresses the core of the evaluation, namely how helpful the CVC is deemed by the participants, the first two stages additionally offer useful accounts. The first stage in fact displays the different ways in which communication value is conceptualised and demonstrated by CCOs. The second stage in turn makes it possible to reflect on how the CVC can and should be applied in practice. These elements will be incorporated in the findings and discussion.

Validation

As appears from the research design, an important stage consists of restructuring the information obtained during the initial interviews. This task is performed by the researcher. To warrant that the CVC framework is applied as intended by the authors, a video call with Karen Berger from the Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication was scheduled prior to the research process. Berger is the project leader

of the research programme “Value Creating Communication” in which the CVC was established. During the said conversation, Berger validated the claims identified in the third chapter as well as the above outlined research method. Moreover, she ensured that the researcher’s understanding of the CVC framework is correct.

Concerning the initial round of interviews, Berger approved the proposition to not yet familiarise participants with the CVC. Very concretely, this entails that interviews are not structured by the framework’s value drivers. Rather, it was decided to let the interviewees talk freely, without referring to any terms anchored in the framework. This way, participants are not steered into a certain direction and the vision of how communication contributes to achieving corporate goals can be obtained with minimal interference from the researcher. The rationale behind this decision is to evaluate whether the CVC can make sense out an “undirected” stream of information. Furthermore, this enables the researcher to assess if applying the CVC and thereby adopting a systematic approach enhances one’s understanding of communication management.

While the decision to not base the initial interviews on the CVC was a deliberate one, it should be noted that future research could elaborate on the alternative which includes the CVC as a guideline to structure interview questions. Such research will prove equally valid and may advance convincing results. Moreover, further studies could assess if using the CVC framework turns out more effective than being a-theoretical. For this, an experimental research design seems most suitable. Although taken into consideration at an early stage of this study, practical restrictions of time and limited availability of CCOs did not allow for this method.

Finally, since no concrete instructions on how to apply the CVC are provided in Zerfass and Viertmann’s publication (2017), it was agreed during the talk with Berger to proceed as following for the restructuring work: upon transcription of each interview, the researcher identifies passages that correspond to components of the CVC. Then, in the restructuring outcome, these are linked to the CVC. For instance, when a CCO mentions during the initial interview that communication is responsible for convincing consumers that the company’s products are to be preferred over those from competitors, this aspect is linked to “tangible assets” (inner circle of CVC, see Figure 1) and “customer preferences” (outer circle). The following example drawn from a restructuring outcome exemplifies this approach:

Enabling operations: communication supports business operations internally and externally by creating **tangible assets**

Employee commitment: not specifically mentioned during the interview

Customer preferences: trying to convince the consumer that X are to be chosen over Y for reasons of Z: presentations of CCO, upcoming website on project with A; trying to take over the public sector and establish the brand in B; sustainability communication efforts

Publicity: managed by the commercial and creative department: ads, campaigns, packaging communication etc. are not responsibility of corporate communication (CC), however CC manages the reactions (see “relationships” below); furthermore, CC produces debate articles for newspapers to clarify the company’s mission and create awareness

Figure 4: the restructuring process

By completing the above procedure for all relevant interview passages, the CCOs are offered a systematisation of their presentation based on the value drivers of the CVC. It becomes evident to them what focus they adopted, since value drivers that were not addressed are left blank (see “employee commitment” in Figure 4). In addition, at the end of each restructuring outcome, a number of overall reflections are formulated by the researcher.

In more general terms, the outlined considerations show that great attention is given to applying the framework as intended by the authors. The claims to be evaluated were furthermore approved as relevant by Berger. The validity of the study, conceptualised by Brinkman and Kvale (2015) as “whether a method investigates what it purports to investigate” (p. 282), arises from this enterprise. In fact, ensuring that the CVC is correctly understood and adequately transposed in practice forms the basis for a “sound, well-grounded, justifiable, strong, and convincing” argument (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015, p. 282).

Research sample

With regard to sampling, the main challenge consisted of finding participants willing to comment on sensitive matters of corporate strategy and to be involved in two rounds of interviews. These rather heavy constraints, together with the study’s exploratory character, argued for a convenience sample (Bryman, 2012). To maximise the chances of participation, it was chosen to rely on the researcher’s personal and professional network.

In this regard, the main sampling criteria were that participants are heads of corporate communication and willing to complete all stages of the study. The sector in which they are active is of lesser importance, since the study aims to provide a first indication on the practical applicability of the CVC. Five CCOs were identified and sent an invitation email. Two CCOs turned down the offer due to time constraints.

While the CVC as previously outlined is mainly designed for corporations, it was attempted to include another organisational type in the sample. This way, the CVC’s relevance can be assessed beyond the corporate business domain. The involvement of a university’s CCOs enables this broader perspective. The two remaining CCOs are part of

companies active in the food sector.

Research process

The CCOs that showed interest were sent a second email with a detailed brief of the research design. Concerning the initial interview, it was highlighted that no questions would be asked. As outlined earlier, the objective of this interview is to obtain the CCOs' respective vision of how communication creates business value. As well as not introducing the CVC, it was opted to let the interviewees talk freely for a duration of 30 minutes. It was emphasised that if necessary, a small session with clarification questions would take place at the very end of the interview. The following preparatory guidelines were provided:

Elements to bear in mind for the presentation:

- *What is the core business of your organisation? What does the market look like?*
- *How does your organisation navigate in this competitive environment?*
- *How does communication contribute to achieving these goals?*

Put very simply, your presentation could address the following question: What did the communication department achieve for the organisation over, for instance, the last year?

Figure 5: provided guidelines for the initial interview

As can be observed, a temporal dimension was included since it can be difficult to address matters of strategy and goal attainment in an abstract way.

All interviews took place face-to-face and were voice-recorded. Only limited interference from the researcher in the form of clarification questions was necessary. Upon completion of this process, the interviews were transcribed and the restructuring work was performed by the researcher. The outcome was drafted back to the participants.

The second round of interviews, which enables CCOs to provide feedback on the restructuring outcome, took place via phone for reasons of convenience. Interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes. This time, specific questions were addressed by the researcher. These are directly based on the claims from Zerfass and Viertmann's (2017) publication (see Chapter 3) and guide the study as sub-research questions:

Do you believe that the communication value circle:

- 1) "Identifies and systematizes communication goals linked to generic corporate goals" (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 68), thus making it possible to link communication activities to corporate strategy?
- 2) "Contributes to the *strategic alignment of communication* with overall organizational goals" (p. 76)?
- 3) "Enables communication professionals to discuss their work with superiors and business partners" (p. 76)?
- 4) "Helps to make corporate communication more transparent and manageable" (p. 76)?
- 5) "Should ultimately enable to "reconstruct empirical settings with the aim of describing specific approaches, identifying gaps, and outlining the best practices for value-creating communication in a common language" (p. 77)?

In more general terms, do you have the impression:

- 6) that I grasped your presentation correctly and that the restructuring work reflects this? Do you believe that applying the CVC helped me – a person with no substantial experience of communication management – to reach a higher level of understanding?

Figure 6: questions structuring the feedback interview

Upon transcription of the feedback interviews, the analysis progressed going from thoughts on the restructuring process to reviewing the feedback provided by the CCOs. Although the participants' feedback plays an important role in answering the research question, the researcher remains the study's main instrument. Indeed, to evaluate the claims and the CVC's applicability, it is necessary to make sense of all research stages and reflect on their broader implications.

Accordingly, to offer insights into the multiple research stages, the findings will remain descriptive and articulate how the initial interviews were restructured using the CVC, as

well as outline the provided feedback. To draw a portrait of each restructuring process, this section will be structured case per case.

Following, the discussion will tie back the material to the claims from the CVC and evaluate each one of them. In addition, the overall applicability and relevance of the CVC will be discussed.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Since this study involves the participation of human actors, ethical considerations need to be discussed. Throughout the study, any potential deception and harm to the participating CCOs was avoided through informed consent (Bryman, 2012) Also, privacy was respected at all times.

First, the participants were clearly briefed on the research's objectives and its design in the invitation email. In addition, prior to the initial interview, they were presented with a consent form (see appendix 2) which highlights that their name, company, job title as well all specifics that should make the aforementioned identifiable, would remain anonymous. It was furthermore outlined that participants could withdraw from the research at any time and that the material would be stored securely. All participants agreed to these terms.

Second, it was decided together with the participants to not append any interview transcripts⁶, since these may contain confidential information related to corporate strategy. Although the same procedure was initially foreseen for the restructuring

⁶ Please note that full transcripts will be provided upon request.

outcomes, it was deemed relevant to include parts of them in the thesis so that findings can be exemplified. One participant already agreed to this during the feedback interview. Authorisation from the remaining participants was granted per email, provided that sensitive passages within the restructuring outcomes would be blurred.

4.5 Limitations of the study

First, because of the study's qualitative exploratory character and the limited sample of three CCOs, findings cannot be generalised. Conducting the present study with other CCOs may lead to different findings. Second, the initial interviews being restricted to 30 minutes, it was not possible for the participating CCOs to elaborate on all areas through which corporate communication contributes to organisational effectiveness.

However, within the paradigm of excellence-based communication management, what the study does offer is a concrete application of the CVC. Rather than suggesting a new conceptualisation, an existing framework is subjected to top communicators. In such an elite study, the participants – and not the researcher – dictate the conditions. Access to top communicators proves difficult, especially when asked to discuss sensitive matters related to communication strategy and to intervene on two occasions. The fact that the CVC is evaluated within this setting argues for the study's relevance.

5. Findings and discussion

The present section is divided in two parts. First, the findings will articulate the undertaken research stages on a descriptive level. Each case will be portrayed individually, so that it can be asserted how the different CCOs tackled the initial interview, as well as how this impacted on the restructuring process and finally formed the basis for feedback. Following, the discussion will tie back the material to the selected claims from the CVC and evaluate each one of them. In addition, the overall applicability and relevance of the CVC will be discussed.

5.1 Findings

As outlined, this part aims to familiarise the reader with the undertaken research stages. The three CCOs and their respective cases are treated individually. Since confidentiality does not allow to name the participants, they will be referred to as CCO 1/2/3.

5.1.1 First case: CCO 1

CCO 1 is employed by a company active in the food sector. The said company owns one particular brand that entails several products, which are available in more than 20 countries across Europe and Asia. With regard to communication efforts, it should be noted that all commercial initiatives such as advertisement campaigns and packaging communication are the responsibility of the company's marketing department.

Initial interview

During the initial interview, when asked how corporate communication (CC) contributes

to achieving organisational goals, CCO 1 started her presentation by quoting that it “contributes in several ways”. In this regard, she added: “I have highlighted a number of points which I would like to address and raise, and also of which CC is responsible.” Consequently, the presentation was structured around seven identified fields of action, which are implemented by the CC department and for which the CCO sees “a clear link to the business strategy and goals”.

To demonstrate that the areas of responsibility are of relevance to overall business goals, CCO 1 briefly detailed the company’s corporate strategy and outlined what sets it apart from competitors. Following, the CCO reviewed the said fields of action, one after one, and explained how they directly relate to the corporate strategy. For instance, when talking about consumer relations, CCO 1 outlined the following:

“We respond to all enquiries, both via email, phone and social media, from all the markets in the world. We exist in about 20 markets worldwide. We also monitor everything that is said about us, that is a huge job. Then we make a judgement: do we intervene or not?”

While marketing communication “initiates a conversation with consumers”, the CCO noted that her team subsequently manages the discussion and answers to questions, concerns etc. This in turn creates “a long-term engagement and bond”, which forms “a clear link to the business goals”. Regarding consumer dialogues, the CCO furthermore argued that they enable the company to “move forward”, as consumers often pose confronting questions or suggest useful improvements.

Closely linked to these dialogues is the fact that CC monitors the company’s coverage in the media. Relying on a concrete example, the CCO demonstrated that her department

recently spotted an issue in a newspaper article that may have posed a threat to the production line. Consequently, the matter was discussed and the company reacted proactively by contacting its suppliers to ensure that standards are respected. Drawing on this circumstance, the CCO outlined that “this is another thing for which CC is responsible: when issues arise that are potential crises, we need to address them and see what we can do”.

The above elaborations on two areas of responsibility, i.e. consumer relations and issues management, highlight the systematic approach adopted by CCO 1. To conclude the presentation, CCO 1 provided a summary that once again outlined the seven identified value propositions driven by CC and demonstrated how they directly contribute to implementing the corporate strategy.

While showing the CVC in the debriefing that followed the interview, CCO 1 realised that all elements of internal communication (e.g. corporate culture, management communication) had been omitted from the presentation.

Restructuring process

Upon completion of the initial interview, the researcher extracted relevant passages and linked them to components of the CVC. This process, which maps elements expressed by CCO 1 onto the CVC, is shown in Figure 7 for the example of consumer relations (see yellow square).

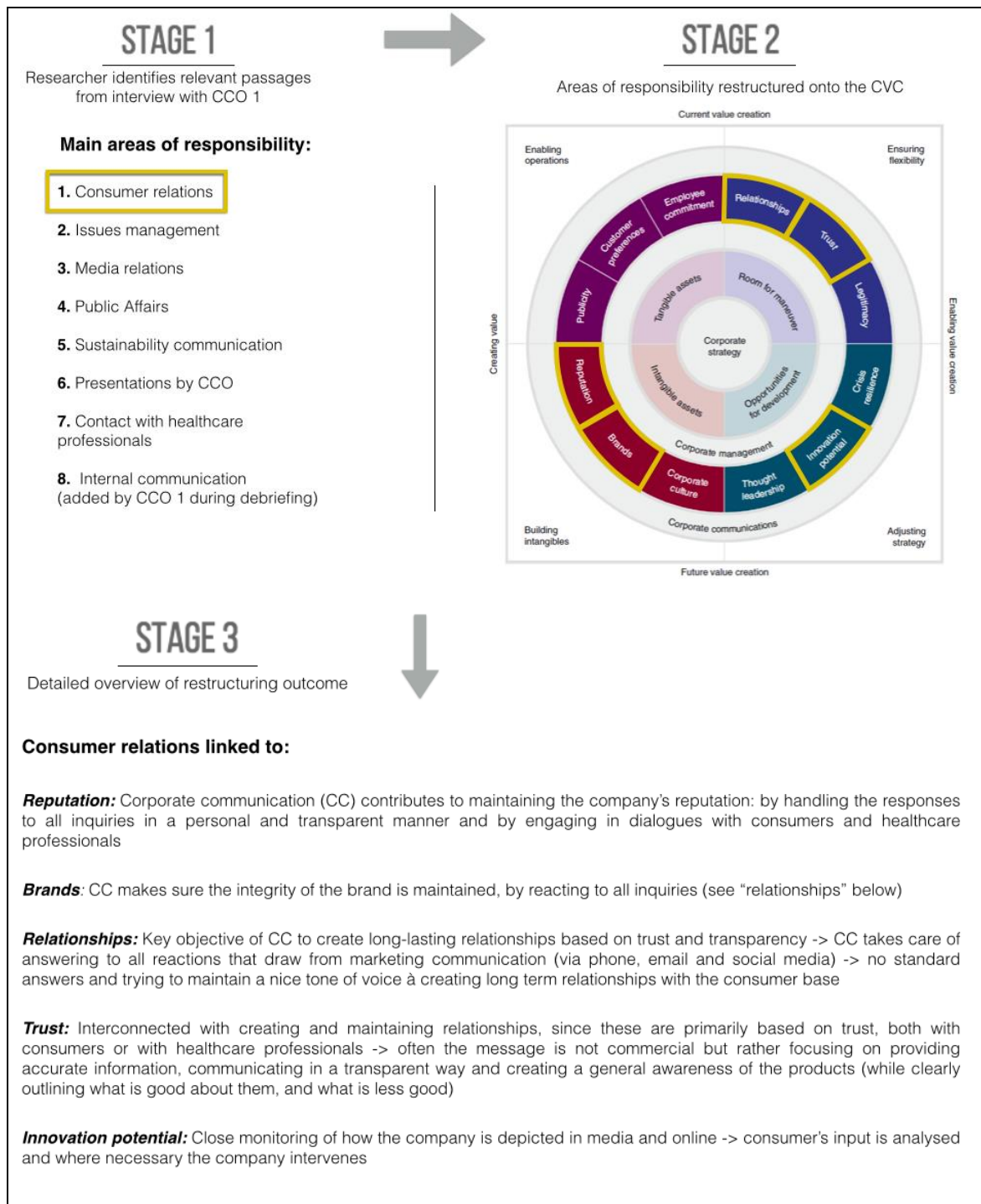


Figure 7: restructuring process for CCO 1

As can be observed, the specific tasks that consumer relations entails are linked to several components of the CVC (reputation, brands, relationships, trust and innovation potential) and thus correspond to multiple values of the framework's inner circle (intangibles, room for manoeuvre and opportunities for development).

The same restructuring was completed for all other areas of responsibility mentioned by CCO 1. The full restructuring outcome is appended at the end of this work.

Feedback interview

CCO 1 opened the feedback interview by stating that the CVC “captures quite well what corporate communication is all about” and that she “liked the framework immediately” when seeing it. Concerning the restructuring work, CCO 1 outlined the following:

“I think you did very well, I recognise everything you referred to and I think you put it in a context where you apply my presentation to the framework, which you did very well. I think you have grasped and interpreted it in a way where I can recognise what I said and you have taken it a step further, which is very good.”

Along these lines, CCO 1 supported that by applying the CVC “it might be easier for someone who does not have the experience or knowledge of corporate communication to understand and capture its function”.

Regarding the CVC’s ability to link communication activities to corporate strategy, CCO 1 argued that the four values on the inner circle display “the way of structuring and relating the different areas”. She furthermore hinted at the condensed visualisation that the CVC offers: “what is positive with the framework is that you have the entire CC processes in one page”.

CCO 1 would not use the CVC to align the goals and objectives for her department with the corporate strategy: “the framework is probably applicable in that way, but we have already quite clearly defined goals on how to support the organisation”. In the same vein, she pointed out that the company’s vision of corporate communication is at present

“transparent and well-managed”.

Rather, CCO 1 sees the contribution of the CVC as adding clarity when demonstrating the value of corporate communication. Using the CVC could in fact deepen the understanding of what values CC supports, both for internal and external audiences, and hence “solidify” the CCO’s presentation. Consequently, CCO 1 could show the framework “to business partners or to non-members of the CC department”, such as the management board. Furthermore, the CCO added that instead of presenting the communication strategy “according to the seven identified areas”, she could rephrase it using the CVC “as a starting point”. Hence, CCO 1 stated that “by starting with the framework, one can see what values CC supports and how strategically important it is for operations, for example with regard to innovation”.

On a final note, CCO 1 confirmed her interest in the CVC and outlined that she “will see whether the framework can be taken as a starting point” next time a communication plan or strategy is designed.

5.1.2 Second case: CCO 2

CCO 2 is employed by a European university. It is important to mention that this university is public and hence subjected to assignments from its national government (i.e. education, research and cooperation with the surrounding society).

Initial interview

The presentation of CCO 2 highlighted in the first place the university’s complex and decentralised structure (several faculties, research departments etc.) in which “very little funding” is available for overarching functions such as communication. Furthermore, she

pointed out that the university fulfils a multitude of roles (on local, regional, national and European level) and serves various stakeholders (researchers, prospective and current students, employees etc.).

Consequently, CCO 2 emphasised that “one department cannot take care of the communication” of the entire organisation and that decentralisation should be welcomed: “we have to say yes to research groups and faculties etc. that employ their own communicators”. This circumstance however, together with the organisation’s large scope, makes it at times difficult for the communication function to work strategically and set clear objectives. Hence, considering the “complex and challenging” environment and the “limited resources” available, CCO 2 defined the aim of her department as to “support anyone from the university with the need to communicate”, in the best possible way.

Following this contextualisation, the core of the CCO’s presentation tackled her department’s main area of responsibility, namely to provide a basic communication platform. In this light, CCO 2 specified the following:

“We can’t claim to be the only ones who know about communication, other departments have a very different environment. Therefore, communication needs to be adapted to the situation, target groups and stakeholders etc., before it can take place. We don’t know about those variables, but for 100 communicators to sort of effectively work, everybody does not need to invent the wheel everywhere. We take care of the basic platform, the basic messages about the university as a whole.”

The rest of the presentation was concerned with exemplifying this value proposition. The CCO mentioned that much effort is put into the creation of documents and tools that are

applicable for the entire university. For instance, CC developed “crafted messages adapted to foundations with money, but also to prospective students or staff”. This way, communicators can use the messages and “adapt them without putting in too much energy”. A similar example involves the visual identity and content management tool developed by CC, which ensures that all promotional communication is presented in a coherent manner. While these tasks primarily aim to use the attributed budget efficiently, CCO 2 added that “by doing things together, we also save reputation”, since the university does not appear “dispersed” or “scattered”.

To conclude, CCO 2 outlined that her department “can make a great difference” and helps “many people” with a variety of matters. In this regard, she added that corporate communication also offers “education, consulting advice, crisis communication” and is furthermore in charge of “overall university communication production” (e.g. internal magazine).

In other words, it appears that CCO 2 structured her presentation around the department’s main field of action (to provide a basic communication platform) and complemented the exposé with additional areas of responsibility (e.g. education, consulting advice). Furthermore, while showing the CVC in the debriefing that followed the interview, CCO 2 realised that all publicity activities had been omitted from the presentation. She stated that generating publicity is in fact “an obligation, since the university is partly funded by tax payers”, and that her department is involved in the organisation of events and visits of politicians or heads of state.

Restructuring process

Based on the restructuring process as previously outlined (see Figure 7), the researcher

mapped elements expressed by CCO 2 onto the CVC. Appendix 3 visualises this process for the case of CCO 2. The full restructuring outcome is also appended.

Feedback interview

CCO 2 indicated early in the feedback interview that the CVC framework is “interesting” and that she would “like to learn more about it to see how it can be used”. While she confirmed that the restructuring outcome reflects her presentation, it should be noted that certain value propositions are “missing”, since time constraints of the initial interview did not allow to draw “the full picture” of her department’s duties.

Concerning the CVC’s ability to link communication activities to corporate strategy, CCO 2 stressed that this is in her case “already quite clear” since activities “are linked to the corporate strategy but also to the priorities of the university”. Similarly, achieving alignment by applying the CVC seems difficult since the university disposes of “a divided communication function” and “not all attributes” of the CVC are applicable to the university’s corporate communication function.

Rather, CCO 2 underlined the CVC’s following feature:

“If you have a divided communication function on a central level, you can trace the responsibilities of each department and complete the puzzle/framework. You could observe that no one works for instance with employee commitment. Then it is possible to tackle the problem from that point of view.”

Consequently, CCO 2 stressed that applying the CVC can help to identify “blank spots” in communication work and to track responsibilities of other departments. Hence, the CCO stated that in her case the framework is most helpful as a “basis for discussion with

colleagues and management”. In a broader sense, the CVC could also be used internally when discussing the value of CC with the management, as it helps to “explain what value propositions communication supports” on an overarching level.

On a final note, CCO 2 mentioned that to evaluate whether the CVC makes communication more transparent and manageable, she would need to first apply it. The CCO once more signalled her interest in the framework and expressed that she would like to refine her knowledge to use it in other ways: “to develop communication, make it more transparent, get more resources or discuss priorities with the top management”.

5.1.3 Third case: CCO 3

CCO 3 is employed by a company active in the food sector. The company is listed on the stock exchange and operates in four areas: foods, food ingredients, confectionary & snacks and care products. CCO 3 is part of the foods section, which is the largest and serves as an umbrella for approximately 25 product brands. Regarding communication efforts, it should be noted that the CCO is responsible for the umbrella brand only, while all product communication is handled by the company’s marketing department.

Initial interview

CCO 3 started her presentation with a brief overview of the company and outlined its overall values: “we have created three main messages to present externally: to be innovative, an attractive employer and a responsible actor”.

The tasks of corporate communication are directly guided by these goals. CCO 3 mentioned in this regard that “it is very much about building awareness and trust”, since the company is someone standing behind all product brands and “goes in as a centre” in

times of a crisis, for instance. Furthermore, much of the communication work aims to “increase confidence in the company and the food business, by reducing all myths that industrial food is not healthy”. The CCO stressed that this conception is outdated and that the company is at present “reducing sugar, fat, salt etc. to get the consumers to like more healthy food”. In addition, CCO 3 highlighted the ongoing process to strengthen the internal proudness and foster a corporate culture. CC contributes to it by creating a “clear understanding of the overall vision, strategy and goals”.

While the CCO did not explicitly relate these activities to the corporate goals, it appeared quite evidently that each field of action corresponds to one or more goals. For instance, trying to reduce myths on industrially processed food constitutes an attempt to depict the company as innovative and responsible. Strengthening the corporate culture in turn aims to portray the company as an attractive employer.

In the second stage of the interview, CCO 3 outlined the goals for corporate communication (“to increase awareness, confidence and internal proudness”) and introduced their specific objectives. Following, the final section addressed the temporal dimension included in the guidelines (see 4.3), as the CCO thematised the contribution of her department during the past year. In essence, CCO 3 complemented the above-mentioned areas of responsibility, stating that CC raised awareness of the “company’s values and objectives” through “workshops”, “doubled the value of PR” and portrayed the company as an “attractive employer” through a social media campaign that involves employees.

Hence, in more general terms, CCO 3 structured the interview around the company’s

overall goals and outlined in what ways CC contributes to achieving them.

Restructuring process

Elements expressed by CCO 3 were mapped onto the CVC by the researcher (see example of Figure 7). Appendix 4 shows this process for the case of CCO 3. The full restructuring outcome is also appended.

Feedback interview

CCO 3 noted to start that the restructuring outcome reflects a thorough understanding of her presentation and that it might help to “see how activities can be structured in a better way”. However, she pointed out that transposing her department’s areas of responsibility to the framework proves difficult, stating that “there is nothing right or wrong” but that “the business and the company need to be taken into consideration”. In the case of CCO 3, CC is solely responsible for the umbrella brand, while all product communication is handled by the marketing department. Hence, the CCO argued that the CVC is best used when applied “to overall communication enterprises” and that some areas of the framework are simply not relevant to her work: “I don’t have anything to do with advertisements or social media of the product brands, for instance, so I can’t rely to that”.

In addition, CCO 3 noted that “for the business, there is often a focus on revenues, market share etc.”. Consequently, the CCO highlighted that the inner circle of the CVC is relevant but “would need to correspond to the company’s goals”. She argued that “for the management to understand” the added value of communication, activities must be “closely connected to the company goals and the business strategy”. Therefore, CCO 3 would not explicitly show the CVC when presenting to the management, since “they want the facts at a glance, in a quick and easy to understand exposé”. In other words, both

linking CC to corporate strategy and ensuring alignment, as well as demonstrating value to the management, are aspects for which CCO 3 would not utilise the CVC.

Rather, CCO 3 sees the value of the framework as a “checklist” to evaluate current activities and as a starting point to plan new ones. In the eyes of CCO 3, the CVC can be applied to ensure that no areas of responsibility are neglected in communication work, which may also serve as a basis to prepare a presentation addressed to the management: “for me the CVC could be some kind of checklist, to ensure that I cover all areas”. Nonetheless, CCO 3 underlined that the applicability of the CVC is very dependent on organisational circumstances, stating that her company “has come a long way” and is “already transparent and very goal oriented”. Hence, CCOs operating in a different setting might not necessarily find the framework applicable in the same way.

5.2 Discussion

This section reflects on the findings described above. First, Zerfass and Viertmann’s claims as identified in chapter three will be evaluated based on the gathered material. Second, the CVC’s applicability will be discussed in more general terms and further implications of the study will be outlined.

5.2.1: Evaluation of the claims

1. Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) note concerning the CVC that it “identifies and systematizes communication goals linked to generic corporate goals” (p. 68), thus making it possible to link communication activities to corporate strategy.

This function was confirmed by CCO 1, who stated that the CVC’s inner circle structures and relates communication to corporate strategy. However, CCO 1 demonstrated a clear view of how communication contributes to implementing strategy prior to encountering

the CVC. Along these lines, linking activities to corporate goals did not prove problematic to CCO 2 and 3, who both outlined that their work is closely linked to the corporate strategy since it is structured around the organisation's priorities.

In other words, although the CVC displays the process of CC and connects it to corporate strategy, there is agreement among the participants to not use the framework for this purpose. The reason for this choice is not related to a shortcoming of the CVC, but rather to the participants who already present a thorough understanding of how their work is linked to the corporate strategy.

2. The authors claim that the CVC "contributes to the strategic alignment of communication with overall organizational goals" (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 76).

Again, there exists agreement among the participants to not apply the framework for this purpose. However, divergent motivations were brought up by the CCOs on this occasion. As previously noted, CCO 1 stated that she would not apply the CVC for matters of alignment since her department's work is at present already closely connected to the corporate strategy. Nonetheless, CCO 1 emphasised that in less advanced organisations the CVC may certainly assist in the creation of aligned goals. Similarly, CCO 2 highlighted the complex structure of the university she is employed by and stated that alignment is ensured based on the organisation's overall assignments. She added that the university's strategy is not as clear as the one of a corporation. Therefore, resting alignment on the CVC would prove problematic since the framework does not fully correspond to the organisation's peculiar goals. Lastly, CCO 3 also noted that the CVC's inner circle does not fully display her company's objectives, hence the indicated preference to base alignment directly on the corporate strategy, rather than on the CVC.

Consequently, it appears from the gathered material that the CVC potentially assists in alignment, but that organisational circumstances can make this function difficult to implement (e.g. in settings where goals deviate from the generic ones outlined by the CVC) or unsuitable (e.g. in advanced settings where alignment is already ensured).

3. Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) highlight that the CVC “enables communication professionals to discuss their work with superiors and business partners” (p. 76).

CCO 1 is convinced that the CVC can assist for this task, since it shows what values CC supports and how strategically important they are for operations. Hence, CCO 1 stated that the framework can be used when talking to business partners or members of the company, among which the management. In addition, CCO 1 remarked that the corporate strategy could be rephrased according to the value drivers of the CVC. This underlines how relevant CCO 1 deems the framework to discuss communication value. Similarly, CCO 2 praised the CVC in helping to explain what value propositions CC supports. While CCO 2 could incorporate the framework in future presentations addressed to the management, she stated that she would rather use it as a basis for discussion, both with colleagues and superiors. Lastly, CCO 3 deviated in her opinion and pointed out that the CVC would not be shown explicitly when presenting to the management. CCO 3 stressed that the framework is in her case not helpful, since the management prefers a rapid and easily understandable presentation.

Hence, on balance, a favourable tendency can be observed towards using the CVC when talking to business partners and superiors. CCO 1 and 2 firmly indicated that the framework forms an added value in this regard. Moreover, the decision of CCO 3 to not

apply the framework is connected to an understanding of her superiors' preferences. In other words, this example shows once more that although the CVC may prove helpful to perform certain tasks, the specific settings of an organisation can at times reduce its applicability or even make it unsuitable.

4. Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) outline that applying the CVC “helps to make corporate communication more transparent and manageable” (p. 76).

Both CCO 1 and 3 highlighted that their company presents an advanced view of how communication creates value and already manages activities in a transparent manner. CCO 2 in turn mentioned that she would need to apply the CVC prior to expressing a judgement.

Therefore, the gathered material does not refute the authors' claim, but rather highlights that the framework *can* be applicable to make CC more transparent and manageable. As reflected in the evaluation of previous claims, specific settings related to the focal organisation (e.g. level of understanding of how CC creates value) direct whether the framework is suitable or not to fulfil a certain task.

5. The authors outline that applying the CVC should ultimately enable to “reconstruct empirical settings with the aim of describing specific approaches, identifying gaps, and outlining the best practices for value-creating communication in a common language” (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 77).

In this regard, the CVC's ability to identify gaps or blank spots evidently emerged from the material. Both CCO 2 and 3 emphasised the framework's application to avoid neglecting areas of responsibility. As exemplified by CCO 3, the CVC displays the “big

picture” and can hence serve as a checklist to review activities. In addition, during the debriefing that followed the initial interview, both CCO 1 and 2 realised when seeing the framework that an area of responsibility had been omitted from their presentation. This circumstance strengthens the CVC’s ability to identify blank spots.

Concerning the CVC’s ability to describe best practices, it appeared throughout the restructuring outcomes and feedback interviews that the framework solely serves to identify and organise communication activities. All CCOs confirmed this function, yet none of them believed that the CVC can profoundly ameliorate their functioning.

6. Since the CVC will be used for educational purposes, it should enable students or other individuals with no substantial experience of communication management to reach a higher level of understanding.

This claim identified by the researcher is inherent to all frameworks, which aim to facilitate the understanding of complex matters by applying a systematic approach. As the researcher himself is a student with very limited experience of communication management, the study enabled a reflection on the matter.

In this regard, it should be noted that all CCOs deemed the restructuring outcome performed by the researcher helpful and said it reflected their presentation. In fact, when interpreting the initial interviews, the CVC proved very helpful to break through singular activities and identify their overarching purpose. Furthermore, the framework hinted at the full scope of communication activities and made it for the restructuring outcomes possible to draw an exhaustive picture. Hence, both the CCOs’ feedback as well as the researcher’s experiences support the CVC’s ability to enhance one’s understanding of

communication management.

5.2.2: Broader implications of the study

By evaluating claims from the CVC, the previous section laid the groundwork to answer the research question. However, to add sufficient depth to the discussion, it is also necessary to reflect in general terms on the research process and the framework's practical applicability.

First, this study coincides with previous empirical research showing that no consistent rationale of how communication adds value exists among practitioners (Macnamara et al., 2015). Indeed, all CCOs tackled the initial interview in a different manner. CCO 1 proceeded systematically and outlined corporate communication's main areas of responsibility, whereas CCO 2 structured the presentation around her department's key activity. Lastly, CCO 3 focused on the company's strategy and goals.

This inconsistency confirms that no widely accepted theory or protocol exists at present to demonstrate the value of communication. Moreover, it is interesting to observe that none of the CCOs involved in the study encountered major difficulties to link their work to the business strategy, which is in academic literature identified as "one of the key challenges for communication professionals around the globe" (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017, p. 68). Due to the small sample size, this circumstance can however not be generalised.

Second, the study puts forward an important validation of the CVC's effectiveness. Both the framework and the restructuring outcomes were deemed relevant by all participants. Hence, the study strengthens the pre-test executed by Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) and

contends that the framework is generally applicable. In addition, all value drivers of the CVC were approved by the CCOs and no components were added. The framework thus depicts an exhaustive representation of communication value.

Third, additional light is shed on the specific function of the CVC. Although each participant outlined a preferred use – ranging from solidifying a presentation on communication value (CCO 1) or constituting a basis for discussion (CCO 2) to forming a checklist (CCO 3) – general tendencies can be observed. These emphasise the CVC’s ability to identify blank spots and discuss value with business partners or superiors. Furthermore, the framework is deemed helpful to individuals with no substantial experience of communication management. Lastly, the study supports that the CVC can potentially assist in linking communication to business strategy and ensuring alignment. As previously mentioned, the material does not directly approve the two latter claims, since organisational circumstances made them difficult to implement (CCO 2’ goals deviate from the generic ones outlined by the CVC) or unsuitable (CCO 1 and 3 already ensured alignment).

Rather than devaluating the CVC, this shows that framework’s degree of applicability often depends on organisational specificities (e.g. job profiles, tasks of corporate communication, type and size of organisation). Zeffass and Viertmann (2017) recognise this fact, stating that “the multitude of possible variables and situations in the business world” direct “the significance of the four dimensions of value creation” (p. 76). Nonetheless, capturing real settings through a generic framework remains at times difficult. In this regard, both CCO 2 and 3 pointed out that the CVC does not fully correspond to their organisation’s peculiar goals. On the contrary, CCO 1 adhered to the

CVC's way of structuring and relating communication areas.

Hence, while organisational factors should be acknowledged, the CCOs' divergent reactions to both the framework and restructuring outcome highlight above all distinct types of reasoning. Indeed, the way to approach communication value can vary from one person to another: some CCOs reflect in systematic terms and base much of their work on the corporate strategy, while others rather focus on the value of singular activities.

This circumstance corresponds to the "empathizing-systemizing (E-S) theory" developed by psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist Baron-Cohen (2009). In short, E-S theory contends that individuals can be classified based on two cognitive dimensions:

1. Their "capacity to predict and to respond to the behavior of agents" (Baron-Cohen, Knickmeyer & Belmonte, 2005, p. 819), characterised as ability to *empathise*;
2. Their "drive to analyze or construct systems" (Baron-Cohen, 2009, p. 71), characterised as ability to *systemise*.

Depending on an individual's performance on these scales, Baron-Cohen (2009) distinguishes the following five "brain types":

- *Type E* ($E > S$): individuals whose empathy is stronger than their systemizing
- *Type S* ($S > E$): individuals whose systemizing is stronger than their empathy
- *Type B* ($S = E$): individuals whose empathy is as good (or as bad) as their systemizing (B stands for balanced")
- *Extreme Type E* ($E \gg S$): individuals whose empathy is above average, but who are challenged when it comes to systemizing
- *Extreme Type S* ($S \gg E$): individuals whose systemizing is above average, but who are challenged when it comes to empathy

Figure 8: "brain types" according to Baron-Cohen (2009, p. 76)

In this light, it is most likely that CCOs characterised as strong systemisers will find the CVC most helpful. Practitioners looking beyond singular activities and fully aware of the corporate strategy are likely to be appealed by the framework. The study hints upon this condition: CCO 1, whose initial interview reflected a systematic clustering of communication value, deemed the CVC most helpful of all participants.

Consequently, an increased emphasis should be put on types of communication managers when discussing the relevance of theoretical frameworks. Similarly, the reasoning of their superiors appears crucial: while CCOs who think in systems may find the CVC helpful, the framework's applicability can be reduced if their superiors do not adhere to such reasoning.

6. Conclusion

This thesis searched to find an answer to the question “To what degree do practitioners experience the CVC as fulfilling its aims as a conceptual framework (e.g. link and align communication to corporate strategy, demonstrate value)?”. Hence, the researcher first extracted key claims from the CVC’s publication. Following, their practical applicability was asserted through a multistage research design validated by one of the framework’s contributors. This process enabled to explore the meanings that experienced chief communication officers ascribe to the communication value circle. Several conclusions can be formulated.

First, the study confirms that a consensus to demonstrate the value of communication remains non-existent. All participating CCOs tackled the initial interview differently and signalled distinct conceptions of communication value.

Second, both the framework and restructuring outcome performed by the researched were deemed relevant by the participating CCOs. Furthermore, their feedback underlined the framework’s exhaustive character. Therefore, the study affirms that the communication value circle is generally applicable.

As well as confirming the framework’s relevance, this study sheds lights on how it can be applied in practice. The gathered material accentuates the CVC’s ability to discuss value with superiors or business partners, identify blank spot and assist unexperienced individuals to form a better understanding of communication management. This last

feature particularly strengthens the CVC's contribution: all CCOs involved in the research, who each present more than 20 years of experience, confirmed that the restructuring outcome reflects their presentation. Hence, applying the CVC assisted the researcher, a student lacking any substantial professional experience, to grasp the participants' communication strategy in an efficient and quick manner.

In addition, the material shows that the framework can potentially contribute to linking communication to business strategy, ensuring alignment and enhancing transparency. However, it became evident that organisational circumstances can make these functions difficult to implement (e.g. in settings where goals deviate from the generic ones outlined by the CVC) or unsuitable (e.g. in advanced settings where the CVC's aims are already covered).

While the study emphasises the importance of organisational circumstances, the answer to the research question seems to depend on a practitioner's type of reasoning. As hinted upon by the material, practitioners characterised as strong systemisers are most likely to find the CVC appealing.

Hence, the study concludes that the degree to which practitioners experience the CVC as fulfilling its aims varies, mostly as a result of distinct types of reasoning. This finding adds a new dimension to the field of communication management. It indeed highlights that frameworks such as the CVC cannot be of equal relevance to all practitioners.

In this regard, it is essential to stress that systematic approaches constitute only one way to demonstrate communication value. Based on the type of reasoning of communication

managers, but also of their superiors, other conceptualisations can be more appropriate. For instance, a strongly empathising superior will most likely prioritise a human, less tangible judgment of communication work. Consequently, for the CCO to demonstrate value, it may be more effective to identify dominant stories on how communication supports the organisation. In certain cases, it appears most important for CCOs to reassure their superiors, using stories, hand-drawn sketches or similar techniques.

Hence, the overarching conclusion of the study is that more emphasis needs to be placed on types of managers. While the ideal of the classical manager is linked to systematic clustering, it does not reflect the thinking of all practitioners. Furthermore, depending on the type of superior, other approaches may prove more effective.

Although this circumstance adds an important nuance to the communication value circle's applicability, it does not devalue its relevance. On the contrary, as previously stated, the CVC is supported as generally applicable. The framework offers an integrative understanding and can help practitioners to detect misalignments, uncover the full scope of their work or demonstrate value to superiors. However, it needs to be applied with a sensitivity of both organisational factors and a CCO's respective type of reasoning.

Further research is necessary to additionally strengthen the CVC's relevance. As noted earlier, an experiment could assess whether applying the framework proves more effective than acting a-theoretically. Moreover, a research project involving a larger sample of CCOs would generate more representative findings.

Finally, for the field of strategic communication to progress, future research should be increasingly concerned with systematic evaluations of existing frameworks. In its deliberate choice to evaluate an existing contribution, rather than to present a novel one, this study hopes to pave the way towards such efforts. This in turn will contribute to a more unified understanding of communication value, both in practice and academia.

Appendices

1. Definition of terms

Corporate communication

The following definition is the essence of corporate communication as employed in this thesis:

Corporate communication is “the set of activities involved in managing and orchestrating all internal and external communications aimed at creating favorable starting points with stakeholders on which the company depends” (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007, p. 25).

Strategy

A strategy can be defined as the position an organisation takes for the future and states what should be done in the coming months and years (Steyn, 1999).

Strategic communication

Strategic communication entails “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3).

CEO, Chief Executive Officer

The CEO is the highest-ranking executive in a company whose main responsibilities include developing and implementing high-level strategies, making major corporate decisions, managing the overall operations and resources of a company, and acting as the main point of communication between the board of directors and the corporate operations (Investopedia, 2017).

CCO, Chief Communication Officer

The chief communication officer (CCO) - or sometimes, corporate communication officer - or public relations officer (PRO) is the head of communication, public relations, and/or public affairs in an organisation. Typically, the CCO of a corporation reports to the chief executive officer (Wikipedia, 2017).

2. Consent form

Research Project: Research on how corporate communication creates business value and testing of the claims formulated by a theoretical framework that relates to it

Researcher: Nicolas Moreau, MSc Strategic Public Relations at Lund University

Participants Name:

Date of Interview:

Many thanks for contributing to my Master thesis research project. This consent form is used to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree on the conditions of your participation. Therefore, I kindly ask you to read the sheet and then sign it to certify that you approve the following:

- The interview will be recorded and a transcript will be produced
- Based on the transcript, the researcher will restructure information using the chosen theoretical tool
- Upon completion of this process, you agree on providing feedback related to the document that the researcher sent you. This feedback will be recorded and transcribed.
- The access to the transcribed interview and feedback is strictly limited to the researcher, his academic supervisor for this research project and possible examiners of the thesis
- Any summarized content of the interview or direct quotes will be anonymized so that you as an individual are not identifiable for readers. However, descriptions on your work (job role or the like) can be used if necessary for the understanding of the research
- The actual recording as well as transcriptions will be kept on a password protected computer

No personal risks are associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time. Please don't hesitate to ask any questions about the research process or questions of anonymity.

I have read and understood the terms explained in this information sheet.	Yes	No
I agree to participate in this research project by taking part in an interview and providing feedback at a later stage.	Yes	No
I am aware that my data will remain confidential and anonymous.	Yes	No
I agree that the interview and feedback will be recorded.	Yes	No

Please choose the way of quotation you prefer:

I agree to be quoted directly without previewing the text if my name is not published and I remain anonymous.	Yes	No
I wish to review and approve direct quotations made by me before publication.	Yes	No

Please sign below:

Place, Date

Name Participant

Place, Date

Name Researcher

Further information and contact details:

In case of any further questions or interest in more information concerning the study, please do not hesitate to contact:

Researcher:

Nicolas Moreau

E-Mail: ni7838mo-s@student.lu.se

Supervisor:

Howard Nothhaft

Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University

E-Mail: howard.nothhaft@isk.lu.se

3. Restructuring process for CCO 2

STAGE 1

Researcher identifies relevant passages from interview with CCO

Main objective of CC:

to support anyone from the university with the need to communicate in the best possible way

Achieved through:

1. Providing a basic platform for communicators (cf. visual identify, content management system)

2. Internal workshops and education

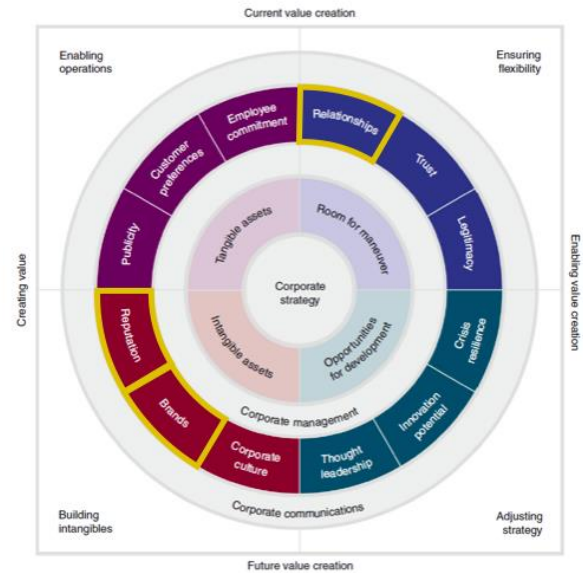
3. Consulting advice

4. Crisis communication



STAGE 2

Objectives restructured onto the CVC



STAGE 3

Detailed overview of restructuring outcome



Providing a basic platform linked to:

Reputation: Centrally managed communication efforts ensure consistency and contribute to creating an overall good reputation (avoiding fragmentation)

Brands: Centrally developed visual identity and content management tool enables a consistently depicted brand (e.g. correct use of logo and matching layout)

Relationships: Maintaining internal relationships with faculties' and and research group's communicators by providing ready to use templates

4. Restructuring process for CCO 3

STAGE 1

Researcher identifies relevant passages from interview with CCO



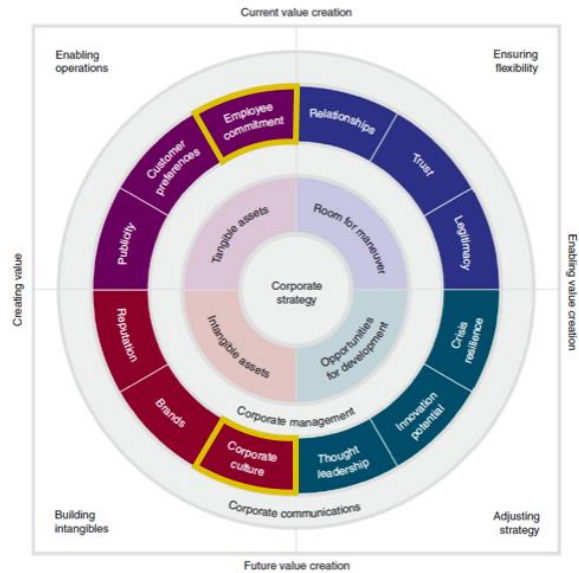
STAGE 2

Objectives restructured onto the CVC

Main objective of CC:

to comply with the overall goals and depict the company as:

1. Innovative
2. An attractive employer
3. A responsible actor



STAGE 3

Detailed overview of restructuring outcome



Attractive employer linked to:

Employee commitment: Workshops organised to familiarise the employees with the company's values and overall vision; social media campaign involving employees

Corporate culture: Contributing to depicting the company as an attractive employer, for instance through stories on X; ongoing process to strengthen the internal pride

5. Restructuring outcomes

Please note that the below outcomes were presented to the participants preceded by an introduction of the CVC and followed by overall reflections formulated by the researcher.

For reasons of confidentiality, the reflections cannot be published.

CCO 1:

Enabling operations: communication supports business operations internally and externally by creating tangible assets

Employee commitment: not specifically mentioned during the interview

Customer preferences: trying to convince the consumer that X are to be chosen over Y for reasons of Z: presentations of CCO, upcoming website on project with A; trying to take over the public sector and establish the brand in B; sustainability communication efforts

Publicity: managed by the commercial and creative department: ads, campaigns, packaging communication etc. are not responsibility of corporate communication (CC), however CC manages the reactions (see “relationships” below); furthermore, CC produces debate articles for newspapers to clarify the company’s mission and create awareness

Building intangibles: communication builds intangibles needed to deal with uncertainty, complexity and future challenges

Reputation: CC contributes to maintaining the company’s reputation, by handling the responses to all inquiries in a personal and transparent manner, by engaging in dialogues with consumers and healthcare professionals and by handling management communication

Brands: foundation for the brand is created by the commercial department, both with presenting style of the packages and campaigns, ads etc.; CC makes sure the integrity of the brand is maintained, by reacting to all inquiries (see “relationships” below)

Corporate culture: quite present within the company by nature, since majority of employees strongly identify with values; CC contributes to maintaining and strengthening the corporate culture (not discussed in depth during interview)

Ensuring flexibility: communication ensures that the company maintains its license to operate by creating **room for manoeuvre**

Relationships: key objective of CC to create long-lasting relationships based on trust and transparency

1. X is responsible for communicating with healthcare professionals → developing tight relationships that are based on Y and trust in the product → objective: to create awareness and knowledge of the company’s products so that healthcare professionals may recommend them

2. Customer relations: CC takes care of answering to all reactions that draw from marketing communication (via phone, email and social media) → no standard answers and trying to maintain a nice tone of voice → creating long term relationships with the consumer base

Trust: Interconnected with creating and maintaining relationships, since these are primarily based on trust, both with consumers or with healthcare professionals → often the message is not commercial but rather focusing on providing accurate information, communicating in a transparent way and creating a general awareness of the products (while clearly outlining what is good about them, and what is less good)

Legitimacy: Public Affairs efforts are about creating the conditions to carry out the company's business: to create equal conditions for X + facilitate Y → influencing decision makers through meetings with politicians, presentations on various occasions etc. → very complex process and only able to judge on long-term, yet CC actively supports this value proposition

Adjusting strategy: communication assists in making strategic management decisions by fostering **opportunities for development, mainly through organisational listening**

Thought leadership: providing communication training and advice to management

Innovation potential: close monitoring of how the company is depicted in media and online → consumer's input is analysed and where necessary the company intervenes: example of consumer asking whether X: CC made the company go through supply chain to ensure that standards are respected

Crisis resilience: monitoring the media and consumer's input to detect issues that could lead to potential crisis situations → example of X, which was recently targeted by several newspapers → CC detected the issue and made sure contact was established with the supplier to check how the company is affected

CCO 2:

Enabling operations: communication supports business operations internally and externally by creating **tangible assets**

Employee commitment: not specifically mentioned during the interview

Customer preferences: portraying the university internationally as an attractive place for prospective students and researchers

Publicity: organisation of ceremonies, events, jubilee of X, visit of Y etc.

Building intangibles: communication builds intangibles needed to deal with uncertainty, complexity and future challenges

Reputation: centrally managed communication efforts ensure consistency and contribute to creating an overall good reputation (avoiding fragmentation)

Brands: centrally developed visual identity and content management tool enables a consistently depicted brand (e.g. correct use of logo and matching layout)

Corporate culture: managing the overall university communication, for instance through the production of an internal magazine

Ensuring flexibility: communication ensures that the company maintains its license to operate by creating **room for manoeuvre**

Relationships: maintaining internal relationships with faculties' and research group's communicators by providing ready to use templates; how are relationships with external stakeholders maintained?

Trust: portraying the university internationally as an attractive place for prospective students and researchers, highlighting that researchers and students find an optimal environment to excel at the university

Legitimacy: not specifically mentioned during the interview

Adjusting strategy: communication assists in making strategic management decisions by fostering **opportunities for development, mainly through organisational listening**

Thought leadership: offering education, consulting advice, crisis communication to leadership and departments

Innovation potential: not specifically mentioned during the interview

Crisis resilience: not specifically mentioned during the interview

CCO 3:

Enabling operations: communication supports business operations internally and externally by creating **tangible assets**

Employee commitment: workshops organised to familiarise the employees with the company's values and overall vision; social media campaign involving employees

Customer preferences: not specifically mentioned during the interview; most likely in line with the company's aim to offer healthy and tasty products, however not mentioned explicitly how communication helps to create this value proposition

Publicity: PR and PA activities raise the awareness of the company and its product brands among consumers

Building intangibles: communication builds intangibles needed to deal with uncertainty, complexity and future challenges

Reputation: not specifically mentioned during the interview

Brands: managing the general communication of all product brands, forming a centre and ensuring consistency; recent desire to strengthen the company's brand name supported by future communication efforts

Corporate culture: contributing to depicting the company as an attractive employer, for instance through stories on X; ongoing process to strengthen the internal proudness

Ensuring flexibility: communication ensures that the company maintains its license to operate by creating **room for manoeuvre**

Relationships: creating transparent relationships with consumers, for instance through the use of social media (cf. Y) or the creation of a knowledge bank so rapid and consistent answers can be offered

Trust: communication mostly centres on trust, trying to depict the company both internally and externally as 1) innovative 2) an attractive employer and 3) a responsible actor

Legitimacy: communication efforts are actively trying to reduce the myths on industrial foods not being healthy, thereby aiming to enhance the legitimacy of the company and the industry sector at large

Adjusting strategy: communication assists in making strategic management decisions by fostering **opportunities for development, mainly through organisational listening**

Thought leadership: supporting managers in change communication by providing guidelines

Innovation potential: not specifically mentioned during the interview

Crisis resilience: not specifically mentioned during the interview

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