Rethinking Bernstein Communication Wheel:
A Re-visitation of a Communication Tool

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this conceptual paper is to review Bernstein's communication wheel in order to make it a tool that can be used in the selection of a corporate communication mix.

Design/methodology/approach – A critical analysis of Bernstein's communication wheel shows it to be a checklist, a starting point in the examination of corporate communication mix, but it is not as such of great help to the decision-maker.

Findings – The findings of reviewing literature highlight that the principle of a clear distinction between strategic decisions and operational decisions is applicable also in the field of corporate communication. For each stakeholder relationship, our framework suggests typical combinations of activities and means to be employed. These combinations are useful to experiment with expert systems which are functional to the choices of corporate communication mix.

Research limitations/implications – The analysis of communication gaps gives directions for formulating strategic decisions. In our framework tactical decisions concern the components of the communication mix architecture (or communication chain): activities, means and vehicles of communication. On the contrary, Bernstein's communication wheel includes only generic channels (or media) and gives no indications as to the architecture of the communication mix.

Originality/value – This study illustrates the hierarchy of decisions relating to corporate communication mix, the communication wheel could also be useful in communication planning. If this assumption is held to be true it then becomes possible to lay out a framework for a progressive decision-making path that means making sequential choices (first strategic, then tactical). In the stakeholder approach, the aim of strategic decisions is to choose the stakeholder groups on which a firm has to focus its corporate communication activities.

Key words: communication wheel, corporate communication mix, strategic and tactical decisions of communication, experimental expert systems.

Introduction to Bernstein's Communication Wheel

Bernstein's communication wheel (Bernstein, 1984) represents a checklist for analyzing the possible combinations of different types of public (audience) and means of communication. The author pinpoints nine types of public: internal public, local public, groups of influence, commercial sector, government, media, financial public, clients and general public, with whom he communicates through nine means of communication: product, mail, public relations, personal presentation, not-personal presentation, corporate literature, dealer, media and advertisement (Foroudi et al., 2017; Fitsimmons, 2014).

For his checklist, Bernstein prefers the wheel to a matrix because only in this way does he easily manage to show that different publics can be reached with different means of communication. In fact, the author turns the internal circle (channels) within the external circle (categories of public) to show multiple possible public-channels combinations, keeping the firm as the wheel's fulcrum.

The wheel and sector positions are such that a reciprocal correspondence between the internal and external circles does not take place, so that no predetermined combinations between categories of public and means of communication are made (Cottrell, 2011). On this point, Bernstein highlights the fact that each means of communication has the same probability of being chosen to communicate with different publics. In fact the wheel produces 81 possible combinations of medium and audience, that come from the 9x9 options that the communications coordinator may choose from (in this paper we shall refer to him as 'CC'). In fact, in searching for the corporate communication and means-coordination management, Bernstein is aware of the fact that this is a task for the fulcrum of the wheel - the firm - but the author also believes that a single person has to control this task: the CC.

Indeed, specifying that not all presumable combinations can be put into practice, Bernstein believes that the wide range of combinations allows the CC to express his creativity and, at the same time, to have a wide and global vision of corporate communication. In fact, Bernstein highlights that a lot of organizations often make the mistake of considering corporate communication not as one entity, but rather as a sum of different messages made for different publics. Only a global vision allows the firm to pay attention to what it manages to communicate and to coordinate the means of communication in the best possible way. The wheel then allows the CC to communicate with the different categories of public without losing the broader meaning of communication and without forgetting that, in communicating with publics, many possible choices (channel-public) are available which otherwise could not be considered.

Some Limits to Bernstein's Communication Wheel

Besides sharing the principle of the importance of using a variety of channels to communicate with different publics, in our opinion this variety could be dangerous for the CC who does not have a quantity of experience sufficient to select from the '*mare magnum*' of communication. Indeed, a limit to Bernstein's model is that it does not specify the necessary level of expertise of the CC – and this cannot be neglected. In other words, Bernstein introduced the variety

of tools a firm has at its disposal to communicate, but he leaves the CC surrounded by a wide choice of channels and public, without suggesting operational solutions capable of putting the proposed theoretical model into practice.

Therefore the novice CC who has not yet experimented with effective channel-public correlations through implementation could make the mistake, for instance, of managing operational communication activities of supplier and distributor relations only and exclusively through the press and not personal communication. Hence he would be neglecting the more proper method of personal communication. This decision would cause the firm not only to bear an onerous expense due to the costs of press advertising, but it would also mean that the communicative efforts will be ineffective since these publics - supplier and distributor - will not adequately be reached by messages communicated via the press. Implementing supplier and distributor relations successfully involves applying means of communication other than newspapers, such as sales force, corporate literature and stationery (house style material, newsletters, brochures, etc.), events (meetings, videoconferences, etc.), sales literature, internet (extranet), telephone, etc. Moreover, the author speaks generically of channels (media) in his category, but he does not take the vehicles of communication into account. The communication mix in Bernstein's wheel is simplistically reduced to combinations of types of public (audience) and channels. This limitation and the checklist function mean Bernstein's wheel is not a fully adequate tool for corporate communication mix planning, but rather only a starting point for analysis.

Concluding, we can add that the risk perceived by Bernstein concerning the possibility of having organizations that make the mistake of not considering corporate communication as one entity, but as a sum of different messages created for different publics, can be considered a false risk. If corporate communication is thought of along the basic principles of integrated communications (Novelli, 1989; Caywood and Ewing, 1991; Schultz *et al.*, 1993; Nowak and Phelps, 1994) every message produced from within this viewpoint will be created to preserve a strong coherence with all other messages made to reach every category of public. In fact, developing relations with all publics (Gummesson, 2002) not only with the external public of the organization, and not only with clients, shows that integration of communication into management has to concern the whole of corporate communication (van Riel, 1995; Gronstedt 1996; Grunig and Grunig 1998; Wightman, 1999; Cornelissen, 2000).

Bernstein's Communication Wheel Revisited
In order to overcome the limits in Bernstein's communication wheel we propose a revisited version of it. However, we do keep the metaphor of the wheel because it is useful to show the different elements of corporate communication mix. Contrary to Bernstein who turns the internal circle (channels) within the external circle (categories of public), our framework involves a circular sequential decisional path. Indeed, our framework is of a progressive decision-making path that leads to making sequential choices for the corporate communication mix, especially for the novice CC, who does not have a great deal of experience.

Moreover, the sequential choices for the corporate communication mix need a clear distinction between strategic and tactical decisions (Holm, 2006). Therefore it is essential to strengthen the bonds between strategic choices and tactical options. At the strategic level, the decision maker prioritizes stakeholder relationships, based on an analysis of communication gaps (i.e. requirements analysis). In our framework, we follow a stakeholder relationships-focused

approach (Freeman, 1984). Hence, when selecting a corporate communication mix we suggest using the "corporate communication mix wheel" framework (Siano and Confetto, 2003) as an aid to the decision maker (see figure 1).

<<<Insert Figure 1>>>

Otherwise a gap exists when the results differ from set objectives. Furthermore budget assignments must also privilege the relationships with a greater need to be supported by communication activities. Indeed the integration of budget assignments avoids the separatist approach adopted by communication specialists to communication programmes. In this way it is possible to prevent each communication program from being developed and budgeted separately (Schultz and Kitchen, 2004). Furthermore, the development of each stakeholder relationship (customer relations, investor relations, employee relations, etc.) involves activities that fall within specific areas of communication (marketing communications, financial communications, internal communications, etc.).

Afterwards, the components of the communication mix architecture (or communication chain) are selected through tactical decisions for each stakeholder relationship: communication activities (public relations, advertising, sales promotion, direct-mail, personal selling, etc.); and the means of communication (newspapers, magazines, televisions, internet, etc.) for each particular activity (Melewar et al., 2017). The means of communication are "generic" channels of communication because they represent the technological alternatives employable for corporate communication; the vehicles for communication (newspaper headlines, radio stations, TV channels, websites, portals, etc.) for each selected means. The vehicles are the last link in the communication chain and identify media precisely; they really allow messages to be sent to, and contact to be established with, a particular audience type. Thus the vehicles are "specific" channels of communication.

For this reason, the distinction between stakeholder relationships, activities, means and vehicles of communication means we must avoid the use of generic terms (like 'instruments', 'forms', 'types', or 'kinds' of communication) which may make our understanding of the communication chain level ambiguous or difficult. In the proposed framework, the wheel shows the circularity and interactiveness of the decision-making process behind the design of the corporate communication mix. Therefore the decision maker selects the appropriate mix of activities, means and vehicles of communication for each stakeholder group. In fact, the proposed framework takes into account gradual decision-making following the circular sequence of the scheme (see figure 1). This allows for continuous iterations until a final decision is reached for each relationship with specific stakeholders (area of communication), the proper mix of activities, the means and vehicles of communication, in line with the principles of integrated communications and the availability of financial resources (Spotts, Lambert and Joyce, 1998). Consequently, the communication mix selected represents the most suitable combination of "type of relationships-activities-means-vehicles" in terms of effectiveness and cost optimization for corporate communication, and with due regard paid to budget limits (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). In this way any integrated communications action can be planned and implemented preserving a unitary vision of the entire corporate communication spectrum. Thus the proposed framework allows a marriage of two crucial aspects of integrated communication: power to control and coordinate different communication actions along with the variety and flexibility of resources the decision-maker has at his disposal.

Although the choice of activities-means combinations must be made at the same time – because the two elements have a reciprocal influence on one another (see figure 1) – each communication activity involves the employment of a suitable means. Each means of communication makes specific communication activities possible because it allows a different type of contact (interpersonal or not interpersonal) and different types of flow or dialogue (one-way or two-way) (Hartley and Pickton, 1999; Siano and Confetto, 2003). On the one hand, the features of the communication mean influence the execution of the activities. On the other hand, the choice of communication type to be used (one-to-many, one-to-one and/or many-to-many) in stakeholder relationships stems from the choice between activities and means. Finally, the media-planning process and techniques (Donnelly, 1996; De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2007) make the end choice of means possible.

The last link in the chain of corporate communication mix concerns the choice of communication vehicle. It is therefore necessary to identify one or more vehicles for each selected means, according to the profile and breadth of the target audience as well as the cost per contact. In fact, as far as vehicles are concerned, it can be possible to judge the level of economic efficiency of the means, since the vehicles affect the cost of corporate communication activities.

Our framework suggests the typical combinations of activities and means for each stakeholder relationship. Indeed these combinations are useful in testing expert systems functional to the choices of corporate communication mix (see table 1). Moreover, the typical combinations represent a useful guide in directing the choices of the decision maker in practical situations. Summing up, table 1 is a 'toolbox' from which the decision maker can extract the most apt elements for corporate communication planning.

<<<Insert Table 1>>>

Conclusion

This paper proposed the key identifications of typical corporate communication combinations can constitute a starting point in the development of experimental expert systems in the corporate communication field. In fact as they concern semi-structured problems, expert systems appear particularly suitable in the field of corporate communications where the knowledge for problem solving is available but often fragmented. It is true that so far studies in the field of decision-making systems have stopped at the marketing communications mix and have primarily been concerned with specific problems on the definition and allocation of the advertising budget (Aaker, 1975) or the critical factors for means selection and planning (Little and Lodish, 1969). Only in few cases have expert systems been built with the capacity to consider semi-structured problems concerning strategic decisions, as for instance ADCAD (Burke *et al.*, 1990) created for the identification of copy strategies in advertising design. On the other hand, the increasing quota of investment in different communication activities (away from traditional mass media advertising) seems to justify greater attention in defining the knowledge-base (domain-specific heuristics, models and facts) on which to develop systems able to provide help with complex decisions (Metaxiotis *et al.*, 2003) concerning the whole of corporate communication.

In our opinion, experimental expert systems may be able to manage the complexity of corporate communication in concrete terms. For this reason it is desirable to have a formalisation of the criteria for a proper choice of mix for corporate communication so as to spread technical skills (also for educational purposes), to create a shared culture, and

to speed up and make the decisions of practitioners more rigorous. Typical combinations and expert systems aim to drive the novice CC towards the selection of the most suitable channel-public combinations for each stakeholder group.

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Table 1: Typical activities-means of communication combinations for every stakeholder relationship

STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS (and Communication Areas)	ACTIVITIES OF COMMUNICATION	MEANS OF COMMUNICATION
Employee relations	Internal public relations (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many)	Corporate literature and stationery (house style material, annual reports, newsletters, brochures, cd/dvd-rom, environmental report, sustainability report, CSR report, etc.), events (conventions, corporate presentations and celebrations, team meetings, videoconferences, open-door, training programmes, etc.), multimedia kiosks, company television, bulletin boards, corporate publishing, house magazine, internet (intranet), telephone-fax, mail
Partner relations	Partnership public relations (one-to-one; one-to-many, many-to-many)	Corporate literature and stationery (house style material, newsletters, brochures, etc.), events (meetings, briefing ad-agencies, conventions, training programmes, videoconferences, roadshows, interviews, etc.), corporate publishing, house magazine, internet (extranet), telephone-fax, mail
Supplier and distributor relations	Channel public relations (one-to-one; one-to-many)	Corporate literature and stationery (house style material, newsletters, brochures, etc.), events (meetings, videoconferences, etc.), sales literature, internet (extranet), telephone-fax, mail
	Trade promotions (one-to-one)	Buying allowances, count and recount allowances, buy-back allowances, merchandise allowances, advertising allowances, dealer contests
	personal selling (one-to-one)	Sales force
Investor relations	Financial public relations (one-to-one, one-to-many; many-to-many)	Corporate literature and stationery (house style material, annual report, brochures, environmental report, sustainability report, CSR report, etc.), events (meetings, shareholders' meetings, conventions, roadshows, etc.), internet, mail
	Corporate advertising (one-to-one, one-to-many)	Daily newspapers and periodicals, radio, television, internet, mail
	direct-mail (one-to-one)	Mail, newsletters, internet (e-mail marketing)
Labour relations	Recruitment public relations (one-to-one, one-to-many)	events (meetings, interviews, etc.), internet
	Corporate advertising (one-to-many, one-to-one)	Newspapers, magazines, internet, mail
Customer relations	Marketing public relations (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many)	Advertorials, corporate literature (brochures, newsletters, guidebooks, cd/dvd-rom, environmental report, sustainability report, CSR report, etc.), product events (meetings, roadshows, exhibitions, trade fairs), product (design), packaging, internet,
	Sponsorship (one-to-many)	Event-related, broadcast (radio or television), product placement, cause-related programmes
	Product advertising (one-to-many, one-to-one)	Advertisement (newspapers, magazines, radio, television, cinema, hoardings, buses, trains, subways), internet, mobile phone
	Consumer promotions (one-to-one, one-to-many)	Price-offs, bonus packs, coupons, cash refunds, savings cards, contests, sweepstakes, sampling, free in mail, premiums, gadgets, telephone (call centres), mail, internet, mobile phone
	In-store communications (one-to-many)	Shop signs, shop windows and internal displays (visual merchandising), product (design), packaging, front-office, internet
	Personal selling (one-to-one)	Front-office
	Direct-marketing (direct response advertising, telemarketing) (one-to-one)	Telephone-fax (call-centres), internet (e-mail marketing), mobile phone, mail, catalogues, sales force (door-to-door), print, radio, television, teletext
Media relations	Media public relations (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many)	Press releases, press conferences, interviews, video or radio news releases, environmental report, sustainability report, CSR report, telephone-fax, internet
Government relations	Public affairs (lobbying) (one-to-one, one-to-many)	Annual reports, newsletters, brochures, flyers, environmental report, sustainability report, CSR report, corporate events (meetings, round table talks, interviews, etc.), mail
Community and pressure groups relations	Public affairs (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many)	Annual reports, newsletters, brochures, flyers, environmental report, sustainability report, CSR report, community events (meetings, round table talks, interviews, etc.), internet, mail
General public relations	Corporate public relations (one-to-many, one-to-one, many-to-many)	Advertorials, corporate literature and stationery (house style material, newsletters, brochures, guidebooks, cd/dvd-rom, environmental report, sustainability report, CSR report, etc.), corporate events (conventions, meetings, conferences, roadshows, open-door, exhibitions, trade fairs, etc.), corporate publishing, internet (corporate website)
	Sponsorship (one-to-many)	Event-related, broadcast (radio or television), cause-related programmes
	Corporate advertising (one-to-many)	Advertisement (newspapers, magazines, radios, televisions, cinema, hoardings, trains), internet

Figure 1: The corporate communication mix wheel