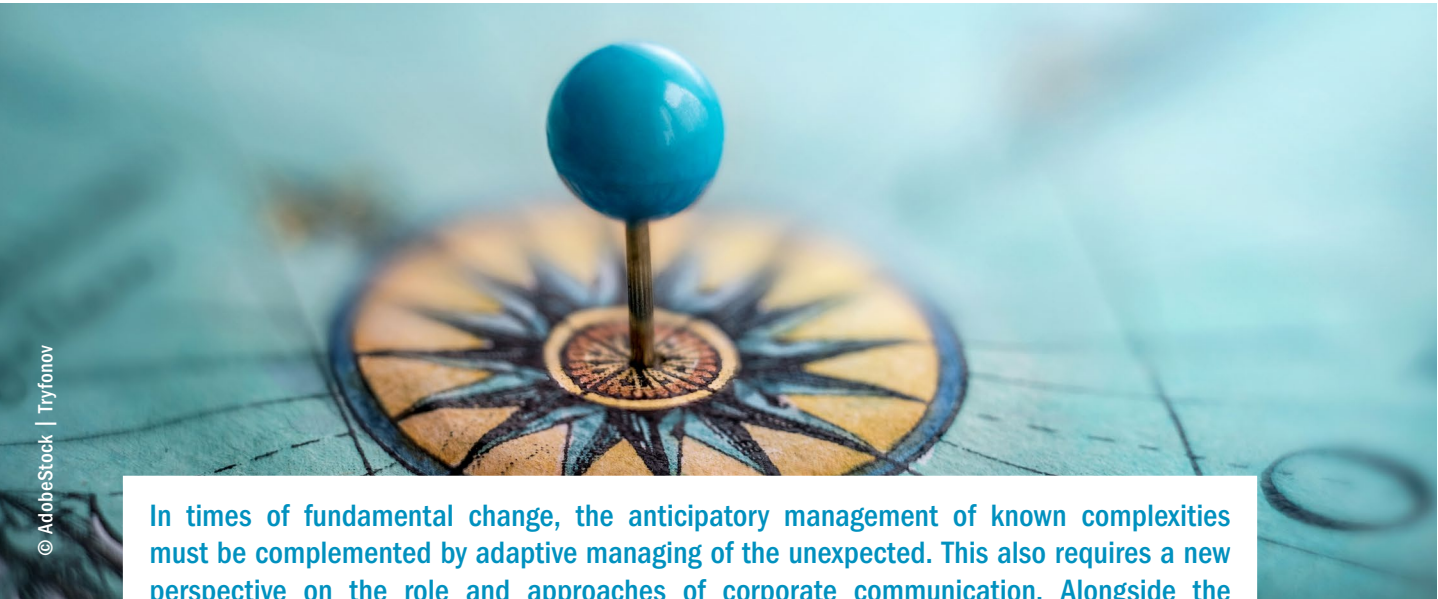


RETHINKING CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: PROVIDING ORIENTATION IN TIMES OF RADICAL UNCERTAINTY

AUTHOR: CHRISTOF EHRHART, LEIPZIG UNIVERSITY

RETHINKING CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: PROVIDING ORIENTATION IN TIMES OF RADICAL UNCERTAINTY

AUTHOR: CHRISTOF EHRHART, LEIPZIG UNIVERSITY



In times of fundamental change, the anticipatory management of known complexities must be complemented by adaptive managing of the unexpected. This also requires a new perspective on the role and approaches of corporate communication. Alongside the well-established strategic-instrumental task of achieving predefined communicative goals, a more strategic-orienting role in guiding fundamental business decision-making becomes crucial. This article highlights three key competencies for corporate communication as an orientation function: validation through communicative relationality, calibration through contextual leadership, and interpretation through perceptual organization.

FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN THREE WAYS

In the current decade, the understanding of effective management within companies is undergoing a fundamental shift, driven by radical new opportunities and challenges for the economy. Increased expectations for value creation from diverse stakeholders extending beyond purely economic success, intensifying national and international resource allocation conflicts, and revolutionary technologies – particularly GenAI – are creating a new environment for corporate communication.

Above all, internationally active companies today

typically operate amid social and political legitimacy dilemmas that require the continuous review of business decisions – especially since widely accepted principles such as market economy, free trade, and political multilateralism no longer carry the same normative weight.

At the same time, companies today face significantly increased demands to demonstrate their social contributions beyond economic success, alongside new expectations regarding their positioning in public debates (Ehrhart, 2019). In the third decade of the 21st century, the term

“stakeholder capitalism” has become established for this new economic paradigm – one that sits between economic competitiveness and social acceptance.

In parallel, algorithms and GenAI are giving rise to a “new structural transformation of the public sphere” (Habermas, 2022). This lends convincing evidence to Marshall McLuhan’s thesis that the real effect of media revolutions lies in their social consequences (McLuhan, 1994). Having displaced traditional notions of the public and produced hyper-transparent, fragmented, and fluid publics (Habermas, 2022; Herbers, 2024), digitalization and networking have now been joined by GenAI as an independent communication actor in this new public complexity – appearing alongside humans in the form of bots, avatars, and virtual agents.

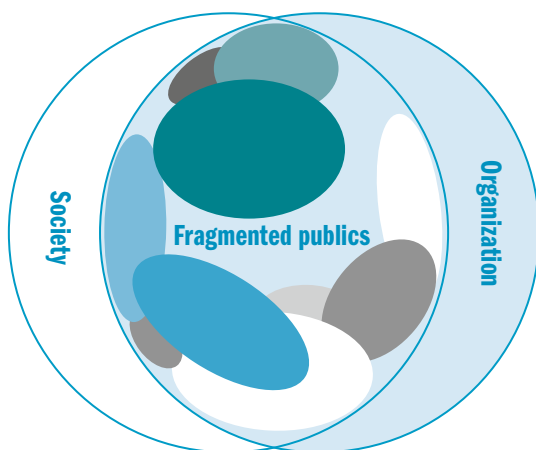
As a result, corporate communication currently faces fundamental changes and increased expectations in three ways – it is:

1. Clarifying its role within the company amidst social, economic, and political upheaval;
2. Contributing beyond traditional message delivery to help navigate “radical uncertainty” (Gigerenzer, 2023); and
3. Making effective and ethical use of new communication instruments in the age of algorithms and GenAI.

Yet these changes also bring significant potential – communication management’s specific skill profile positions it well to meet demands in times of fundamental change. The decisive success factor for companies will now be the ability to identify and address the critical junctures of external and internal perception where economic imperatives, diverging stakeholder interests, and increasingly fragmented publics converge.

The question of whether corporate communication can provide orientation at these “trigger points for consensus and conflict” (Mau, Lux, & Westheuser, 2023) will determine whether the discipline establishes itself as a genuine orientation function in times of fundamental change – or whether it continues to be relegated to the role of an auxiliary discipline within the canon of management disciplines, not least in view of the considerable new capabilities that GenAI brings to the analysis and creation of content of all kinds.

From public to publics – hyper-transparency and liquid reality



- › High communicative permeability between the organization and society creates hyper-transparency.
- › Fragmentation of the public sphere produces multiple publics in the organization’s environment.
- › A growing mix of human and artificial actors creates the impression of a liquid reality – who or what is communicating becomes difficult to establish.

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION REVISITED

While public relations was among the first applied disciplines to be systematically introduced into corporate practice in the early 20th century, the theoretical foundations and specific methods of corporate communication remain controversial to this day (Nothhaft & Zeffass, 2023; Waisbord, 2019). Despite a century of professionalization, corporate communication today presents a picture of a management sub-function that, compared to other management disciplines, lacks conceptual self-confidence, is increasingly exposed to the risk of overload in its traditional areas of responsibility, and faces increasing competition.

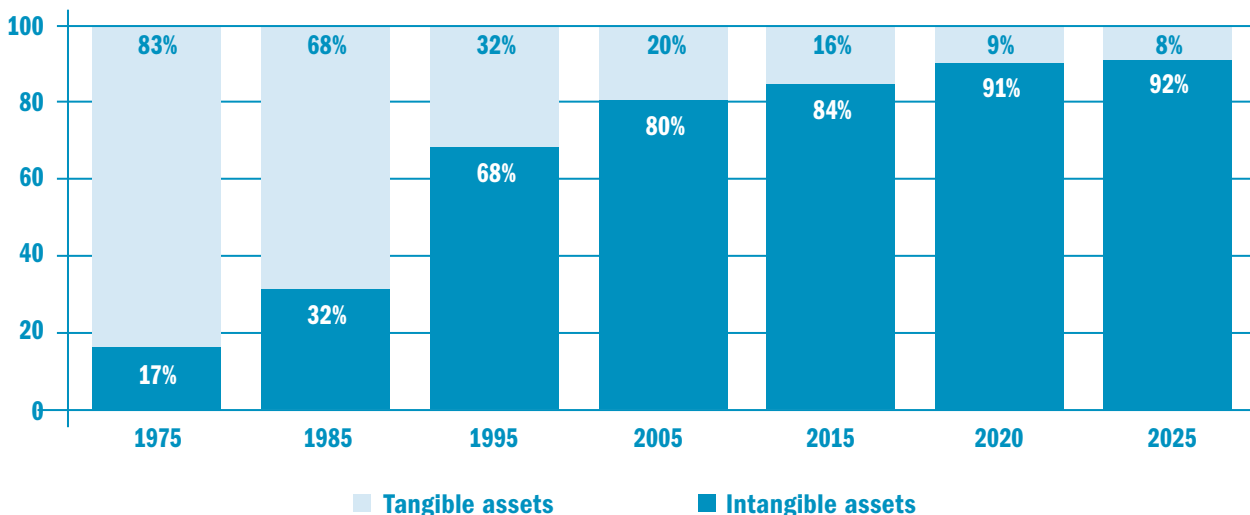
At the same time, expectations for the reliable performance of corporate communication have significantly increased. Since the mid-1970s, the ratio of tangible to intangible assets of companies has reversed. Today, intangible assets – including the company’s reputation – dominate with 80% (Ocean Tomo, 2025). Given this new importance of intangible assets such as societal trust and acceptance, the strategic impact of corporate communication has become an imperative.

The regularly cited dimensions of strategic corporate communication management – situation analysis, strategy formulation, measure implementation, and evaluation – reflect a “rational-analytical approach” of management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2022), which developed between 1950 and 1970 and was described in the 1980s by authors such as Peter Drucker and Michael Porter in detailed case studies (Drucker, 1986; Porter, 1985). On this basis, strategic communication management presents itself as the task of “managing and shaping communication activities and processes that influence value creation in organizational contexts through planning, organizing, leading, and controlling” (Zeffass & Link, 2022).

However, the results of a survey conducted in Germany in November 2023 – involving 1,147 participants from companies with more than 1,000 employees – paint a markedly different picture. When top and middle management, as well as employees, were asked about their perception of corporate communication, their responses deviated significantly from the discipline’s self-image as a strategically aligned function that systematically manages its contribution to corporate success (Zeffass et al., 2024):

- While 100% of surveyed top management and 80% of middle management executives were fundamentally

Intangible assets on the rise



Source: Ocean Tomo LLC, 2025, measured against S&P 500

familiar with the work of corporate communication, only 58% of middle management knew its goals.

- › Only half of top executives and just over a third of middle management stated that “the work of the communication function facilitates the achievement of their own goals.”
- › Only 57% of respondents in the top management and 54% in the middle management attributed a high level of competence to corporate communication.
- › Among top executives, the operational task “formulation and evaluation of mission statements, linguistic regulations, and design guidelines” received the highest approval rating at 73%, while the strategic performance contribution “consulting top management and executives on strategic decisions” received the lowest approval at 57%.

FACING UNCERTAINTY WITH A COMMUNICATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In phases of “radical uncertainty,” where the future unfolds differently than the past “stable world” would have suggested, the anticipatory management of known complexities is replaced by “adaptive managing of the unexpected” (Gigerenzer, 2023; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2016). For corporate communication, this presents considerable challenges but also unique opportunities. If critical discourse with stakeholders can no longer be reduced to the precise transmission of messages to passive target groups, and if legitimacy in an increasingly fragmented public sphere can no longer serve as a consistently reliable standard for action, then corporate communication is required as an orientation function. To fulfill this task, its self-conception must be rethought and its approaches supplemented.

New approaches to the fundamental understanding of management goals and procedures, already discussed at the end of the 20th century, can show the way here, having rapidly gained prominence in the past two decades, driven by the increasing complexity of the corporate environment. The COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on markets and supply chains, global tensions and regional wars with worldwide implications, and far-reaching state interventions to align the economy and society along sustainable lines have

recently acted as catalysts for this reorientation. Three new perspectives are at the forefront:

- › A stakeholder-oriented perspective as opposed to the previous primarily inside-out approach (Freeman, 1984);
- › Strategic management “more as the result of an informal learning process than a formal planning process” (Mintzberg, 2011); and
- › Management as the process of organizing through “sensemaking,” rather than as a purely decision-making process (Weick, 2021; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2016).

At first glance, the considerations mentioned above share a common thread: They largely draw on genuinely communicative competencies such as empathy and dialogue competency, opinion formation as well as perception and relevance management. Applying this new fundamental understanding of management to corporate communication, it becomes clear that in dealing with the new complexity and contradictions in the age of stakeholder capitalism, the fundamental communicative perspective is just as important as the explicit communicative contributions. This goes significantly beyond the recognition that organizations always have a communicative dimension that simply needs to be consistently advocated in everyday business. Rather, it is about a new understanding of corporate communication as a resource for management decisions under conditions of fundamental uncertainty and contradiction.

In this context, alongside the strategic-instrumental contribution of the function to achieve communicative goals, a strategic-orienting role for the company manifests – primarily delivered across three competencies:

1. **Validation**, mainly through systematic “communicative relationality” inwards and outwards (Kuhn et al. 2017);
2. **Calibration**, mainly through “contextual leadership” (Hamrefors, 2009); and
3. **Interpretation**, mainly through active “perception organization” (Weick & Sutcliffe 2016).

These competencies will be outlined below in terms of their perspective, method, and effect.

Validation competence – thinking in the future perfect

In the debate about the future of corporate communication, digital tools and GenAI currently occupy a prominent place. Beyond the hope for increased efficiency with GenAI – in particular for content analysis and generation – the question of the most valid practical orientation in times of great complexity also regularly arises. However, the field of corporate communication is strongly influenced by human dynamics, and a contingency problem exists that structurally limits predictive capability: “If the future is different from the past, then collecting and analyzing big data – which always comes from the past – can lead to false conclusions” (Gigerenzer, 2023). Although GenAI tools with their algorithmic logic can help in understanding reality, their inherent tendency towards certainty simultaneously limits their effectiveness. The true validation competence of corporate communication lies in professionally justified doubt. AI-based data analysis can increase effectiveness here, but genuine orientation performance consists in the ability to find probable statements or practicable solutions with limited knowledge (about the future) based on varied experiences and careful conclusions.

The communicative validation of corporate decisions requires a new understanding of the company’s internal and external world. Given increasing, sometimes contradictory stakeholder demands and the simultaneously growing complexity of the public sphere, it is no longer sufficient to merely introduce the communicative perspective or to name the communicative effects and accompanying phenomena of individual approaches. Rather, a holistic communicative understanding is required – one that combines the targeted and unintended internal and external communicative impacts of the company, its actors, and its offerings (Kuhn et al., 2017). Ultimately, this is not just about intentionally employed corporate communication, but about the entire resulting communication of the company.

Communicative validation requires the selection and interpretation of relevant information to enable a retrospective and, even more importantly, a prospective view of the communicative impact of business decisions. Two tasks are central to this selection process:

1. Specific segments of reality must be purposefully selected and presented from the company’s “stream of experience” (Weick, 2021).
2. A binding interpretative offer must be made regarding the meaning of these segments of reality (Weick, 2021).

Both tasks require a process of “active exploration” that combines “perception-driven processes” for gathering practical, detailed observations with “concept-driven processes” that relate collected observations to known categories and concepts (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2016). At the end of the exploration, there is no fixed situational picture or definitive decision proposal, but rather a “design” for reviewing communicative impact from a current or – for a prognosis – future perspective (Mintzberg, 2011; Weick, 2021).

Placing current events or business decisions into a communicative future perspective is one of the key tasks of corporate communication as an orientation function in a time of fundamental change. Neither free speculation based on selected assumptions nor pure extrapolation by projecting past trends is effective. Rather, it is necessary to “treat a future event as if it has already passed” (Weick, 2021) – that is, to look ahead by looking back at the future as if it were already history. Thinking in the future perfect (Weick, 2021) allows – based on selected measures, assumptions of impact, and framework conditions – to describe alternative future projections, explain their emergence, and assign probabilities (Ehrhart, 2022).

Key competencies for corporate communication as an orientation function

Key competence	Validation	Calibration	Interpretation
Delivered through	Communicative relationality	Communicative contextual leadership	Perception organization
Perspective	Holistic view on all communications of the company	Confronting business assumptions with stakeholder expectations	Interpreting liquid reality
Methods	Free exploration and systematic design	Gathering significance and defining relevance	Collecting small and big numbers data
Effect	Alternative future projections	Providing peripheral vision	Communicative weather report
Illustrative examples from Bosch	Future projections are condensed into short texts or presentations with suitable illustrations, and are often used as table documents with a short expiry date.	In 2025, Corporate Communications has provided the top management with more than 330 situation pictures with focus either on time periods, relevant issues, or specific events, combining data and impressions from published and – on the basis of dedicated online polling – public opinion. In doing so, established parameters such as quantity and sentiment of coverage were combined with the dimension sovereignty of interpretation in the public environment.	Corporate Communications follows the fundamental logic of “reputation plus bonding creates stakeholder capital” as return-on-invest. Since 2020 more than 4,000 participants from civil society, science, politics, culture, and NGOs were involved in respective stakeholder interactions.

Calibration competence – bringing the devil’s advocate to the table

Targeted business action is only possible if, at the end of a decision-making process, one option is selected from several and resources are provided for implementation. In this process – the actual management of the business task – there is a threefold alignment with reality: during problem definition, in the development of approaches, and at the moment of decision-making (Mintzberg, 2011). To prevent the necessary complexity reduction from leading to black-and-white thinking, especially regarding stakeholder expectations, corporate communication can provide continuous calibration. The resulting orientation performance constructively questions accepted assumptions to avoid the impression that no alternatives exist.

For corporate communication to contribute to the calibration of business decision-making in an environment of ambiguous reality, a selection must be made from the available information and observations. This requires a perspective of communicative relevance – that is, the utility for assessing possible impacts on publics and stakeholders. Communicative relevance usually arises whenever change within the company meets continuity in the social environment, and vice versa. Calibration performance then primarily results from referring to corresponding changes or continuities as an alternative to the established opinion in decision-making.

Critical orientation in particular requires a targeted approach to complexity. When complexity reduction is repeatedly mentioned in this context, it applies at best to the process of describing reality in ways that simplify communication. However, the actual perception of the increasingly complex social reality for companies in the age of stakeholder capitalism simultaneously requires “complex observers” who “anticipate significant environmental changes” and “see patterns” (Weick, 2021). To avoid undercomplex observation – such as blindly trusting one’s own data on published and public opinion inside and outside the company – a shifting perspective is essential. Peripheral vision of debates, events, and developments not currently in the spotlight, including “non-rational personal upheavals” (Weick, 2021), proves particularly valuable here. So too does the continuous input of an outside perspective through a well-informed but independently minded devil’s advocate.

The calibration of assumptions and perceptions regarding publics and stakeholders enables corporate communication to provide orientation in specific decision-making situations. This claim goes beyond classical communication consulting aimed at increasing opportunities or reducing risks, as it involves interpreting essential foundations for decision-making. Just as a ship’s captain in narrow waters or when entering harbors is advised by a local and experienced pilot without giving up command on the bridge, responsible management receives targeted “contextual” leadership support through hints on perception patterns, hot-button issues, and changes in values (Hamrefors, 2009). The shoals, reefs, and sandbanks of navigation become, in this analogy, the ambiguities, dilemmas, and uncertainties that management must navigate in extreme situations.

Interpretation competence – nowcasting

Strategic business decision-making in the age of stakeholder capitalism takes place not only under conditions of an increasingly accelerated and fragmented public sphere – due to digitalization and the use of GenAI – but is simultaneously confronted with “postmodern meta-discourses” (Lyotard, 2012) on legitimacy issues, within which meaning and responsibility as a starting point for economic action occupy at least as much space as prosperity and growth as desired outcomes (Ehrhart, 2019). The resulting experience of a liquid reality creates a rapidly growing need for continuous interpretation of internal and external publics and stakeholder relationships in corporate decision-making. While empiricism can provide the basis for this, the actual orientation performance is inherently interpretive.

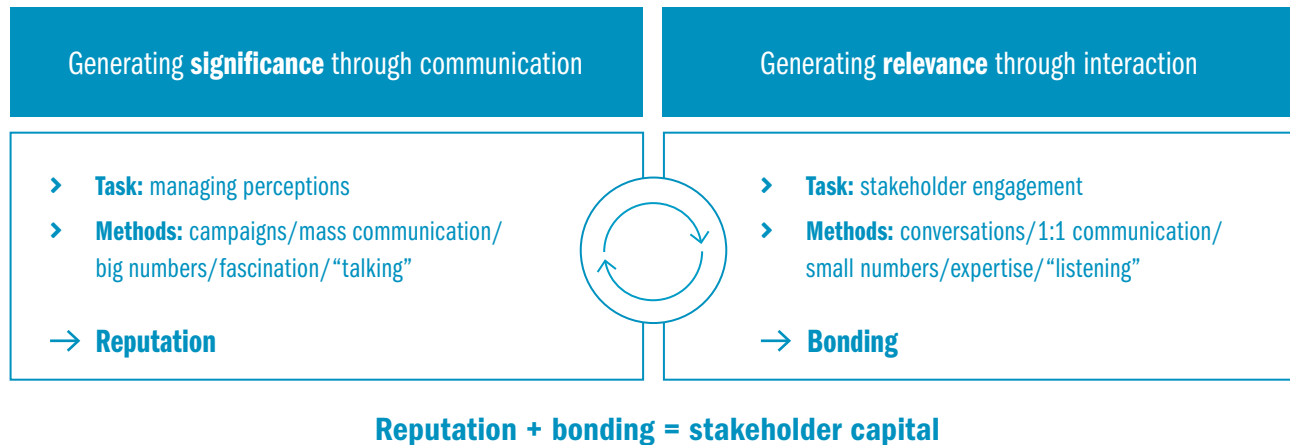
To achieve the necessary interpretation of the company’s communicative environment, an explanatory model is required that structures this interpretative process and makes its results understandable to actors outside corporate communication. By pointing to the effects and interdependencies of communicative factors, such a paradigm simultaneously creates the basis for a business model for corporate communication – one that provides information about the function’s perspective and goal-oriented contribution. A communicative paradigm that aims to meet the demands of stakeholder capitalism must combine classical aspects of perception management – such as instruments for increasing awareness, image, and

reputation – with measures of relations management aimed at building and maintaining relationships (or bonding) with stakeholders from the social environment. The interpretive competence of corporate communication can only be effective beyond the function itself if assessments and results are introduced promptly and in a guiding manner. Signals from the field of perception management – typically big numbers derived from quantitative or qualitative analysis of published and public opinion – must be combined with insights from the field of relations management – typically

combined with clear instructions for action and the respective paradigm of corporate communication as expressed in strategic communication planning, form the methodological backbone of effective interpretive performance.

In practice, interpretive performance is less often found in large strategic designs, where it is at most the starting point for long-term positioning and action planning, than in the routine of daily situation analysis, which also regularly transitions into ad hoc consulting for short-term management decisions. Given the new requirements for orientation

A new business model for corporate communication



Source: Christof Ehrhart

small numbers based on physical, virtual, and sometimes AI-supported dialogues and exchanges with stakeholders in small groups – and distilled into decision-relevant scenarios and complexity-reduced situational pictures.

When preparing these representations – usually short texts or presentations with catchy language and a few relevant data and observations – timeliness (even anticipation) is more important than completeness, especially since such documents usually only serve as a starting point for further strategic discussion. Daily situational pictures,

in the face of the unknown, clarifying what is currently the case in the company’s environment becomes an act of present forecasting. As with nowcasting in meteorology, for example, this involves assessing the current situation based on available (incomplete) data and an established mental model. Communicative present forecasts are regularly conveyed rhetorically – in dedicated briefing meetings, in short-term requests for orientation, and in written formats such as table documents or board presentations – using highly condensed language.

WHEN FACING RADICAL UNCERTAINTY, ONE NEEDS MORE THAN GENAI IN COMMUNICATIONS

Companies in the age of stakeholder capitalism operate amid fragmented publics, contested value-based maxims of action, new national and international conflict constellations, and technological revolutions, navigating a complex mix of opportunities and challenges of the known, the unknown, and the unexpected. Corporate communication is therefore required to provide an orientation service for management that, while intrinsically present in the skill profile of corporate communication, has hitherto lagged behind the traditional focus on communicative steering and impact – both in the self-perception and competence development of the discipline.

By supplementing the strategically instrumental viewpoint on corporate communication, which has previously understood “communicative value creation” primarily in terms of creating intangible assets such as reputation and trust (Zerfass & Link, 2022), with that of a strategically orienting management function, an escape route also opens from the narrow self- and external perception of the discipline as an overwhelmed, underwhelmed, or simply misunderstood second-rate function (Nothaft, 2010) or auxiliary discipline of management.

For this to truly succeed, communicators cannot solely rely on algorithm-based data evaluations, including the use of GenAI, going forward. While these technologies are primarily helpful in increasing the efficiency of orientation in times of radical uncertainty, past data says little about what lies ahead and can itself become a perception trap. To function effectively as an orientation function, corporate communication must expose its specific communicative perspective, sharpen its sensors for communicative relevance, and present a convincing business case for corporate communication.

OUTLOOK

For corporate communication in times of fundamental change, the question of what the actual state of affairs is and what should (or should not) be communicated is of utmost relevance. This requires not only sensitive use of language but also a highly developed sensitivity to the backgrounds and origins of the interpretative offers and language games in circulation. Many of these are contentiously nuanced; some highly value-driven or even interest-driven.

Professional communicators themselves have learned to make themselves heard with meaningful narratives. This is effective as long as a sense of reality is maintained, but it carries risks if that sense is lost. The American science fiction author Philip K. Dick – known for the literary originals of iconic film adaptations such as *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report*, and *Total Recall* – answered the question “What is reality?” in a text with the apt title “How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later?": “Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away” (Dick, 1978). That may serve also as guidance for a communications discipline increasingly confronted with the task of providing orientation in times of fundamental change. There’s a lot to win and much to lose.

REFERENCES

- Dick, P. K. (1978).** How to build a universe that doesn't fall apart two days later https://philipdick.com/mirror/essays/How_to_Build_a_Universe.pdf.
- Drucker, P. F. (1986).** Management: Tasks, responsibilities, practices. Truman Talley.
- Ehrhart, C. (2019).** Erfolgsfaktor PR: Impulse für die Unternehmenskommunikation. Frankfurter Allgemeine Buch.
- Ehrhart, C. (2022).** Internationale Unternehmenskommunikation. In A. Zerfaß, M. Piwinger & U. Röttger (Eds.), Handbuch Unternehmenskommunikation (3rd ed.) Springer Gabler.
- Ehrhart, C. (2025).** Unternehmenskommunikation als Managementaufgabe im Stakeholder-Kapitalismus – am Scheideweg zwischen Orientierungsfunktion und Hilfsdisziplin. In: L. Dühring, F. Krebber, A. Melzer, J. Seiffert-Brockmann & E. Oliveira, E. (2025). Kommunikation als Strategie (pp. 89–105). Springer Gabler.
- Frandsen, F. & Johansen, W. (2022).** Strategic Communication: a discipline in the making? In J. Falkheimer & M. Heide (Eds.), Research handbook on strategic communication. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Freemann, R. E. (1984).** Strategic management. A stakeholder approach. Pitman.
- Gigerenzer, G. (2023).** How to stay smart in a smart world. Penguin Random House.
- Habermas, J. (2022).** Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik. Suhrkamp.
- Hamrefors, S. (2009).** The professional communicator's role in leadership. Swedish Public Relations Association https://www.ipr.mdu.se/pdf_publications/1560.pdf
- Herbers, M. R. (2024).** Post-publics. Halem.
- Kuhn, T., Ashcraft, K. L., Cooren, F. (2017).** The work of communication. Routledge.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (2012).** Das postmoderne Wissen. Passagen Verlag.
- Mau, S., Lux, T. & Westheuser, L. (2023).** Triggerpunkte. Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft. Suhrkamp.
- McLuhan, M. (1994).** Understanding media. MIT Press.
- Mintzberg, H. (2011).** Managen. (2nd ed.) Gabal.
- Nothhaft, H., & Zerfass, A. (2023).** Public relations in a postdisciplinary world: On the impossibility of establishing a constitutive PR theory within the tribal struggles of applied communications disciplines. In C. H. Botan & E. J. Sommerfeldt (Eds.), Public relations theory III (pp. 247–265). Routledge.
- Ocean Tomo (2025).** Intangible Asset Market Value Study. <https://oceantomo.com/intangible-asset-market-value-study/>
- Porter, M. E. (1985).** Competitive advantage. Free Press.
- Waisbord, S. (2019).** Communication. A post-discipline. Polity.
- Weick, K. (2021).** Der Prozess des Organisierens. (8th ed.) Suhrkamp.
- Weick, K. & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2016).** Das Unerwartete managen. Wie Unternehmen aus Extremsituationen lernen (3rd ed.). Schäffer-Poeschel.
- Zerfass, A. & Link, J. (2022).** Communication management: structures, processes, and business models for value creation through corporate communications. In J. Falkheimer & M. Heide (Eds.), Research handbook on strategic communication. (pp. 237–258). Edward Elgar.
- Zerfass, A., Brockhaus, J., Ehrlenspiel, M., Gulich, S., Heinz, A., Kelm, K., Leißner, V., Müller, A., Rüth, A., Schick, J., Schröder, M. & Weiß, L. (2024).** Perceptions and positioning of communication departments. What C-level executives, middle managers and co-workers know and think about corporate communications and which strategies are used by communication leaders to strengthen their profile. Results of a multi-method study in listed and private companies. Academic Society for Management & Communication. www.academic-society.net

AUTHOR



DR. CHRISTOF EHRHART is Executive Vice President Corporate Communications & Governmental Affairs of Robert Bosch GmbH, Honorary Professor for International Corporate Communication at Leipzig University and Chairman of the Board of the Günter Thiele Foundation for Communication & Management. Email: christof.ehrhart@uni-leipzig.de

MORE INFORMATION

The article is based on the German publication Ehrhart, 2025, as listed above. More related content can be found at www.futureproofingpr.de