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# Corporate communication and strategy in the field of projects

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## Abstract

The communication concerning situations of project marketing (space industry, train construction, engineering, building construction, . . .) does not lead to a lot of researches and publications. An attempt will be made in this article, to establish the link between project and corporate communication considering the various steps in the development of a particular project strategy. This induces the development of the identity of the firm, the definition of the main targets (sociogram approach) and the development of particular tools at both an internal and an external level. It appeared in this study that the traditional communication mix arrives late after the management communication and the organizational communication. Concerning the tools, the relational network seems to be the best adapted to the particular situation and the targeting allows a good despatching of the resources at this level. The firms have in fact to develop both a functional and a relational positioning.

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## Introduction

If corporate communication in industrial fields leads to various researches and publications, it is not the case in the specific area of industrial project marketing. This situation is mainly due to the specific aspects of the projects and to the particular sectors concerned (space industry, train construction, engineering, hydraulic engineering, building construction, etc.)

In order to try to establish a link between corporate communication and strategy in the field of projects, it seems interesting to present a definition about both a project and a corporate communication strategy.

## Definition of the project

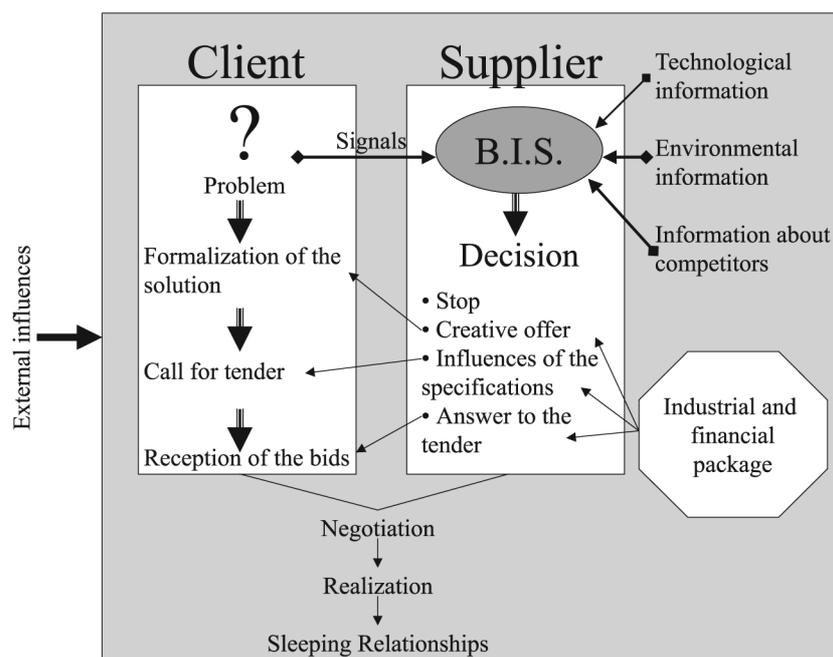
A project is a complex transaction concerning a group of products, works and services, forecast to realize, in a certain period of time, a specific asset for a buyer (Cova, 1990). The specificities of projects can be summarized in three words: unicity, complexity, and discontinuity. Unicity because each project is different from the others, complexity due to the number of actors, technologies, etc., and discontinuity between different projects, which induces a period of sleeping relationships with the client.

First of all, it is necessary to describe the general process of development of the project regarding the supplier point of view. It can be summarized through an integrated approach presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 can be analysed as follows: first, we find a client who has a problem. He/she is in search of a solution and sends different signals to the environment (contact with potential suppliers, contact with authorities, etc.). These signals are detected by a business intelligence system (BIS) developed by the potential supplier. This BIS also permits one to obtain information concerning the technological environment (substitution technologies, evolution of the technologies of the firm, new technologies, etc.), the competitors (strengths and weaknesses, number and characteristics, new competitors, etc.) and the general environment (political and social aspects, legal aspects . . .). Faced with this amount of information, the supplier



Figure 1 Evolution of the project



has to make a decision. If the project has no interest for them, they stop. If they discover the project really at the beginning of its development by the client, they can try to develop a creative offer which is a good way to avoid competition by the conception, with the client, of all the parts of the projects (the influence of the supplier is then maximum). If they discover the project later, they will try to influence the specifications often by the means of their relational network. And finally if it is too late to influence the project, the last solution is to meet the specifications established by the client (and unfortunately, often, by the client and a competitor!). In all the cases, the supplier needs to build a financial and industrial package with the help of engineers, experts, insurance institutions, financial actors and industrial partners.

All this leads to negotiations and sometimes to a contract. After this contract, the supplier has to realize the project. During this period he/she can also gain interesting information for a future contract. This is the same during the period of "sleeping relationship" when the supplier tries to maintain the relation by the means of after-sales services, training schemes, etc. These contacts permit one to obtain information to go back to the beginning of the diagram (signals detected by the BIS).

## Dimensions of corporate communication

Following van Riel (1992), three forms of corporate communication can be retained: (1) marketing communication; (2) organizational communication; and (3) management communication.

These three main forms of corporate communication are present in the field of projects but we are convinced that organizational and management communication are key factors for industrial success.

Marketing communication, oriented to support sales of particular goods and services, contains traditionally the promotional mix and the public relations mix. A central concept here is the need to operate in a "customer-oriented" fashion and to use an "integrated marketing communication". Organizational communication concerns public relations, public affairs, investor relations, labour market communication, environment communication, internal communication. Management communication will try to persuade individual subordinates that the goals of the organization are desirable. Its specific purpose is to transmit authority and to achieve cooperation with the organization and more precisely: developing a shared vision of the company, maintaining trust in the organizational

leadership, managing the change process and motivating employees. In the face of this heterogeneous group of communications, it is essential to obtain a durable coordination between the different forms of internal and external communication.

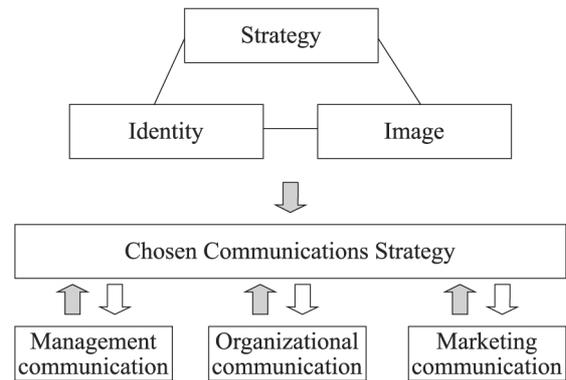
To complete these considerations, it seems interesting to reproduce here Aberg's representation of the "total communication sphere" in Figure 2.

Another fundamental concept to be considered is the triangle "corporate strategy-corporate identity-corporate image" in relation with the chosen communications strategy. This can be illustrated by Figure 3.

A strategic approach of corporate communication implies a new vision of the role of communication both within the organization and between the organization and its environment. Identity and image constitute two key concepts of corporate communication in the field of project marketing, the ultimate goal being the creation of a positive and durable basis for relationships with the multigroups on which the company depends.

These general considerations can be completed and illustrated by mentioning van Riel's (1992) focal responsibilities of corporate communication:

**Figure 3** Link between communication triangle and communications strategy

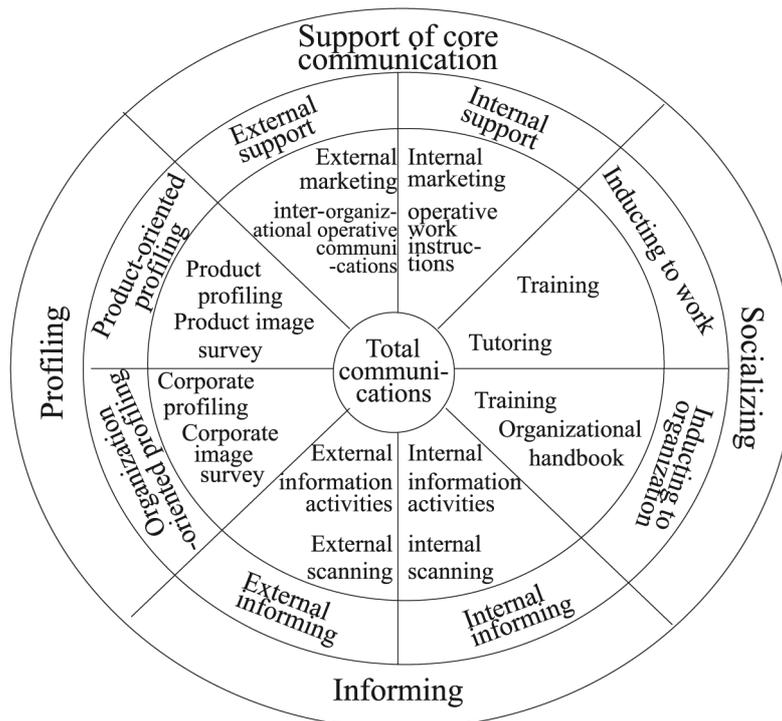


- to develop initiatives in order to minimize non-functional discrepancies between the desired identity and the desired image;
- to flesh out the profile of the "company behind the brand";
- to indicate who should perform which tasks in the field of communication, to formulate and carry out effective procedures in order to facilitate decision making.

**Relation between project and corporate communication**

In order to establish the link between project and corporate communication, it seems

**Figure 2** The total communication sphere



interesting to envisage the different phases in the development of a project. Based on what we presented before, we identify three levels:

- (1) Outside the project: without any link with a particular project.
- (2) At the inception of the project: when the client tries to describe the specifications of his project.
- (3) Inside the project: when the project is precisely determined.

During those phases, the communication tools have a particular role to play but all has to be integrated in a complete communication strategy. The main goal of this corporate communication strategy is to establish a good reputation for the company (= image: "picture of an organization as perceived by target groups"). Each project is different from the others, so it is impossible to communicate on a specific product or service. What the firm wants to present to its clients is mainly an insurance about its ability to realize the entire project, about a well developed adaptation capacity, about a respect of delays and about a good awareness/brand image[1] (= identity: "the way in which a company presents itself to its target groups by the use of symbols, communication and behaviour"). This identity is developed as single or not considering the sector. For example, in the construction industry in Belgium, the identity can be adapted to meet the requirements of the client in the north or in the south of the country (that leads to the creation of multiple subsidiaries corresponding to different types of clients).

During the first phase (outside the project), this is mainly awareness/brand image which is developed in order, in the second phase (at the inception of the project), to be contacted by the client who needs some help to create his project. In this phase and in the third one (inside the project), communication rests more on the ability to realize the entire project (ability to manage the industrial package), on the adaptation ability and on the seriousness in the respect of delays. But new aspects seem to become more and more important such as the furnished help in the construction of the financial package and the role of intermediary in the relations with the local authorities and other partners.

As we can imagine, the organizational and management communications seem to become more important than the traditional

marketing communication. This last one seems to be less adapted to this type of activities. So, in the rest of this paper, we will mainly develop the particular aspects of organizational and management communication.

### **Developing a communication strategy in the field of project**

#### *Developing the identity*

Considering the triangle identity-strategy-image, the first thing to do in order to implement a strategy is to determine how we want to be viewed and thus to determine our identity. In the field of projects, this identity must lead to the creation of a trust or confidence atmosphere between the potential client and the firm and between the other actors and the firm. In fact, in the realization of a project, the client has generally a problem which has real important implications. Sometimes, the future of the client depends on his investments in the project. So, when choosing his partners, he will be particularly attracted by all the aspects allowing a reduction of its perceived risks. The supplier has thus to appear as an expert and has to be always on the top at the technological level (the technology being the only common element of all the projects). The communication must thus pinpoint those aspects and leads to a technological (or functional) positioning doubled with a relational one allowing the creation of the right atmosphere.

Once the identity developed, a strategy must be implemented. This strategy, in the field of project, will use particular tools differing from those used for traditional goods. As mentioned before, communication is most defined as organizational and management communication.

#### *Targeting*

The first thing to do, after the determination of the identity, is the definition of the targets. In this particular field, targets are numerous and various. They include all the partners in the research, the development and the realization of the project. These targets are both internal and external.

At the internal level, all the employees and workers are specific targets.

A definition of the external targets may be facilitated by the use of specific tools developed for the marketing of industrial

projects. The first one concerns the realization of what we will call “a sociogram” (Cova and Salle, 1999).

A sociogram is a representation of all the actors and of all their links (see Figure 4). It allows one to identify the main actors (who have the most numerous links) and thus permits a reduction of the communication efforts by the centralization on the most important targets.

The sociogram is constructed by members of the firm and is based on a search of information via databases and via contacts with identified central actors in the targeted environment (also called “milieu of the project”). This permits, via a graphical representation, a direct and global view of the situation and an identification of the links between the different actors. This thus allows a high targeting of the communication efforts.

Another tool to develop is related to various portfolios of actors or of clients which can also help to despatch the resources (see Figures 5 and 6). Those portfolios are constructed on the basis of different dimensions such as:

- attractiveness and relational vulnerability for the clients;
- central position and accessibility for the actors.

Figure 4 Sociogram of the “milieu”

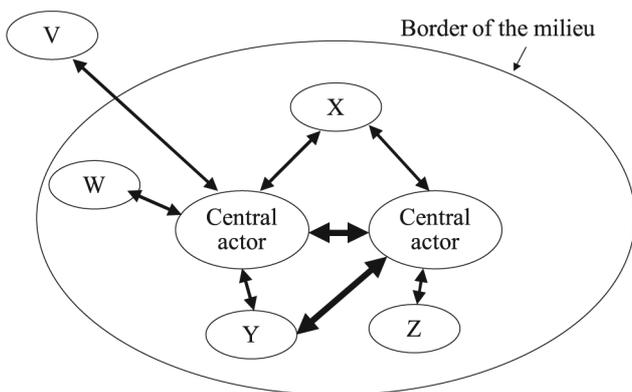


Figure 5 Portfolio of clients

		<b>Relational Vulnerability</b>	
		Strong	Weak
<b>Attractiveness</b>	Strong	Clients who need major investment	Clients to maintain without too much investment
	Weak	Clients to study with a selective approach	Clients to maintain with a minimal investment

Figure 6 Portfolio of actors

		<b>Accessibility</b>	
		Strong	Weak
<b>Central position</b>	Strong	Actors to transform in possible link with other actors	Major actors to follow without direct contact
	Weak	Minor actors to develop as indirect source	Minor actors who do not need a specific action

After a suitable use of those tools, the firm is able to perfectly identify the targets of its communication strategy and to realize the more appropriate allocation of resources between them.

### Specific tools to develop in the field of projects

#### At an internal level

Internal communication regroups all the communication actions and decisions of the firm inside the company. The goals of the internal communication are mainly:

- To present the results of the company or other particular important aspect of the company’s life.
- To transfer information, know-how.
- To explain new orientations, new projects.

This is particularly important in the case of projects where a high degree of adaptability is asked of the employees who have to invest a lot themselves in order to satisfy, in the best way and at the best moment, their potential clients and other partners. This represents, in fact, the relationship “communication-motivation-productivity” (Westphalen, 1998). This internal communication also takes part in the construction of the firm’s image which depends on what the employees transmit outside the company. A good transfer of the identity via the members of the company is particularly vital in the creation of the trust atmosphere around the firm and in the approach of the environment in terms of risks reduction.

As evidence, management communication has a particular role to play. All the traditional tools (internal journal, Internet ...) may be used in order to improve the communication but some particular aspects are to be developed such as the creation of a feedback system on furnished information. This in

Belgium is achieved by 81.11 per cent of the firms working in the concerned sectors[1]. This return on information is really vital in the inception of an efficient BIS in the company.

The questioned companies traditionally estimate that their dimension also allows a good circulation of information inside the firm but, in fact, it seems that this is facilitated more by the structure of firms working on projects. Those firms develop a central team working on all the common aspects of the projects and around this different moving group particularly attached to specific projects. Those groups differ regarding the characteristics of the projects. That induces a moving composition which facilitates the circulation of information. Nevertheless, the exchange of some particular pieces of information is difficult (generally between people at similar hierarchical levels) when the data are linked to the quality of expertise of the employees and then when they can influence their professional future.

#### *At an external level*

The most important aspect of the external communication concerns the relational network of the company. This relational network is useful in order to furnish information to the BIS, in order to influence the specifications of the various projects, in order to realize the industrial and financial packages required and in order to create the trust atmosphere between the company and its environment (clients and partners). We can speak about the "linkage-mix" which represents the relational position of the firm in the network related to the project and around the project (the social context of the project). This relational network of the company is constructed around formal and informal relations both professional and non-professional. If we consider the relationship between the client and the supplier, we can represent it as shown in Figure 7.

As presented, the relationship can be divided into two components:

- (1) the relationship in the context of a particular project;
- (2) the relationship outside this context.

The particularities of the relationship in the field of projects appear mainly in the situation without project. This period is called period of sleeping relationships. The relationship between the partners cannot be supported by an exchange of resources and is thus particularly weak. The competitors will of

course try to break it at this moment. The problem is thus to maintain the relationship by the way of multiple tools.

In fact, during the realization of the project, it is really important for the supplier to stress the quality of his know how and the ability to meet the particular requests of the client. The double positioning presented before is thus developed. The relational aspect allows one to develop a confidence atmosphere which leads to a better comprehension of the client's needs, to a reduction of the perceived risk and to an influence of the specifications of the projects. The technological positioning permits an adaptation of the knowledge of the firm in order to integrate the project in its general environment. In the period of sleeping relationships, the relationship between the two actors is shaky and a good relational management allows one, by the way of after-sales services, training, tribal approach, etc., to maintain a good contact with the client and thus an important source of information for the future development of the firm in the context of new projects.

Of course, it is impossible to maintain the relationship with all the clients. This is why it is also important to develop the contacts with key actors in the environment. Those actors have been identified via the use of the particular tools presented before. Those are, for example, authorities, financial suppliers, political actors, etc.

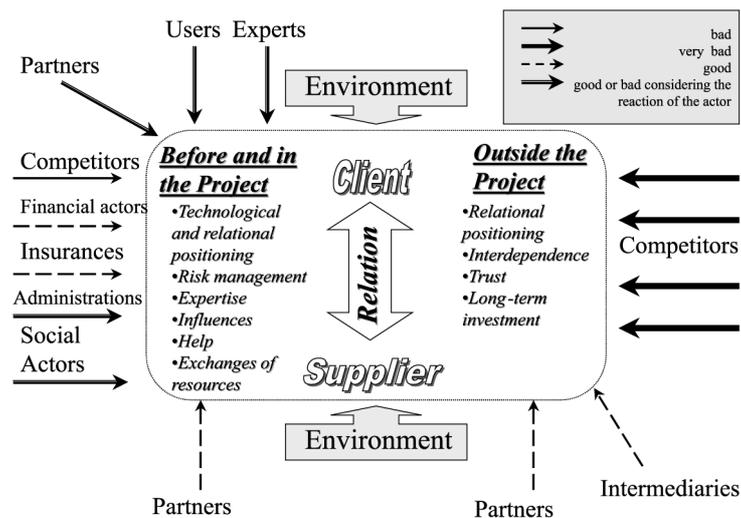
In this context, the financial communication, the press relations and the lobbying activities are, sometimes more than in other sectors, developed. Moreover, in each particular sector concerned with the projects' activities, we can find examples where all the actors of the sectors are present and where the relations can be consolidated.

Except for those elements, we can, of course, also find traditional aspects linked to the symbolic approach. For example, in the construction industry, the first thing that appears on a particular project is the indication on the construction site of the name and image of the client, the supplier, the architect and the partners which favour the notoriety and brand image of the actors.

## **Conclusion**

As presented, corporate communication in the field of projects has particular goals. In

Figure 7 Client-supplier relationship



fact, what is really important for the firm is the creation of the trust atmosphere which allows one to achieve part of the other specific objectives. This permits a reduction of the asymmetry of information which is particularly vital in order to be able to influence the future of the project (specifications, partners chosen, etc.) and this also permits one to reduce the perceived risks by the client, which is an important criterion in the decision-making process.

Concerning the particular dimensions of corporate communication, it appeared that the traditional communication mix arrives late after the management communication and the organizational communication. This is due to the particular aspects of the projects (unicity, complexity and discontinuity). This centralization on such aspects of the corporate communication induces the development of specific approaches in terms of culture (culture of the organization and culture of the various partners), behaviours, etc.

Concerning the tools, the relational network seems to be the best adapted to the particular situation and the targeting allows a good despatching of the resources at this level.

The double positioning of the firm (functional and relational) has to be developed with attention and the behaviour of all the employees can help transfer this position outside the company.

As a conclusion, we can say that, in this particularly complex and heterogeneous environment, international by nature, corporate communication induces highly differentiated policies concerning both internal and external communication. The objectives of awareness, brand image, attitude and behaviour have, in this case, particular significations and implications and lead to the inception of efficient policies in the field of identity, integration, inducement and investigation.

## Note

- 1 This is what appeared in an inquiry into 181 Belgian firms working on projects (Scoubeau, 1999).

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