THE POWER OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION. STRATEGIES, TECHNIQUES AND CHANGES IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: More than ever, in this period it is very important to communicate effectively, on a personal and professional level. We have to find the most useful methods and techniques for the information we want to transmit or receive. After 2020, many aspects have changed in the communication process, especially in the field of business communication. The existing communication strategy in 2022 is no longer the same as in 2019, for most people, private companies or public institutions. The way we communicate with family, with employees, with clients, with suppliers, with pupils, with students has changed a lot. The most important changes in the communication process were generated by the pandemic, war and other crisis situations that had effects on people and companies. The main objective of this research work is to emphasize the importance of efficiency in the communication process and also the power that information transmitted or received in real time can have. To identify the results, I included the analysis of documents, official surveys and studies published in the field. Also, I discussed with communication specialists and entrepreneurs in the field of communication, in order to obtain the most relevant solutions regarding this subject. As preliminary results, the following can be mentioned: the transmission and reception of information in real time together with the feedback in real time can be real solutions for solving problems related to (business) communication, within private companies and public institutions. The communication process is at a different level, compared to the past period, from many points of view. People and companies have changed the way they communicate, they have changed the channels through which they communicate, they have even changed the frequency with which they communicate. The key words for the period we are in can be: adaptation and efficiency.

Keywords: feedback; changes; impact, new communication, business solutions

JEL classification: M30

1. Introduction

The pandemic and the war have shown us once again that communication is extremely important, both on a personal and professional level. We knew this even before 2020, but after we all realized that without communication, we cannot really achieve important things. Moreover, the communication process must keep up with technology, so that we have at our disposal the most efficient and effective tools and channels to communicate, especially in exceptional situations.

In the last three years, there have been many changes at the global, national and local levels. All these changes had a huge impact on everyone's life. One of the basic solutions we all had at our disposal was communication or information.

The difficult context in which we have been since 2020 forces us to communicate effectively and to make important decisions in a very short time. This way of making important decisions in a very short time is extremely risky, due to the simple fact that we do not have enough time to reflect and implicitly to look for the best solutions. It will be very difficult to know if the decision we will make is the best.

For this problem that we face and will face in the future, we have an extremely simple but at the same time complex solution: information and transmission of information. This two-way information process (personal and professional) must be continuous, without pause and with some very clear "rules".

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The first rule could be daily information, practically to be "up to date" with everything that is happening around us (locally, nationally or internationally). The second rule could be the one related to "reliable" sources. From this point of view, there are many problems, regardless of the country or continent, many challenges that have the role of distracting, manipulating and finally influencing important decisions.

The "fake news" part developed at the same time and almost at the same pace as the communication process, in general. Everything that includes false information exists both online and offline. Recently, most of the people interviewed believe that false information prevails in the online environment. It may be so, but we can have this perception because we, all of us, use online communication much more, both on a personal and professional level.

Also, private companies and public institutions were forced to move to another level in terms of communication. The people responsible for communication, from these organizations, had a lot of challenges during this period. Public relations, communication or marketing departments have undergone profound changes, some from the point of view of human resources, others from the point of view of the tools used, current technology, and others from the point of view of interaction with citizens, clients, suppliers...etc.

In the research that I carried out, the interviewed people pronounce the word "feedback" very often. It is extremely important to generate feedback, but also to receive feedback. In recent years, many public institutions and private companies have implemented a system through which citizens, customers, suppliers or other categories can provide real feedback. It would be extremely important that this feedback could also be provided anonymously. However, if this option exists, the person who sends anonymous feedback must be aware that the responsibility for the data sent must be at the highest level. Only in this situation, feedback can improve the activity of public institutions, the activity of private companies and finally it can improve the personal life of all of us.

With all these tools at hand, there are many people who avoid giving feedback, arguing that "nothing changes anyway". From my point of view as well as that of the people interviewed, feedback has proven to be extremely effective when it is objective. Feedback must be constructive, not destructive!

2. Communication in public and private sector

According to datareportal.com, globally, we are almost 8 billion people. Almost 5.5 billion are unique mobile phone users, 5 billion are active internet users, and almost 4.8 billion are active users on social media platforms (Data Reportal, 2022).

Communication is an essential component and to the same extent a responsibility for carrying out tasks in the activity of the administration and public institutions. The relevant legal norms establishing obligations regarding public communication, in general, and government communication, in particular, have been grouped according to the following fields of application (SGG, The regulatory framework in the field of government communication, 2020):

- Fundamental rights
- Initiation of normative acts and public policies
- Free access to information of public interest
- Decision-making transparency in public administration
- Protection of personal data
- Protection of classified information
- Reusing information from public institutions
- Romania's digital agenda
- Development, monitoring and evaluation of public policies
- Open data and reuse of public sector information
- Communication in the context of the implementation of projects financed by European funds
- European citizens' initiative
- Communication in specific situations/areas

The right to information and the correlative obligation, in the charge of the public authorities, to ensure the correct information of the citizen presupposes the existence of mechanisms through which the citizen, on the one hand, can know his rights and the ways in which he can benefit from their exercise, and on the other party, to be able to have a clear and correct representation of the manner of carrying out the mandate of its representatives, mechanisms such as free access to information of public interest or transparency in the decision-making act of the authorities.(Garlisteanu, 2008).

When it comes to communicating and promoting oneself effectively, regardless of whether we are talking about public or private sector organizations, there are several purposes for which public relations are absolutely necessary: to attract attention, to inform, to create a sympathetic climate, to solve a problem, to manage a challenge, to develop an image, to defend ourselves, to influence public opinion, to respond to journalists, to deal with socioeconomic complexity (Dagenais, 2002).

What seemed almost unthinkable ten years ago, in the public sector, is the order of the day today: institutions of all ranks, in addition to direct communicators, must also have up-to-date accounts on social networks, but also networks of influencers online, follow lists, etc. (Parghel, 2022).

In 2021, the worldwide communication service market generated around 1.37 trillion U.S. dollars, up from 1.33 trillion in 2020. The Statista Technology Market Outlook estimates that global revenue will continue to increase and reach around 1.52 trillion U.S dollars in 2027 (Statista Research Department, 2022).

3. Solutions for streamlining the communication process

One of the most important solutions that we all have at hand is adapting to the new society, adapting to the new reality, which is totally different from the one until the year 2020. From this point of view, first of all, we need to be aware of the needs and expectations of new generations. Studies show that Gen Z youth are more educated, more realistic, more open, more empathetic, more health conscious, and more socially engaged than the previous generation of millennials. They use social networks more to get information, are more connected to the news and are much more concerned about the environment and nature (Radu, 2022).

In order to adapt more easily, it is necessary to know very well the generations with whom we communicate and interact, on a personal and professional level. We have the distribution of the population by generations (the approximate number of people in Romania, in 2021) (Gyenge, 2022):
-   Silent Generation (1928-1945): approximately 1.4 million people
-   Baby Boomers (1946-1964): approximately 4.2 million people
-   X Generation (1965-1980): approximately 4.5 million people
-   Y Generation (1981-1996): approximately 3.9 million people
-   Z Generation (1997-2010): approximately 2.9 million people
-   Alpha Generation (2011-present): approximately 2.1 million people

With the pandemic forcing firms to engage with clients in new ways, an opportunity arises to set expectations around what methods will stay with us long-term: understanding the trends and adapting for the future! (Miller, 2021)

It goes without saying that client satisfaction is one of the most important aspects of a firm's success. While most firms know it, however, not all are taking the necessary steps to ensure that their clients are happy. Here are some tips on maintaining the communication that your clients need (Thomson, 2019).:
-   Provide short response times;
-   Discuss expectations at the beginning of the matter;
-   Set a dedicated time to check in with a client
-   Ask the client for feedback at the conclusion of the matter

Having a formalized system for feedback will help you track client satisfaction. It is also important to remember to provide multiple methods for clients to share their feedback as some may not want to share any disappointment directly with you (Thomson, 2019).

Positive connections between the existence of company mission and organizational values and their communication within a company on one hand and some of the non-financial aspects of company performance on the other (Dermol, Sirca, 2018).

We live in times where everything around us is changing at a very accelerated pace. From this point of view, the safety of an important decision is questionable. In some situations, it is decisive that the information reaches us in real-time, and that we transmit it immediately, so that the final beneficiary has the necessary information to be able to make the best decision for citizens, for the company, for the family...etc.

A strong communication department understands and responds to top management's priorities and draws on its knowledge of concerns in society and what matters to staff, customers and steak holders to accelerate and improve the decision-making process at the top (Ruler, Korver, 2019)

Individuals do make many decisions in organizations, starting from the CEO down to employees working directly with customers (Conrad, Poole, 2012).

4. Case study

In this research paper, I will interpret the answers (of communication and PR specialists, representatives of advertising agencies, entrepreneurs, representatives of media channels / public institutions / private companies), regarding the importance of efficiency in the communication process and also the power of information transmitted or received in real-time and the impact generated.

The qualitative research method used is the interview and the hypotheses underlying this study are the following:
- The existing communication strategy in 2022 is no longer the same as before 2020, for most people, private companies or public institutions.
- The most important changes in the communication process were generated by the pandemic, war and other crisis situations that had effects on people and companies.

The topic of the interview is: The power of effective communication. Strategies, techniques and changes in business communication.

The number of interviewees was 21. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 10-15 minutes and took place between September 1, 2022 and October 15, 2022. The research questions were:
- What has changed in communication with employees / clients / partners?
- What solutions have you noticed regarding the efficiency of the business communication process?

The structured interview consists of seven questions. I will present each question with the corresponding answers:

4.1 As a representative of a public institution, to what extent do you consider that the communication strategy in the public sector has changed? Considering the global context.

Most of the people interviewed believe that the communication process in the public sector has changed a lot, especially in the last 2 years.

First of all, both internal and external communication were digitized, trying to keep up with the pace of global technology.

Indeed, there are differences between some public institutions in Romania and beyond, but I think this aspect is normal, considering the level of development, the impact on society and the public exposure.

The majority appreciates that the central public institutions in Romania have reached an optimal level of communication, both offline and online. This requires efficient communication with citizens / taxpayers, an open collaborative relationship with the local, national or international business environment, but also an advantage from the point of view of internal communication, between the employees of these very important public institutions.

At the same time, the development of the internal and external communication process (from the Romanian public sector), implicitly leads to better information in real time for all people. This is extremely important and almost decisive in some situations, especially in the current global context.

Real-time communication has proven to be the first solution most of the time in cases that require immediate intervention. From this point of view, the interviewed persons listed several situations/examples, in which real-time communication can make the difference between life and death: road/work accidents; natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, etc.), legislative changes with immediate applicability; situations related to the health system / emergency; the terms or due dates for the payment of taxes/fees; organizing events, and many others.

4.2 What changes have you noticed in the process of external communication, within private companies?

All respondents appreciated that most of the private companies with which they collaborated or interacted updated their external communication strategy, in relation to the new reality.

However, some companies have difficulties in keeping up with the development of technology and an impact on the activity can be observed.

This negative impact can be seen primarily in the relationship with clients, collaborators, suppliers or partners. It is very difficult to communicate with these categories when you do not have access to computer systems, to various applications or software that most of them use. Without any bad intention, these companies that do not keep up with technology, remove themselves from these collaborations, which could have generated significant income and a positive image.

All respondents are of the opinion that creativity can make a difference when it comes to the communication process, especially external communication.

4.3 In the company you manage, what impact do you think internal and external communication has?

All respondents consider that internal and external communication has a very big impact on private companies and public institutions. Most of the time, through external communication, organizations build, maintain or destroy their public image. You can find many national and international examples that confirm this.

And for this reason, in many organizational charts of private companies or public institutions, the people responsible for communication / marketing / promotion carry out their activity in close connection with the management of the respective organizations. More concretely, any action that requires public communication is previously discussed and agreed upon by mutual agreement with the decision-makers in the respective organizations. Especially in cases with major public impact, the people responsible for communication have an extremely important role in making decisions and maintaining a balance of the public image.

Also, the process of internal and external communication has serious effects including in the basic activity of private companies. Including income or profit can be influenced by the way in which the communication process is carried out.

4.4 What has changed in the sales/negotiation process?

All the people interviewed consider that the negotiation / sale process has changed in the last 3 years. Starting with the lockdown period of 2020, "sales people" were forced to adapt to the new context and the new "rules".

The sales activity involves a lot of interaction with clients, partners, collaborators and colleagues. When most activities went online, the negotiation process changed completely.

Most of the respondents are of the opinion that the negotiation process was much more difficult in the online environment. The main reason was the lack of non-verbal communication, part of communication, which practically disappeared almost completely in the online environment.

4.5 As media representatives, how can you describe the level of communication in the last 3 years? Public institutions vs private companies.

All the interviewed respondents consider that both private companies and public institutions communicate much more effectively than before 2020. The difficult context, the constant and continuous pressure, the different needs, the increased claims, all these have influenced the information campaigns and the advertising campaigns.

Even if campaigns are more sophisticated and complex, the messages sent are much simpler now, and this fact can have a positive impact on consumers and citizens, in general.

The interviewed representatives, from the mass media organizations in Romania, declare that in the period March-May 2020, there was the lowest volume of advertising in the last 10 years, at the local, national and probably international level. It was the period when almost everything stopped or froze. However, there were also a few private companies that tried to see the opportunity to communicate in that difficult period, from many points of view.

The representatives of these companies had the courage to break certain mental and physical barriers and with the help of creativity they managed to communicate important messages, which in the end generated economic or social advantages.

Some of these companies saw the opportunity to promote themselves when the competition is "silent" and this decision represented an advantage for them. They even managed to attract new clients and at the same time they managed to open new collaborations / partnerships, useful for the development of the company.

In general, in crisis situations, business people are open to new collaborations, new partnerships that are useful to them and that exist in the form of "win-win" for all involved parties.

From this perspective, in this 2020-2022 period, many social responsibility campaigns were carried out, involving both private Romanian / foreign companies, but also public institutions, which through a successful collaboration had an impact positively on certain categories of beneficiaries.

The media representatives interviewed also identified certain changes in the private and public sectors. From this point of view, in the private sector they mentioned the fact that in the last 3 years the medical / pharma companies communicated a lot. If we compare the period before 2020 and the period after 2020, we can definitely see a major difference in new budgets invested in communication or advertising by medical companies. We can mention private clinics (local / national or international), medical offices, pharmacies, hygiene products and others.

All these companies saw the opportunity to communicate and promote, even if contextually it was a very difficult one for everyone, with many problems and with a lot of uncertainty.

Public institutions communicated more online, which was missing before 2020. Depending on the locality, public investments (in road infrastructure, health and others), decisions regarding legislative changes, restrictions or limitations from the last three years...etc.

4.6 What solutions have you identified in the last 3 years to solve communication problems?

Most of the respondents answered that there is no "recipe" that can generate 100% success. But you can create a mix of things, which cumulatively can generate success or a great advantage in the communication process and not only that. This mix can include traditional communication, online communication, various necessary and useful applications, certain software that through their implementation will facilitate the interaction of citizens / clients / suppliers / collaborators with private companies / public institutions.

Also, another solution identified by those interviewed was related to the human resources involved in the communication process, both in the public and private sectors. In most cases, people make the difference between companies/institutions. The involvement of people responsible for communication was (2020-2022) and is more important than ever. In crisis situations, in which there is no waiting time, no time for consultation, no time for research, it is necessary for these persons to assume responsibility, to be aware of the position they have and to make important decisions for the citizens, clients, collaborators...etc.

4.7 In your opinion, what are the biggest threats and opportunities, from the point of view of the communication process?

The people interviewed are of the opinion that at the global level, the biggest warnings are those related to false information, freedom of expression, cyber security, but also the training of human resources.

Unfortunately, fake information had a significant increase in the last 3 years, the concept of fake news was present almost all over the globe, both in developed countries and in less developed countries. False information has a devastating impact in some situations, especially on minors, the elderly and vulnerable people or people with limited access to information.

In relation to cyber security, more and more problems have appeared even in the most powerful countries in the world, but new solutions are continuously being sought to counter national or international cyberattacks. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine had an influence including in this direction. Cyberattacks have intensified in the last 3 years.

All these global problems, but which also have a national or even local impact, can be solved with the help of well-trained people in this field. The training / professional training side must be continuously developed, and together with a serious research, solutions can be found to stop and eliminate these problems which in the end only generate negative effects on the population.

5. Conclusions, results and solutions

The analysis presented in the article, with regard to public institutions, had in mind the identification of all the relevant legal norms that regulate both at the national and European level, the field of public communication through which applicable rights and obligations are created in the relationship between authorities and institutions central and local public, on the one hand, and citizens, on the other. (SGG, GOV, 2021)

Public institutions were extremely affected from the point of view of organizing events. In particular, in 2020 and 2021 there were many restrictions that blocked the organization of these events expected by citizens. Especially in the cities where people were accustomed every year (until 2020) to several cultural, artistic, sports or educational activities, the impact was very big during 2020-2021. All these events were promoted and there was constant communication with the citizens, at the local and national level.

The lack of decision-making transparency, together with other shortcomings of the regulatory activity, leads to the low trust of society in the strength and importance of normative acts. The absence of consultations means that the rules are frequently modified or replaced, which causes a marked legislative instability and does not provide the necessary security for the existing legal framework in Romania. The real application of the principle of transparency would lead to greater trust in laws and regulations, since they were adopted with the consultation of those concerned. Confidence in the legal framework will result in a greater degree of compliance with the law, with positive consequences on economic development and the maintenance of cooperative relations between the government apparatus and society. (Transparency International Romania, 2006)

One of the existing solutions available to everyone to counter false information is to get information from safe, reliable sources. These sources can be, for example, official sources, which belong to central or local public institutions, depending on the need we have. In the period 2020-2022, we experienced complex situations that required a high level of information and communication, in order to be able to make the best decisions. Transparency is a general obligation under the GDPR that applies to three central areas: (1) providing data subjects with information about fair data processing; (2) how operators communicate with data subjects about their rights under the GDPR; and (3) the way in which operators facilitate the exercise by data subjects of their rights (Data protection, 2018).

Freedom of expression also generates an extremely negative impact in almost any society. Unfortunately, we still have many negative examples from this point of view, in others solutions have been found, but they still exist. The opposite phenomenon of freedom of expression can also be dangerous, if there is absolutely no limit when transmitting information. The solution would be to find that balance that protects the population and prevents misinformation.

"In the workplace, feedback is essential," Ronald Riggio, Ph.D., professor of organizational psychology and leadership at Claremont McKenna College, confirmed to Thrive. "We cannot progress without feedback, therefore this should be a constant approach". Riggio says we should change our perspective on how we approach criticism at work – and by making feedback a core value of our organizational culture, we can all feel more comfortable when we need to address a situation in a sharp and constructive way. (At Thrive, employees are encouraged to provide honest feedback regularly as part of the company's cultural values). "There should be an ongoing performance management model," explains Riggio, "that includes daily feedback and support.". (Muller, 2022)

Digitalization is probably the process most often implemented in most private companies and public institutions. It has brought many advantages in both sectors, and it can continue to bring, but only if it is implemented responsibly and efficiently. The whole digitization process can also bring a lot of IT risks, Cyber Security risks, which can seriously affect the activity of private companies or public institutions. Unfortunately, we see examples in Romania, Europe, the United States of America and other parts of the world.

Persons interested in obtaining information of public interest can use, simultaneously or successively, all the procedures established by the rules in force (whether common law or special) to have access and obtain the information of public interest that they want. (IPP, CJI, 2009)

In relation to the human resources present in the public and private sectors, the interviewed managers say that most of the people responsible for communication have gone through training courses, experience exchanges, or trainings. All this was necessary and is still necessary so that the people in these departments are as well prepared as possible for the difficult situations in which the companies/institutions they represent have been or will be.

The great challenge of all people active in the field of communication is to keep up with technology, with what is new in the field, but it is mandatory to take into account people's needs, their expectations and their interest.

Communication is one of the most important factors when it comes to client satisfaction. The way you handle communication throughout the matter can be the deciding factor when it comes to clients returning to your firm. (Thomson, 2019).

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