

## Peculiarities of a communication strategy in the public sector

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**Abstract:** Public communication through all its registers – information, formation, service advertisement, campaigns – has an impact on citizens wanting to persuade them and sometimes wanting to change their opinions, behaviour. When such communication activities are organized – observing certain rules to be followed – the effects are positive. Therefore, in the present paper we describe the development stages of a communication strategy for public institution, pointing out the moment of detailed planning – target groups, objectives, conceiving the message, choosing the communication tools. We want to point out that among all these it should be as much coherence as possible, reciprocal adaptability; the higher the coherence, the more efficient the communication process.

**Key words:** public communication, communication strategy, target groups, objectives, message, tools.

### 1. Introduction

For a considerable number of times, public institutions have taken measures which are not consistent with the objectives set (objectives which have been too ambitious related to the available resources), or the communication tools are not rightly adapted to

the messages conveyed; or the target group does not manage to come into contact using the respective means of communication and in many cases they produce messages without knowing the basic features of the targeted group. As a consequence, it is of utmost importance to have a communication plan,

follow several stages in the process and most importantly be aware about their coherence. In this respect, in the present paper we want to point out the development stages of a communication strategy for a public institution and analyze thoroughly the objectives, messages and communication tools – as basic moments.

We shall start by defining public communication principles as they have to be observed by all administrative institutions (irrespective of their activities, content and supports used) and emphasize on the characteristics of the objectives, message, tools at the moment we develop a communication plan.

## 2. Public communication – definitions, functions, general principles

Communication, in general, (from Latin *communicare* meaning „to share things irrespective of their nature” - Mihai Dinu, 2007, page 14) and public communication, in particular, mean more than inform and being informed, they actually mean „act upon the citizen” (Haineş, 2008, page 169), the scope being of persuading and obtaining a conscientious adhesion related to public decisions adopted and institutional policies.

We consider that the peculiarity of public communication lies in its cooperative character, the citizen does not have to be a passive receiver but on the contrary, should act as a co-builder of the message, then of the decisions and institutional agenda. This comes from the most definitions given in the field of communication and which we want to emphasize here.

Martial Pasquier gives the definition of public communication as: „the whole

activities of public institutions and organizations aimed at conveying and exchanging information having the main scope of presenting and explaining their decisions and public actions, promoting legality, defend recognized values and help maintain social bond” (2011, page 43). Pierre Zémor: „Public communication is a formal communication that tends towards exchanging and sharing information of public use and maintaining social bond for which public institutions are responsible for” (2003, page 27), and Dominique Mégard: „Public communication, issued by the state and local communities mostly consist of non-commercial communication. Besides ensuring the necessary information required for the good functioning of public services, communication is also responsible for public policies and indicates the behaviour to follow.” (2012, page 25)

**Central functions** of public communication, in principle, come from the obligation of observing the law (principle of legality) given to a public institution or organization. We consider laws which are enforced by public administration to develop its activity, that is Law no 544/October 12, 2001 regarding free access to information of public interest and Law no 52/January 21, 2003 regarding decisional transparency in public administration. According to Martial Pasquier we can detect four main functions: information of the public, decisions giving and explanation, defending values and promoting responsible behaviour and ensuring a dialogue between institutions and citizens.

**Complementary functions**, according to Pasquier, are distinct from central ones, not because they are less important for public communication but because they are not achieved on explicit legal basis. They come

from a modern outlook about public institution and we speak about: receiving, listening, publicity of public organizations and actions, contributing to keeping up social bond.

**General principles** (specific difference of public communication) are as follows:

- clearly identify the sender;
- neutrality in relation with electoral games and voters;
- continuity in communication;
- transparency in financing;
- absence of recipients' discrimination;
- objective contents, complete and adapted to target groups;
- proportional communication consistent with the objectives and target groups;
- communication that facilitates dialogue.

It is about principles which all institutions and administrative entities must observe irrespective of their activities, content and supports used.

### 3. Stages of a communication plan for a public institution

Taking into account the specific difference of public communication against political or business communication, in the present paper we will develop the stages of a communication plan, emphasizing the objectives, formulation of message and criteria according to which they are selected, then planning of communication tools.

Communication plan is an iterative process consisting of taking decisions and achieving diverse actions that allow the ensurance of a strong coherence between the initial objectives and concrete measures to be taken. Many times it happens that the

measures taken are not adequate against the objectives which are too ambitious related to the available resources, on other occasions the tools chosen are not rightly adapted to the messages which we want to circulate, etc. In consequence, it is very important to pass through a series of stages and systematically watch over the coherence of a moment against another one.

According to Martial Pasquier (2011, pages 125 – 139), Thierry Libaert (2009, pages 141 – 167), as well as Marie-Helene Westphalen, Thierry Libaert (2009, pages 49-60) the main **stages of developing a communication strategy** for the public institution are:

- **preparatory stage** (political, legal and financial basis; analysis of needs and background conditions, establishing the budget);
- **detailed planning** (target groups, objectives of communication, drawing out the message, choosing and planning communication tools, mass media plan, budget setting, detailed evaluation of concept and select agencies);
- **producing and achieving the concept** (producing the material and delivering communication, followed by its achievement);
- **control of its efficiency;**
- **integrated communication.**

#### 3.1 Preparatory stage

##### Legal, political and financial bases

Firstly, the legal framework in which public administration develops its activity should be taken into account. Also the Ministry authority and budget framework should be considered. The budget voted by the Parliament and being constrained on

administration reflects in the fact that the amounts not spent until the end of the year cannot be carried into the next year. Political authority, in principle, must give a boost to communication activities. Less important activities or activities delegated to autonomous entities, should not be validated in a systemic manner. Measures that have a high cost and those with a more important political impact have to obtain the approval of the executive authority.

**Analysis of needs** – it is mandatory at the beginning of such a process because communication decisions are sometimes taken without knowing the level of education, characteristics of subjects from the target group, their predisposition to listening, seeing a message and level of credibility of organization. In many cases, the interest of an organization does not automatically intermingle with the public's horizon of expectation. In consequence, from the very beginning we should answer the following questions:

- Who are the people to whom the organization wants its communication activities to get to?
- What do they know about the organization and its activities?
- What do we actually want to „touch“ with these people?

**Framework conditions** – after stating the needs of target groups, we shall do a brief analysis of the background and general context of communication. Firstly, we do an inventory of organizations that develop communication on the same topic, as well as the objectives and concrete measures taken by the organizations.

**Reference budget** – communication costs are quite high and generally they depend on the tools chosen. If the reference

budget is too detailed, chances are that it hinders creativity in developing the message and choosing the support. If the allocated budget is too general, the impression is that of a too loose freedom in the elaboration of the concept.

### **Communication briefing**

When communication activities are repetitive year after year, they are relatively simple (for instance, updating an Internet site), the same is when the organization has specialized resources available internally and it is not necessary to call for external agencies assigned with conceiving, producing and measuring communication. On the contrary, if the problem is new and costs estimated are important, if there are no communication department within the institution, they generally, appeal to communication agencies and a contest is organized to select the best. In such a situation they do a communication briefing – a synthesis document (4 to 5 pages onward to 10 pages) providing necessary information related to the organization, communication environment, its objectives, resources and expectations from the agency to be selected. We emphasize that in the situation in which no external partner will involve itself in the planned communication activities, establishing a synthesis document is very useful. Firstly, it will be a support for political authorities to validate the concept and authorize the first spending, then it will be a guide for all collaborators involved in achieving concrete activities.

### **Setting communication competences for each administrative level and their coordination**

Public sector cannot circulate – within physical time – coordinated informational contents because substantial and institutional

public policies are extremely different one from the other, information needs vary from one group to another and administrative entities are subject to various restrictions. As a result, coherence in public communication is not given by contents (non-homogeneous), but by a correct determination of the level which is assigned with communication and observing the rules, principles by all entities.

Simplifying the hierarchy of the administrative system, we have: government, ministers and local administrative structures and organizations. Coordination of these levels in order to establish responsibilities is of utmost importance and constitute a true strategic stake for public institutions.

To determine the responsibilities level for all communication activities is very important. The government should state – taking into account the peculiarity of topics – what competences has regarding communication. When topics are about public services, responsibility falls on local administration. On the contrary, when it is about governmental policies, internal or crisis communication, responsibility can be different in time according to the political or media importance of the topic. If they do not establish responsibilities for communication activities, „we can face with the phenomenon of cacophony” (Lemaire and Zémor, 2008, page 19), of dissonance (different data, different political and time perspectives, etc.). Also, lack of communication brings about problems, each level leaving this task on the other’s part. Under situation of crisis, lack of coordination can generate problems related to institutional credibility and in such cases it can take a long time to solve the problems.

**Formal aspects** – generally, it is difficult to coordinate the communication contents of

all public institutions, but it is possible to coordinate formal aspects of the message (its graphic representation or visual identity of institutions). It is needed to coordinate formal aspects for two reasons. Firstly, in public communication the sender should be easily recognized and identified. Secondly, financial reasons should be taken into account as creation, development and making of a visual identity of its own are costly and the state has to supervise the rational use of resources provided. Thus, visual identity consists of: „name of the organization, its logo, colour system of the logo, letters character identity, basic information rendered by all these (address, institutional affiliation, etc), format and graphic design of all these elements (their layout and combination shown in the graphic map of the institution)” (Morell, 2012, page 79).

The visual identity must appear on all visual supports used by the organization, such as: paper sheets with header, letters, business cards, envelopes, information brochures, press releases, Internet web sites, different types of billboards, annual reports, publicity posters, facade of head office premises, official cars, wrapping, other means of calling the attention. We have to consider what type of organization is and in this respect the visual identity can have rules regarding the architecture of the building and its interior endowment (furniture, distribution of spaces, colour, etc.). All rules are included in the graphic map and they must be accessible to all people who have responsibilities and are in charge of communication.

### 3.2 Detailed planning

Detailed planning is the most complex stage and technique of the communication strategy. Within this planning we establish

the target groups, objectives to be achieved; the message should be worked out and explained, the specific tools chosen. Based on all these, a media plan should be drawn up and a detailed budget.

#### A. Target groups

In the public sector, determining the target groups is mostly problematic as we have to take into account that all citizens of a territory are part of the communication public. We shall not forget that „aiming at a very large group of population is the best way to get to no-one” (Jézéquel and Gérard, 2012, page 59). Therefore, more and more public communication activities are aimed at well defined target groups (professional groups, parents, elderly etc.). We often succeed in describing people who we want to address our message, but concrete difficulty lies in choosing the suitable supports and tools which enable us to get to them. In consequence, it is important to define target groups according to their basic characteristics but also related to their attitude and behaviour towards all communication tools and media.

#### B. Objectives of public communication

When establishing the objectives of communication we can use the model developed by Lewis in 1898, summarized by AIDA: **attention – interest – desire – action**. According to this model, to be efficient a communication must firstly draw attention upon itself (become visible), then arouse an interest for its contents (before arousing a desire), and the final objective has to be action and behaviour aspect. There are numerous models of structuring the effectiveness of a communication, for instance Colley (1961, page 128) finds four phases: knowledge – comprehension – persuasion – action.

We consider that the Lewis model fits better to the public sector, for two reasons: on one hand, the ultimate objective of public communication is not to cause the purchase of some products as this scope is mainly in commercial communication; on the other hand, most models have been made as a succession of stages needed to be passed, while public communication can be satisfied only with achieving the first level (simply the transmission of public data with no other objective).

Knowledge or **basic information** constitute the first objective which we have to take into consideration. At all levels – organising, projects, collaborators, the most important thing is that institutions should provide basic information related to their activities and events. At services level, the same type of objective will aim at providing information about the services content, accessibility etc.

The second type of objectives wants to be more than a simple dissemination of information, but the scope is to legitimize public action. It is about **explaining and justifying the reasons of a decision**, presenting the advantages and disadvantages of a project or the main characteristics of a new service.

The third type of communication objectives is more difficult to achieve because it aims at contributing to the **creation and modification of an attitude**, therefore the organization must ensure a trustworthy climate. At collaborators level (internal communication) these communication objectives consist in the creation of a feeling of belonging to the organization, developing typical organizational culture values.

The last type of communication objectives refers to a **behaviour change** or at least, establishing the stated preferences. It is about

the main objective of commercial companies. For the public organizations it is especially designed for prevention campaigns that aim to modify people's behaviour (giving up smoking, fastening safety belt, persuade people to vote etc.). Thus it is about defending values and attitudes proposed by the organization, active support of a project.

As far as internal collaborators are concerned, mainly they want to make them defenders of the organization, of its activities and values. The insiders must contribute to explaining the activities happening within the organization, thus they become the organization promoters. Therefore they must be correctly informed (in advance) and convinced about the organization's activities and values.

The scope of the most communication campaigns is to develop people's attitude towards a project and organization and adapt their behaviour to it. However, such modification are not too often possible because the people in question do not have a "bunch" of basic information in order to effectively enter such a process, or they are not willing to do it (different political views, reject the project, personal choice, etc.). In a communication campaign the four objectives are combined.

### C. Conceiving the message

It is a matter of creativity whenever we conceive a message and especially accuracy (if it is a complex one) and it must be circulated through many publicity supports.

A message must answer **three main questions**:

- What will the advantages of the recipients of communication be after they receive the message (benefit)?
- For what reasons the same recipients will want, in a way or another, to modify their perception, view or behaviour (why)?

- What is the tone or general impression of communication (tonality)? It is mainly about a very official communication, austere in wording and visual, or, on the contrary, a playful one with drawings, pictograms and a very easy and pleasant message to read?

The basic message we want to convey must be very clear. It is not recommended to convey several different messages at the same time, but "we have to concentrate on one or two main messages" (Mucchielli, 2008, page 95). Then, communication will be structured, more precisely we have to organize the transmission of the message indicating the connection between the main elements and arguments used. Communication should be conceived like a story with a script that is made up of an introduction, phases and an end. At the end, we choose what type of marks are the most suitable to be used: should texts be given a privilege being the first, images or other symbols? How do we combine different types of marks? What forms and graphics aspects should we give a privilege?

Another element that helps to conceive the message is the potential attitude of recipients when receiving the message. According to Rossiter and Percy (1997, page 69) we have to look at two criteria: **level of involvement of people** and **type of motivation** related to the organization and its services provided. If the level of involvement or interest is poor, then communication should be very simple, aim to the essential and should avoid rhetorical figures. On the contrary, if the level of involvement is high and the people are interested in the information, then that organization can develop it, bring all the necessary information including the technical ones. Related to motivation, we can distinguish a positive motivation and a negative one. In

the public sector the situations that are quite often encountered are related to negative motivations (request of an authorization, tax payment, etc.) but there are also situations with positive motivations (such as, setting up a business). In the case of negative motivations we recommend communication to be approached in a rational manner and emphasize on the advantages. If the motivation is positive we can consider an emotional communication that appeals to rhetorical figures.

Besides the basic idea, the form and graphic of the message text should develop **creativity**. According to the support it uses (publicity in mass-media, a new Internet website, etc.) it is recommended to make use of the services of a specialized agency which has the necessary competences and can come with creative proposals.

#### D. Choosing and planning of communication tools

Communication tools are means or supports that enable „transmission“ of message from sender to receiver. Generally, we can have the following tools:

- Personal communication: discussions, individual letter, etc.;
- Publicity communication: ads in newspapers, TV, radio, posters, etc.;
- Multimedia communication multimedia: Internet, cell phones, social networks, etc.;
- Direct marketing: sent by post and via Internet;
- Public relations: relation with media, participation to conferences, etc.;
- Organizing events and participation to fairs and exhibitions;
- sponsorship: sponsor an organization, a project or event.

Taking into account the limited use of sponsorship we can notice that there is no major difference – at tools level – between public organizations and private ones. Cobut and Lambotte (2011, page 69) specify two criteria after which we can structure the communication tools: communication forms (difference between direct and indirect tools) and target groups (internal and external people of an organization). In public communication we can differentiate **three target groups**: members of an organization (internal communication), decision makers/people in charge, people and organizations that have a direct impact upon public policies and, eventually, the general public (citizens).

Out of the combination of the first two criteria results the main communication tools used in public sector.

Personal communication **addressed to the members of the organization** normally consists of individual or group talks, meetings and speeches. These classical tools allow transmitting accurate, detailed and interactive information. Under time pressure, numerous people in charge neglect messages that are sent to their collaborators compared with the external messages and key information is not repeated. When certain information is complex and difficult to communicate, seminars should be organized with the participation of external and/or internal people. Communication addressed to collaborators is completed with other tools based on electronic support or hard copy. We can mention here correspondence/letters (classical or electronic), notes, internal diary, posters and the Intranet. We can add to this list documents that are addressed to new collaborators: brochures about the organization, summary of the rules in force, etc.



**Communication addressed to decision makers** and important partners for the organization is one of the peculiarities of public sector. Making decisions and enforcing them is very different from the private sector due to the time it takes until reaching an agreement, necessity of consensus, legal procedures, number and diversity of partners, mix between political rationality and economic one, etc.

Thus, organizations that develop public action must identify important partners for their actions and supervise the targets in their communication activity. Talks on a regular basis with the partners, personal relationship in a formal or informal framework are important. Indirect tools are in their turn very much used because they allow the delivery of a great deal of technical nature information, structured and constantly. Information letters are a very efficient support (classical or electronic).

Regarding **communication addressed to the general public** we can notice an increase in number of the people who deal with communication activities and an increase in their costs. The activities addressed to citizens are: relation with media, publicity and Internet – as basis of public communication. Social networks have become more and more important, they allow a rapid delivery of information to all people interested in them.

**The choice of tools is closely connected to message, audience, frequency, support credibility, budget.** Thus: „a very complex message requires - basically – the use of tools for a longer period of time (information meeting, a brochures that can be read many times, etc.), while the basic messages can be conveyed on supports or contacts limited in time, such as displaying” (Giuly, 2010, page

68). In principle, choosing one communication tool or more tools and supports depend on several criteria, as follows:

a. The most important criterion refers to the **adequacy that must exist between message and support**. The support should be able to circulate (from a technical point of view) the messages which the organization wants to give.

b. **Control of content:** organizations have the possibility to choose between developing their own support or paying for it, purchase available space in a support (paid publicity) or organizing communication in such a manner so that the support itself take over the information in their edited parts (articles in mass-media followed by press releases). In the case of an article, the organization can control the information but it cannot control the way it is presented in the media.

c. **Audience or capacity of reaching target groups:** it is about the percentage of people from the target group who have at least one chance to have contact with the respective support for a definite period of time. When we have the lists and addresses of all people from the group that has to be contacted, it is easy to send a brochure and have a 100% audience. On the contrary, when we do not have such a list for the target group we try to reduce as much as possible the loss of information delivery.

d. **Frequency:** frequency corresponds to an average number of contacts that a person will have with a support during a determined period of time. Certain messages are very easy to understand and one single reading or watching is enough. Most messages have to be repeated frequently in order to be understood and assimilated. Thus, it is

necessary that the people in question should see the same messages several times, on the same support or different supports (for instance, more media combined: watch the spot on TV, a poster in the street).

e. **Period and duration:** the moment when the message is broadcast, as well as the continuity in broadcasting is important.

f. **Credibility of support:** in communication, media or transmitting channel matters as much as the meaning or the content of the message. The importance of support and its credibility for the target groups play a fundamental role in receiving the message.

g. **Budget:** financial resources available, as well as human resources put constraint on how to choose the communication tools. Certain communication supports such as publicity in media need a very high budget because of the costs needed to produce advertisement, announcements, posters and mostly the price of publicity space.

After choosing the communication supports we can organize in details everything that is part of media (choosing the means, moments, periodicity) and we can make an exact budget.

After a detailed planning at the level of the objectives, message and tools, budget the next step is to produce and make the concept – producing the material followed by its effective making – and efficiency control.

#### 4. Conclusion

Public communication means acting upon another party (with the aim of changing opinions, behaviour, attitudes). It certainly is an art and at the same time a science – it supposes respect to a series of rules to be followed during a process.

In the present paper we started from the principles of public communication and

according to them we pointed out the main moments of a communication strategy – emphasizing on objectives, message, tools. After the preparatory stage (within this stage we have to consider the legal, political, financial background and the needs of people to whom we want to convey our message; we have to determine communication competences for each administrative level taken separately) comes the detailed planning – the most complex moment of the strategy. We underlined who the target groups are for public communication (internal and external collaborators, decision makers, general public), the objectives (basic information, explanation and justification of a decision, creation and modification of an attitude, behaviour changing), how we have to write out the message so that to have the desired impact and on which criteria we choose the communication tools. The message and the support are closely linked and tied in a second time.

Through the present lines we want to emphasize the fact that efficiency in the activity of a public institution is directly dependent to the coherence that exists between different moments of the communication plan. Communication strategy is a whole whose efficiency gives a result when each component part takes account of the other one, otherwise it continually adapts one to another.

#### Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/89/1.5/S/62259, Project „Applied social, human and political sciences. Postdoctoral training and postdoctoral fellowships in social, human and political sciences” co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013”.

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