

# Normative Dimensions of Corporate Communication

Jan van der Stoep

## Abstract

In this chapter, it is argued that corporate communication is not an arbitrary affair, but an activity with its own intrinsic normativity. Communication is part of a creation order, which means that one has to obey specific norms and rules in order to present oneself in a convincing way. First of all, organisations need to have a clear sense of self and have to be accountable for their actions. They have to know 'who' they are, and to which principles they stick (directional dimension). Secondly, organisations must have a clear sense of the intrinsic good that is at stake in their professional field. They need to have a clear understanding of 'what' they are doing (structural dimension). Thirdly organisations must have a clear understanding of what is required in their specific context. They must have a sense of 'why' they exist in a particular time and place (contextual dimension). All three normative dimensions are important. If they lose sight of any one of these dimensions, organizations risk losing their credibility.

## Key terms

Corporate communication, organizational identity, trust, standards of excellence, spiritual marketing

## Introduction

Organizations cannot exist without communication. They must make themselves known and need to build relationships of trust with customers, employees, interest groups, and other stakeholders. Every organization tells a story about itself, be it in a more implicit or a more explicit manner. In our current mediatized society, corporate communication has become a complex and highly professional activity. Communication professionals, however, often have a bad reputation. The general impression is that they frame reality in such a way that organizations may profit from it. They stimulate people to buy products and give a rose-colored picture of their organization. Their only concern is the interest of the organization, not the interest of society at large.

In this chapter, I will argue that corporate communication is not—by definition—a dirty business, but an activity with its own intrinsic normativity. Corporate communication is not just about telling lies. One cannot unrestrictedly manipulate the minds of people. In order to tell a coherent and convincing story communication professionals have to obey to laws of human communication. They cannot just construct stories or distort facts, but have to deal with a reality that is already given. Corporate communication is part of a creation order. If one doesn't obey this order, sooner or later this will backfire upon the credibility of organization. By corporate communication I mean all possible ways in which an organization communicates, externally as well as internally, including the fields of management communications, marketing

communications, and organization communications (Van Riel and Fombrun 2007, 14-21). The use of the adjective “corporate” in this definition must be interpreted in relation to the Latin word “corpus” or “body.” This means that it refers to the whole of the organization. Corporate communication is not restricted to business enterprises. It is relevant for business enterprises as well as for non-profit organizations and governmental institutions.

Not only the adjective “corporate,” but also the noun “communication” needs further elaboration. Communication is an activity in which people share their experiences and opinions, and make sense about what is going on. It is a way in which people exchange meaning and build a communal world (Aula and Mantere 2008, 168-172). In order to get people involved, organizations have to make sense of what they are doing. Making sense is not only necessary for external purposes; it also serves important internal needs (Weick 2001, 36). It gives organizational members a rationale for action and helps them to orient themselves in the world. Organizations are vehicles in which people share goals and commit themselves to a collective task. They activate the individual commitments of people and orchestrate their actions.

The primary concern of corporate communication is the social legitimacy of organizations (Van Ruler and Verçiç 2005, 255-256). Organizations must convince the public that they contribute something to society. They need to show that they not only pursue their own interests, but also the interest of society at large. This presupposes an element of trust. Conversation partners have to assume that one is telling the truth about a current state of affairs, committed to maintaining a good relationship, and truthful about one’s inner motives (Habermas 1983, 137). If conversation partners cannot trust each other, communication will be obstructed.

What are the norms and rules, which organizations have to obey in order to tell a convincing story about themselves, a story that resonates in the hearts of the public? In order to formulate an answer to this question I make use of the distinction of Mouw and Griffioen (1993) between three dimensions of reality: directional, structural, and contextual dimension. In each of these dimensions, the normative order of corporate communication is revealed in a specific way. First of all, organizations have to convince the public that they act according to their core identity. They must present themselves as organizations that keep their promises and take responsibility for their actions. This is the directional dimension (section 2). Second, organizations must show that they act in a professional way. They must show that they meet the standards of excellence of their professional field. This is the structural dimension of the organization (section 3). Third, organizations need to prove their actual relevance. They must show that they add something to the life of people and make their life more meaningful. This is the contextual dimension of corporate communication (section 4).

## **Directional Dimension**

The directional dimension of corporate communication is related to the way in which an organization envisages its past, present, and future and views the world. It is involved with the vision of the good life that guides the activities of the organization (Jochemsen 2006, 106-107). In the directional dimension, the organization discloses its core identity. Sometimes the vision

of the good life is made explicit; most of the time, however, it remains rather implicit. If an organization sticks to its core values and its core principles, it will be seen as an organization with a high level of integrity. The general public knows what to expect from the organization, and where it is going. If it does not stick to its core identity, sooner or later the organization will reveal that it is not true to itself.

The importance of a vision of the good life especially becomes apparent in the study of so-called “visionary companies” such as—for example—3M, Apple, and Walt Disney. Visionary companies, according to Collins and Porras (2005, 1-2), “are premier institutions—the crown jewels—in their industries, widely admired by their peers and having a long track record of making a significant impact on the world around them.” The world is frequently changing, and leaders come and go. In order to be successful, what is really necessary is that one has an idea of the basic fundamentals of the organization—the core ideology that binds all those involved in the organization together—and at the same time, sets forth what one aspires to become or to achieve in the future.

The corporate identity of an organization gives employees, customers, and other stakeholders a sense of belonging. It also gives them a sense of direction because it gives them knowledge about what to expect from the organization. It tells them “who” the organization is and to which principles it sticks. The presentation of a corporate identity is an inevitable part of the way in which an organization communicates. When one addresses other people, be it as a person or as an organization, one necessarily makes oneself known and, willingly or not, tells something about oneself (Avenarius 2008, 73). What a corporate identity exactly is, however, is not so clear. Balmer and Greyser (2003, 15-29), for example, distinguish between the actual identity, communicated identity, conceived identity, ideal identity, and desired identity of an organization. Without going into detail, their work at least proves that corporate identity itself is a complex concept and also that the various identities of an organization must be consistent with each other. The way in which an organization presents itself and thereby communicates its identity must be more or less in alignment with its actual identity or the identity as others conceive it.

A corporate identity cannot just be invented. It is something that has to be discovered and has to appeal to a shared understanding of the core values and the core purpose of an organization (Collins and Porras 2005, 228). The corporate identity has to appeal to something that is already there before it is made explicit. This is in line with a fundamental characteristic of our human condition. Human beings, religious or not, cannot live without an idea that their life is intended by someone (Ferry 2002, 15-17). They are in need for something that is already given and that transcends their lives. An organization, however, may easily lose sight of its core values and core purpose. Therefore, a healthy identity formation of an organization always involves openness to critique. Critique may bring organizations back to the core of who they are, and how they were meant to be (Walzer 1987, 87-88). It also helps organizations develop a corporate identity that is robust enough to survive unfavorable circumstances (Hauerwas 2001).

The self-presentation of an organization is not without risks. By presenting oneself, one puts oneself at stake. Other stakeholders will contest the integrity and trustworthiness of the organization. One enters an arena in which one has to struggle for recognition. That such a struggle for recognition is not always fair was experienced by Shell when in 1995 it planned to

sink the oil platform Brent Spar. According to them, this was the best thing to do in the actual situation. Greenpeace successfully protested against the plans of Shell. Afterwards, however, it turned out that Shell and not Greenpeace was right. Greenpeace had to admit that it had used the wrong information and that the sinking of the Brent Spar was more appropriate from an ecological point of view than the dismantling of the oil platform in a Norwegian fjord as Greenpeace had advocated. In the meantime, however, the public image of Shell was seriously damaged. Shell had to learn—to its own cost—that being in the right does not automatically entail that you win your case.

The example of Shell and Greenpeace shows that communication is always a two-way, and not a one-way process. The public is also an active party in the communication process, which implies that the sender does not have full control over the reception of the message. The situation is even more complex. Long before the organization starts to communicate about its identity, there is already a dialogue going on in which people share meanings with each other and make sense about the world. Corporate communication is itself part of a circuit of communication (Edwards and Hodges 2011, 3-6). This means that organizations are just one of the conversation partners in a dialogue. In such a dialogue, the reputation of the organization is also at stake. The reputation and the identity of an organization are two sides of the same coin. A corporate identity is related to how an organization defines itself in terms of continuity and discontinuity or change. It defines the core self of the organization (Aula and Mantere 2008, 56-59). The reputation of an organization, however, is the way an organization is perceived by others. It has to do with the stories that people tell about the organization and is built up in dialogue with various stakeholders.

In order to build up a good corporate reputation, organizations need to relate to various audiences and a variety of stakeholders. This shows that the self of an organization is always a dialogical self. The identity of an organization is not a product of solitary reflection within the organization, but it is developed in dialogue with the stories that other people tell. It has to appeal to a common framework of understanding in order to articulate what is really significant (Taylor 1991, 31-53). However, that does not mean that the identity of an organization is just a plaything of what other people are saying. In the same way as an organizational self always exists in dialogue with others, a dialogue can only exist between parties that have an identity of their own. Without others who may reject or refuse what you are saying real communication is not possible (Habermas 1996, 18-19).

In this section, I have argued that organizations have to be aware of their core values and their core identity. The identity of an organization, however, does not always need to be the same. The character of an organization may change according to the circumstances. New circumstances require that you critically examine what you are doing, and your reasons for doing it. Therefore, an organization needs to have a clear sense of direction. It has to know where it is going. This means that it has to identify with the commitments with which it entered into. An organization must take responsibility for its actions and keep its word.<sup>1</sup> A company such as Shell may change its strategy time and again, according to what circumstances require, but through this it must show that it acts according to its principles. Moreover, at the moment it changes its course, for good reasons or not, it has to be accountable for that. If an

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<sup>1</sup> Here I make use of a distinction made by Ricoeur (1992, 2-3; 115-125) between *idem* identity and *ipse* identity.

organization is not faithful to its promises or promises things that it cannot keep, it devours the confidence that people have in this organization. It throws its credits away.

## **Structural Dimension**

The normativity of corporate communication not only has a directional, but also a structural dimension. “Structure” refers to the specific type of the organization at hand—the art, trade, or profession that it carries out. Professional quality or craftsmanship is a quite powerful ingredient of corporate communication. It shows that an organization is competent enough to solve a problem, or that it is able to perform a specific task in a professional manner. Because professionals are specialized in a specific field, they may reach a standard that ordinary people are not able to reach. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that in advertising many companies make an appeal to their specific expertise. Being a professional is a way of living that is worthwhile in itself, with its own intrinsic value. Professionals are not just driven by economic interests, but also by the intrinsic good of the profession itself. They have, as Pierre Bourdieu calls it, an interest in disinterestedness. Their profession provides them with a sense of dignity and pride that goes beyond their material concerns (Bourdieu 2000, 125).

The professional competence of an organization is what distinguishes an organization from other types of organizations. One may easily imagine that a government organization needs another type of corporate communication than, for example, a business enterprise or a media organization. Therefore, one must be very much aware of the professional field in which an organization functions. If different professional fields are mixed, this often leads to serious trouble. An example of this is the magazine called “Gerda,” published by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture in March 2010. The name of the magazine refers to the first name of the Minister of Agriculture at that time, Gerda Verburg. The magazine was meant to promote the activities of the Ministry of Agriculture. Other politicians and opinion leaders, however, accused Gerda Verburg of using the magazine for her own personal campaign, especially because of the upcoming elections. The problem in this case was the blurring of the boundary between political communication and government communication, and the personal profiling of a political representative and the communication of a government institution.

In order to distinguish itself from others, an organization has to be very much aware of the professional field in which it is operating and the rules that structure that field. An organization needs to have a clear understanding of “what” it is doing, and “how” it is functioning in a proper manner. In most fields, professional competence is meticulously monitored in a system of audits, accreditations, and certifications. Each professional field has its own standards of excellence. These standards of excellence, however, are not just a set of requirements to be complied with; they also incorporate an idea of the intrinsic good of a profession, an idea about what is at stake in the profession at hand. When it comes to the heart of the matter, an organization not only needs to have a good story or has to meet a certain set of criteria; it has to distinguish itself by its good deeds (Aula and Mantere 2008, 137-139). It has to show that it is keeping a high standard and takes its professional task very seriously.

One of the reasons that corporate communication has such a bad reputation is that people doubt that organizations deliver the professional quality they promise. They are not

convinced that it is the search for high professional standards rather than the reduction of costs that drives the organization, for example. This also explains, in part, the formation of accreditation systems, mentioned before, in which the performance of organizations is carefully monitored. Skepticism among the general public about the good intentions of organizations is especially fueled by ideologies like those of Milton Friedman, who argues that the only social responsibility of companies is to maximize profit (Aula and Mantere 2008, 139). As soon as suspicion arises that an organization is just acting out of economic concern, however, its credibility is seriously damaged. In an age of privatization, this not only casts doubt on companies and business enterprises, but also on NGOs and other organizations with a public function. The public assumes that organizations only boast about their craftsmanship in order to sell more products or services.

The problem with the view of Friedman is that it identifies the professional task of an organization with the means by which this organization has to reach its goals. Instead of analyzing organizations as entities that serve important social goods, such as food production (in the case of a farm), risk protection (in the case of an insurance company), or health care (in the case of a hospital), it maintains that organizations are machineries that maximize profit. Referring to MacIntyre (1985, 187-191), it might be said that in such a case the external goods replace the internal good of a profession. According to MacIntyre, the internal good is an inalienably part of that specific type of profession and cannot be achieved by professions of another type. In order, however, to achieve this internal good, an organization needs to obtain money, power, status, and other means. MacIntyre calls these the external goods of the organization. Money, power, and status are a necessary requirement to make an organization ready for operation, but as such they only are of instrumental value. You need them to operate professionally, but you cannot use them to legitimize your activities.

Thus far, I have argued that an organization has to distinguish itself from other organizations by its standards of excellence. It has to show its craftsmanship and specific competence in order to acquire a place in a specific professional field. This may be done in various ways. It may be that the products or services of the organization are of such a good quality that it beats the professional standards of its competitors. It may also be that an organization sells a very specialized product, or serves a specific target group. Another way to distinguish itself from its competitors is by developing a corporate social responsibility strategy in which an attempt is made to balance the interests of people, planet, and profit. This last strategy, in particular, has become increasingly important. In our mediatized society, the public wants to be involved in the development of products and services and holds companies and other organizations accountable for their actions.

Corporate social responsibility programs are based on the idea that organizations exist not only for themselves, but also for the good of society. According to James E. Grunig, this means that organizations not only have to pursue their own objectives, but must also balance the interests of the organization with the interests of society at large. Organizations must start a dialogue with other stakeholders and, through negotiation and compromise, search for the mutual benefit of the organization and its social environment. Such a symmetrical approach is not only more ethical, it is also more desirable and profitable for the organization because it produces long-term relationships with other stakeholders (Grunig et al. 2006, 47). This again shows that, in order to communicate well and effectively, you need to enter into dialogue and

seriously take into account the concerns of other parties. You may try to persuade people by using force or coercion, but then you will never reach their hearts. You will only achieve short-term results. In order to really convince people, you must not overpower them but search for a shared understanding (Chambers 1996, 5-9). Your conversation partners must have the option to reject your arguments and come up with their own point of view.

However interesting Grunig's theory may be, it overlooks one important point. The added value of an organization is more than an exchange between the interests of society and the interests of the organization itself. As experts in their field, organizations know very well how to run an enterprise, educate students, or care for people in a professional manner. They usually have sophisticated intuition about what a high-quality product looks like. It is, of course, very important that organizations listen carefully to the various stakeholders. By incorporating various points of view, they may even improve their products. This is indeed why corporate social responsibility programs are a good strategy for raising one's professional standards. However, ultimately it is the professional quality or craftsmanship of the organization that is decisive, and not what society is asking for. That is what gives the organization its social legitimacy. The best way to prove that an organization is really competent is by delivering high quality products. It is the intrinsic good of the profession that is at stake here, and not the interest of the organization, or the people.

### **Contextual Dimension**

The last dimension in which the normativity of corporate communication is revealed is the contextual dimension. The corporate communication of organizations must fit the actual situation in which people live. Organizations have to question time and again whether people are in need of their products and services. What is the relevance and social impact of what they are doing? How can they make a difference in the lives of people or contribute to society as a whole? In the preceding sections, the contextual dimension was already present as a kind of background against which the corporate identity and professional competence of an organization was defined. It was argued that organizations depend on others in the framing of their corporate identity in the public debate. They also are in need of input from others in order to acquire a fuller understanding of their professional task. Therefore, they must consult public opinion repeatedly and consider the peculiar circumstances of their time.

The contextual dimension has its own normative significance. We may envisage something of the fullness and beauty of human life in the various historical situations and cultural forms (Mouw and Griffioen 1993, 154-155). Being sensitive to the way people live and express who they are takes them seriously as a human being. It is acceptance of them as people with their own worth and dignity. The worst thing we may do is to ignore the individuality of people, or to misrecognize them in their particular way of being (Taylor 1994, 25). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply that every historical form or lifestyle is of equal worth. Taking other ways of life seriously also means that you critically examine them and not just accept them at face value (Taylor 1994, 69-70). Organizations must not simply adapt to what people are saying, but must search for the appropriate answer to the urgent issues of their time.

The contextual situatedness of an organization becomes apparent at the moment that one asks “where” and “when” an organization is active, and what the organization is assumed to do in this particular time and place. An organization must be sensitive to the expectations of the public and the main issues of their time. What counts as a good or effective way of communication depends upon the specific local and historical circumstances. A way of communicating that is appropriate in one situation is not automatically also appropriate in another situation. To stimulate contextual sensitivity, communication professionals often ask what people would miss if the organization wasn’t there. This shows that, in addition to the “where” and “when” of an organization, the “why” of an organization is also important. By questioning “why,” it becomes immediately clear how urgent it is for an organization to know what its specific contribution to society is. By questioning “why,” one asks for the purpose or reason of existence of an organization; the ideal that keeps an organization running (Sinek 2009, 39). One has to project oneself ahead and discover what one wants to contribute in a particular time and place (Ricoeur 1992, 85-86).

The question “why” an organization exists has become more and more important in corporate communication. In our information age, we are becoming acutely aware of our contextual situatedness. We live in an age in which all places on earth are connected with each other, and in which an overwhelming number of incentives are available and our local circumstances are constantly changing. In order to attract the attention of people and build long-term relationships with them, organizations must touch their hearts and connect to their life purposes. Kotler et al. (2010, 20) argues that spirituality is increasingly replacing survival as the prime need of human beings. Supplying meaning and embedding values in your business model are, according to them, the new focus points in marketing communication. We are entering an age of participation in which people want to be involved in the creation of the brand, and do not only want to be consumers who buy products. Where in the 1980s and 1990s, an appeal for authenticity and quality of life dominated, nowadays marketers try to commit customers to their products and services by using socio-ideological motifs: caring for nature, the ill, poor, and deprived. With their products and services, business enterprises want to open up new worlds and add meaning to people’s lives. Organizations want to give the impression that they are not just consuming goods, but also are participating in a struggle against evil (Zizek 2010, 356-357).

In order to understand what is happening in spiritual marketing, it is important to have a better understanding of what “spirituality” means in this context. Quite often the term “spirituality” is used in opposition to the term “religion.” Whereas religion is associated with hierarchical control and clearly demarcated choices, spirituality is often associated with personal freedom and self-realization (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 5-6). In the case of religion, it is especially important to know “who” you are and to which group you belong. Religion therefore often functions as an identity marker. One is part of a specific group that has its own history. In the case of spirituality, however, the personal quest for a life that is meaningful becomes more important. The question “why” you exist in this particular time and space becomes the central focus point. Spirituality begins with the life purposes of people and the way in which they want to realize their goal.

Spiritual marketing provides organizations with a new powerful tool to involve people. Even spiritual values, one may argue, are now incorporated into the capitalist system. The

opposite, by the way, seems also true. Religious organizations seem to turn more and more into lifestyle brands on the global market place (Schofield Clark 2007). The problem with spiritual marketing, however, is that it easily turns into manipulation. Slavoj Zizek offers the example of Starbucks. When you buy Starbucks, you are buying something that is greater than a cup of coffee. You are buying a product from a company that cares for its customers, as well as for the world as a whole. However, what Starbucks does not mention is that the price of their coffee is higher than elsewhere. You buy an authentic and meaningful experience, but it also costs you more (Zizek 2009, 52-55). This shows that a one-sided emphasis on social impact and spiritual value may lead to compromising the trustworthiness of your organization. An organization may involve people in its organizational project in such a way that it loses its credibility and sense of direction.

Not only the “who” of the organization may be compromised by a one-sided emphasis on the actual relevance of the organization, also the “what” of the organization may be lost from view. Everything that people do, then, becomes a search for meaning. The only thing that counts is the way in which organizations help people to realize their purpose in life. Less relevant from this point of view is the question of whether the organization stays true to its own field of competence. This especially becomes apparent in culturalist approaches that hold that marketing, spirituality, and religion are essentially one and the same thing. From a culturalist point of view, the nature of a business enterprise or a media company is not essentially different from that of a church. Both communication and religion are a way in which people make sense of the world (Stolow 2005, 125).

Let me try to demonstrate how problematic such a culturalist approach is by referring to the introduction of the iPhone by Apple that was carefully documented by Campbell and La Pastina (2010). When Steve Jobs, the former director of Apple, first introduced the iPhone in January 2007, he promised that the phone would “work like magic.” A few hours later people on the web were already talking about the “Jesus phone.” News media took over this notion, thereby fueling the suggestion that Apple is not a brand, but a cult. Steve Jobs was pictured as a religious leader, and the users of Mac computers as his believers. Interestingly enough, the Apple company also embraced the religious imaginary. The religious language used by bloggers, journalists, and Apple, however, is of a metaphorical nature. Nobody would seriously consider Steve Jobs as a religious leader. Moreover, even if people were to claim that Apple has acquired a religious status, they must admit that this is a departure from what a company should be. Even if organizations are aware in their corporate communication of the importance that people are creatures that are in search for meaning, this is not the whole story. A company is not a church, and one should carefully distinguish between these two types of organizations.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that corporate communication is not an arbitrary affair. In corporate communication, one necessarily needs to search for the social legitimacy of an organization. This is only possible if one acknowledges the intrinsic normativity of corporate communication. Communication is part of a creation order. That means that one has to obey

certain rules in order to communicate properly. First of all, organizations must have a clear understanding of “who” they are. They must be accountable for their actions in order to be a trustworthy interlocutor (directional dimension). Second, they must have a clear understanding of “what” their specific professional competence is. They must search for the intrinsic good of their profession in order to show their craftsmanship (structural dimension). Finally, they must clarify “why” they exist in their particular time and place. They must show the actual relevance of their organization (contextual dimension).

In all three normative dimensions, organizations must refer to something that transcends their organizational interests. They cannot just frame their message any way they like; otherwise—sooner or later—customers, employees, and other stakeholders will unveil the corporate story of the organization as a more or less sophisticated form of propaganda. In addition, they must pay attention to the directional, structural, and contextual normativity of corporate communication in a well-balanced way. If one of these dimensions is lost from view, the credibility of an organization is at stake. Time and again organizations have to ask “who” they are, “what” they are doing, and “why” they exist.

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