The Role of Physical Metaphors for Decision-Making in Integrated Corporate Communication

Abstract

Purpose – The role of metaphors in information management has generally been acknowledged due to their ability to convey immediately huge amounts of information and richness. Their role is more and more important in the current digital context of communication and marketing activities, as the decision speed and accuracy are crucial. The aim of this study is thus to analyse physical metaphors as tools for making sequential decisions to achieve effective Integrated Corporate Communication (ICC).

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on critical analysis of literature on corporate communication and stakeholder management as building blocks for implementing an integrated approach to corporate communications.

Findings – A revision of two well-known physical metaphors in the communication literature (the "wheel" and "umbrella") has been proposed. It is argued that integrated communication within corporate communications is more complex than in marketing communications, since it involves a greater variety of elements to coordinate and harmonize. The proposed physical metaphors suggest an effective sequential decision-making as they allow a clear distinction between different decision levels.

Research limitations/implications – The paper adds to the debate on the link between theory and practice of ICC. From a practical standpoint, the proposed metaphors as simple and concrete tools for handling complex information and ICC problems could aid novice practitioners and students of corporate communications courses.

Originality/value – The paper shows that while scholars have concurred that integrated corporate communication is crucial for different type of organisations, the use of physical metaphors can be beneficial for the reality-based challenge of ICC.

Key words: integrated corporate communication, physical metaphors, communication mix, message coordination

Introduction

Until the end of '80s, in the traditional approach to marketing communications, companies and communication agencies create separate plans for each communication technique, such as advertising, direct marketing, sales promotions, etc. In most cases, the result was a fragmentation of information about the company/brand that was perceived in a different way according to the different type of communication means used. From the early '90s, an integrated approach to communication has been progressively introduced to use the same communication tools and to reinforce each other. By communicating the same information in advertising messages, in press releases and in direct mails, companies are in fact able to improve the effectiveness of communication.

The basic principle of coordinating communication activities has thus been referred to by authors wishing to see a convergence of the Corporate affairs/Public Relations and Marketing functions of companies, based on shared concepts and methodologies (e.g., Kotler and Mindak, 1978; Porterfield, 1980; Smith, 2012).

The integrated communication paradigm then spread under the name of "Integrated Marketing Communications" (IMC). This came about through a blend of advertising, marketing and public relations (Caywood and Ewing, 1991; Schultz *et al.*, 1993). The IMC point of view grew because of inadequacies in advertising practices (separation of different functions/activities) and an increasing awareness of the advantages of coordinating the various techniques and means of communication for spreading corporate and product information (Novelli, 1989; Nowak and Phelps, 1994). Furthermore, exploratory studies were carried out to investigate the development of the concept of IMC in terms of its theoretical foundations (Schultz and Kitchen, 1997; Kitchen and Schultz, 1999). Actually, the general debate has never been concerned with the validity of the basic premise (sinergy *vs* fragmentation of communications), since almost nobody (academics or practitioners) maintains a non-integrated view of corporate communications (Hutton, 1996).

Prevalently, IMC focuses on customer relations. Stakeholder-focused approach (Freeman, 1984), arising from a different field of studies, suggests instead a broader principle: organizations should communicate information effectively with all stakeholders through corporate communications (Bernstein, 1984). Considering the fact that communications can provide information to create points-of-difference that otherwise would not be possible, this debate took a further step forward when it became clear that integration in communications management involves all company communications to develop relationships with all the stakeholders and so is not just limited to marketing communications (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Grönroos, 1997; Payne *et al.*, 2005; Spotts and Weinberger, 2010; Ots and Nyilasy, 2015; Melewar *et al.*, 2017). The distinction between the marketing communication mix and the corporate communication mix should therefore be considered with this in mind.

The fact that, by managing different kind of information, a company aims to have a unique identity and to develop a favourable reputation (van Riel, 1995; van Riel and Balmer, 1997; Fombrun and van Riel, 1997) has lent support to the concept of "Integrated Corporate Communication" (ICC). This concept is considered

as a singular rather than plural entity, since the proper approach to corporate communication entails a comprehensive, integrated and consistent view leading to a consideration of the organization as a whole (van Riel, 1995). This is not only a shift in language but also a shift in ideas about how integration is conceived. From this point of view, the benefits of ICC include preserving the corporate brand, enhancing reputation, weathering crises, and maximizing organizational potential (Argenti, 2006; Siano et al., 2015; Porcu *et al*., 2016).

The integration of communications is considered as being part of a more general process within the management of complex organizations (Gronstedt 1996; Wightman, 1999). One of the main changes in management since the onset of ICC has been the shift away from an approach based on persuasive communication to one based on involvement and collaboration, so aiming to achieve a "co-construction of communicated meanings" (Christensen *et al.*, 2005).

Despite the spread of the concept among scholars and practitioners, the idea of "integrated communications" is still shrouded in some ambiguity (Low, 2000) due to the lack of any formal theoretical conceptualization and empirically tested measurement methods (Porcu *et al*., 2017). Thus, it is considered to be a re-invention of existing marketing concepts (Spotts *et al.*, 1998) or as purely a management fashion (Cornelissen and Lock, 2000).

The term "IMC" has been used by different authors to indicate four diverse aspects of the integration of marketing communications (Foroudi *et al*., 2017):

– integration as a "process". This refers to organizational and inter-functional mechanisms, which aim to align the activities of communications specialists. This primarily requires coordination between the communication processes and activities developed by the various marketing communications experts inside and outside the organization (Nowak and Phelps, 1994; Eagle and Kitchen, 2000; Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014);

– integration as "content". This concerns to the links and consistency between media and marketing messages. Here, the consistency of the marketing communication mix is emphasised as a means of increasing brand equity (Keller, 1996; Madhavaram *et al.*, 2005) and improving the effectiveness of communications (Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014);

– integration as the "creation and development of long-term market relationships". The integration of communications is considered as the need to develop a system of managing relationships with consumers and other stakeholders through direct and interactive contact (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Duncan, 2002; Porcu et al., 2017);

– integration as "technological advances". This point highlights that communications are in a transition due to technological advances, thus organizations move from different stages of integration in communication development as a result of organizations' ability to capture and manage, among others, information technology (Schultz and Schultz, 1998). In the current digital context of communication and marketing activities, there is in fact an increase in the decision speed that makes even more complicated the

information management.

The core idea of these four main issues is their basic assumption that integration is an organizational/managerial philosophy which aims to overcome the isolation of the different communications activities that the company can choose from (Siano *et al.*, 2013). The result is that a holistic and cooperative vision of communication activities is produced (Duncan and Everett, 1993; Miller and Rose, 1994; Kliatchko and Schultz, 2014). Within the holistic vision synergies are achieved through the right combination of different techniques and means (channels) of communication and branding (Naik and Raman, 2003; Luxtun *et al.*, 2015). In the search for synergies, an excessive amount of attention on technical/operational aspects means there is a risk of underestimating or disregarding how closely they are linked to company identity and strategy (Melewar *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, one of most common mistakes is to consider integrated communication exclusively as a tactical activity (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2001) and as a task to delegate to communications practitioners alone. To avoid this frequent mistake it needs to establish a clear distinction between strategic and tactical communication decisions and to make an integration of them (Holm, 2006). This would help to overcome the situation for which "communication is often still seen as a largely tactical activity with practitioners acting as communication 'technicians'" (Cornelissen, 2008: 99).

To bridge this gap to some extent, it could be convenient the use of metaphors – seen as cognitive artefacts that are based on the application of names or descriptive terms or phrases related to information, objects or actions to which they are not literally applicable (Eppler, 2006) - which can help to clarify the distinction between strategic and tactical decisions in ICC planning. In particular, physical metaphors allow a clear display and a better understanding both of strategic and tactical information in decisional sequence.

For this reason, this study proposes a re-examination of two physical metaphors (the "wheel" and the "umbrella" metaphors), well-known in the field of corporate communications. In the following paragraphs, the two physical metaphors are presented. The wheel metaphor refers to communication mix decisions. The umbrella metaphor, instead, deals with decision-making for message coordination in corporate communication.

Metaphors for decision-making in ICC

In different fields of study (information management, organization, communication and marketing), several publications show a growing interest on the role of metaphors, as cognitive and heuristic devices. Recently, in fact, a number of studies in information systems research (Jung & Hong, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Jackson, 2016) and marketing (Miles, 2014; Holbrook, 2015) used metaphors as an alternative way to explore the social functioning and complexities of decisions in organizations. As already noted by Walsham (1993) over two decades ago, the use of selected metaphors can be very useful as a "way of reading organizations", and to the "development and implementation of information systems strategy".

More generally, metaphors can be finalized to schematizing theoretical perspectives, to laying the

foundations of conceptual distinctions (not immediately perceptible) and to providing practical inputs (Hunt and Menon, 1995; Cornelissen, 2006; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2006; Fillis and Rentschler, 2008, Kitchen, 2008; Capelli and Jolibert, 2009). Moreover, they can be used as relevant mechanism to bring information to life and guarantee that it is correctly understood and recalled (Siano et al., 2017; Fitsimmons, 2014).

The epidemiological metaphor of "viral" marketing (Miles, 2014) and that of the marketing manager as a jazz musician (Holbrook, 2015) are two recent well-known examples of use of these rhetorical devices in marketing. In comparison with other kinds of metaphors, however, physical metaphors have several limitations, because they favour "order and predictability", but usually lack of "sufficient flexibility to deal with unexpected changes" (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2006: 24). In particular, IMC has been criticised as "system" or "mechanical machine" metaphor. Nonetheless, physical metaphors could be helpful to narrow the existing gap between marketing theory and practice (Ankers and Brennan, 2002; Pavia, 2006) and to better disseminate marketing knowledge, ideas and practices. If it is considered that integrated communication "[in practice] seems to be firmly anchored at the earliest stage of its development" (Eagle *et al.*, 2007), it is easily to understand all the more so the contribution made by physical metaphors.

The wheel metaphor

In extant literature, the wheel metaphor was used as a checklist for analysing the possible combinations of different types of public (audience) and means of communication (Bernstein, 1984). For his checklist, Bernstein used the wheel to a matrix because this was the easiest way to show how different publics could be reached via different means of communication. Moreover, Bernstein highlighted the fact that each means of communication had the same probability of being chosen to communicate with different publics. Thus, although specifying that not all the possible combinations could be used, Bernstein believed that the wide range of combinations allowed the "communication coordinator" to express their creativity and, at the same time, to have a global vision of corporate communication.

Although is acceptable the principle that it is important to use a variety of channels to communicate with different publics, this variety could be dangerous for the less experienced corporate communicators/practitioners when they must select from the *mare magnum* of communication. In other words, in Bernstein's wheel there is a wide choice of channels and publics, but no mention is made of operational solutions able to implement the proposed theoretical model. Moreover, Bernstein spoke generically of channels (media) and lumped together communication techniques and means in this one category. These limitations mean that Bernstein's wheel is not an adequate tool for corporate communication mix planning, but rather only a starting point for analysis (Siano *et al*., 2017).

In this paper the wheel metaphor is used with a different meaning than the Bernstein's wheel metaphor. The re-examination of this metaphor is based on principles of: (1) circularity and iteration of decision-making to identify the corporate communication mix; (2) clear distinction between strategic and tactical communication decisions (Holm, 2006; Siano and Vollero, 2012). According to these principles, strategic and tactical communication choices on the various components of corporate communication mix have to be

made moving within a sequential decision-making.

<<<Insert Figure 1>>>

On a strategic level, following the sequence along the communication wheel in Figure 1, the first step of decision-making is the choice of stakeholder groups. An approach focusing on stakeholder relationships (Freeman, 1984; Payne *et al*., 2005) is suggested to decide with which stakeholder groups communicate. To this end, Stakeholder Salience Model (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997) is useful for identifying the more salient or prominent stakeholders considering their level of priority and thus actively communicate with. The model classifies and prioritizes stakeholder groups according to three key attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. In addition to the indications drawn from Stakeholder Salience Model, further factors involved in relationships with the selected stakeholders may be taken into account to deepen the analysis and to evaluate the relevant stakeholder groups: the level of relationship intensity/emphasis, the stage in the life cycle of relationships, the stakeholder performance indicators, etc. (MacMillan *et al*., 2004; Payne *et al*., 2005; Boulding *et al*., 2005).

All these elements (model and further factors) may give information for budget allocation. In fact, budgetary allowances must privilege the stakeholder groups with a greater need of support from communication. Selection of stakeholder groups (customers, investors, employees, etc.) involves the matching of stakeholder relations (customer relations, investor relations, employee relations, etc.) and communication areas (marketing communications, financial communications, internal communications, etc.).

The subsequent steps in sequential decision-making consist in the choice, on a tactical level, of further components of the communication mix for each selected stakeholder group (Siano et al., 2015). These components are:

− communication techniques (public relations, advertising, sales promotion, direct-mail, personal selling, etc.);

− means (channels) of communication (newspapers, magazines, televisions, internet, etc.). They make specific communication techniques possible. Means of communication allow different types of contact (interpersonal or non-interpersonal) and different types of flow or dialogue (one-way or two-way) (Hartley and Pickton, 1999). The features of the means of communication influence the execution of the techniques, and the types of communications (one-to-many, one-to-one and/or many-to-many) in stakeholder relationships comes from the choice of techniques and means;

− vehicles for communication (newspaper headlines, radio stations, TV channels, websites, portals, etc.). They are final channels of communication because they actually allow messages to be sent and contact to be

established with a particular audience type. It is necessary to identify one or more vehicles for each selected communication medium in line with the profile and size of the target audience as well as the cost per contact. For time-cost optimization, the choice of techniques/means/vehicles combinations takes place within the ambit of media planning (Donnelly, 1996; De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2007).

A recent example of optimized integrated marketing communication campaign is the "AnyWare" campaign by Domino's, the pizza restaurant chain, launched in the third quarter of 2015. The core concept was to allow people order food in ways that are more convenient and fast, such as via text message using a pizza emoji, via Twitter, Samsung Smart TVs®, Pebble Watches or through Ford Sync®, as well as voice ordering with its iPhone® and Android™ apps. The AnyWare project was conceivable as Domino's had already developed single Pizza Profiles of each customer, thus saving in customer relationship management system all needed information (payment method, addresses, order type, preferences, etc.). This type of campaign used multiple communication techniques, means and vehicles (press releases, national television, social media, etc.) to get customer attention and drive customers to AnyWare.Dominos.com. The results of this integrated campaign were impressive, thus generating over 2 billion earned media impressions, more than 500,000 visits to the official website, and a growth of 10.5% in sales.

Progressive decision-making through the circular sequence along the wheel in Figure 1 involves continuous iterations until a proper mix of stakeholder groups, techniques, means and vehicles of communication is obtained. Decision maker must iterate over one or more cycles until is reached an acceptable trade off among: (1) level of priority of stakeholder groups; (2) techniques, means, and vehicles suitability; (3) budgetary limits. In the paper, the wheel metaphor gives a good idea of these key features of decision-making. The circularity of the physical wheel suggests, in fact, a sequential and iterative decision-making. Appropriate corporate communication mix generates synergies from integration of techniques/means/vehicles.

Typical combinations of techniques/means for each stakeholder group (and communication area) can be identified by the sequence along the physical metaphor in Figure 1. These combinations could be a useful guide in directing the choices of the decision maker in practical situations, especially for novice practitioners. This guide is valuable because integration of communications is more complex in corporate communication than in marketing communication (Bernstein, 1984; Grunig, 1992), owing to the wide variety of elements to coordinate and harmonize.

The umbrella metaphor

The umbrella metaphor was used in literature by Schultz and Kitchen (2004). They considered it helpful in conceptualizing the foundation and integration of corporate communication. More specifically, they use it to illustrate how corporate branding and communication programmes are pertinent and appropriate for all organizations.

This physical metaphor is used on a different basis from Schultz and Kitchen's umbrella metaphor. In the present study, in fact, corporate umbrella metaphor is considered a useful tool when focuses on decision-making for message coordination in corporate communication. Message coordination aims to achieve a main objective of ICC: the convergence and consistency of the content of all messages addressed to internal and external stakeholders (van Riel, 1995; De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2007). This is true of whichever means is used, so that conflicting messages are not conveyed. Since we are dealing with corporate communication, coordination is required to harmonize and synergize the messages in all communications. It should be avoided the fragmentation of messages which can pose a threat to corporate image and reputation through the lack of orchestration in the communications implemented (van Riel and Fombrun, 2007).

<<<Insert Figure 2>>>

The corporate umbrella metaphor may clarify that message coordination in corporate communication requires an overall vision. This approach means to take into account a plurality of elements in order to harmonize and make them consistent and synergistic. When the umbrella is open, below it you can envision: (1) the stakeholder groups to which address communications; (2) the communication techniques chosen to send messages, specific for every stakeholder group (Figure 2).

The messages conveyed to selected stakeholder groups should be coordinated in the horizontal sense, through strategic decisions. Horizontal coordination of messages can be performed through the translation of strategy into central values (common key words, e.g.: relationship, partnership, innovation, trustworthiness, etc.). These central values act as guidelines ("common starting points") at the corporate level and are the basis for undertaking any kind of communication envisaged by the company (van Riel, 1995; Siano *et al*., 2015). As positioning expressions, common starting points make the messages and symbolic elements used consistent (logo, house style, company clothing, etc.) (van Riel, 1995; van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). This choice is typical of Integrated Corporate Communication (ICC).

Subsequently, it is necessary a vertical coordination of messages for adapting the common starting points to bring them as close as possible to the language of each target stakeholder group a company intends to send its messages to. When the transmission of messages is aimed at a specific stakeholder group through the contemporaneous use of different techniques of communication, it is necessary to create messages that are not mere adoptions of the starting points set at a corporate level. This choice of adaptation is derived from tactical decisions. Also for the umbrella metaphor it is indicated the distinction between strategic and tactical choices and sequential decision-making.

Moreover, vertical coordination is necessary to: (1) make the messages addressed to each stakeholder group friendly and understandable within their linguistic codes and fields of experience (Schramm, 1961); (2) ensure when adapting the message from the common starting points into the stakeholder group's

language that the use of different communication techniques does not render the message too distant from its original meaning. This could reduce the effectiveness of communication or even confuse the recipients; (3) integrate the tone of messages; (4) enrich the effects of the messages, through complementary informational inputs and emotional inputs; (5) harmonize the timing of message transmission (media/press coverage) through different techniques and means so as to have an overlapping effect of communication for a particular target.

In Figure 2 the typical communication techniques are presented. When it is possible to use more than one technique to communicate with different stakeholder group, vertical coordination of messages is a relevant issue. This happens with Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), Integrated Corporate Citizenship Communications (ICCC), Integrated Financial Communications (IFC), Integrated Labour Market Communications (ILMC) and Integrated Channel Communications (IChC).

Conclusion

The paper succeeded in presenting the use of physical metaphors as a manner for explaining and illustrating sequential decision-making for integrated corporate communication, based on the distinction between strategic and tactical decisions. This article posits that developing a superior integrated communications framework can help companies to position themselves to better manage information complexity, reduce risk and sustain competitive advantage.

Actually, although physical metaphors are in their essence descriptive and less flexible than others, their value should not be underestimated. Hence, one main contribution of this work consists in the fact that the revised physical metaphors seem useful to clarify the distinction between strategic and tactical choices for integrated communication, as well as to put into practice some principles on which the integration of communication is founded, namely clarity and consistency of corporate information. The two provided metaphors seem to be a possible answer to Fillis e Rentschler's (2008: 494) thought-provoking question. In fact, they say "one curious conundrum within this gap is that many academics embrace complexity while practitioners do not, even though they often operate in such an environment", as regards the theory/practice gap in contemporary marketing.

The physical metaphors at least could be used in order to raise the complexity perceived by practitioners, mainly because this type of metaphors have an explanatory power.

The communication wheel and the corporate umbrella metaphors could therefore be practical tools that face the reality-based challenge for the integration of communication, thus helping practitioners to understand scholars' perspective. This will allow them – to some extend – to simplify certain kind of information that can be considered crucial for the corporate wellbeing.

For example, our metaphors could be highly appreciated in sales force automation - in which the main goal is to manage information to answer to customers' expectations faster and to enhance the personalized

facet of presentations and responses. In this case, communications not only are developed throughout all marketing channels but they are at the heart of many marketing functions, thus, they need to be treated in an integrated perspective.

Besides, from a practical standpoint, the paper has the merit to show that such physical metaphors could be helpful for education and training purposes, in order to develop analytical and decisional skills for students on undergraduate and post-graduate corporate communications courses, or for new employees with no previous training in communications agencies and in corporate communications functions/departments.

In fact, these physical metaphors are especially conceived to facilitate corporate communications choices of novice practitioners who have not yet experimented with effective stakeholder groups, techniques, means and messages correlations.

In addition, managers and consultants may use physical metaphors efficiently in order to "substitute" complex information about decision-making processes on integrated corporate communication (Cottrell, 2011). For example, bankers and post offices employees, have found recently that their job has shifted from front office role to financial counselling, which involves the processes of paying attention, aligning, and matching with lots of different information needs and requests - all of which necessitate communication and actives of listening skills. For this kind of practitioners, the use of our metaphors can be very beneficial. In fact, metaphors seem to be able to pass information to subjects that have limited former knowledge about specific topics. For this reason, the adequate choice of metaphor can be quite challenging as they have "to create a path from the understanding of something familiar to something new by carrying elements of understanding from the mastered subject to a new domain" (Eppler, 2006: 147), – in this case, in the domain of corporate communication. Besides, these type of physical metaphors, due to their "concrete" nature, can be used in the development of expert systems for information management of integrated communication and marketing plans (Lin et al., 2002).

Lastly, the use of the two proposed metaphors may help both in obtaining to some extent a narrowing of the theory/practice and strategic/tactical gaps and in developing a "form of language" which can be easily understood and shared by researchers as well as by practitioners.

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Figure 1. The wheel metaphor for corporate communication decisions

strategic decisions

Which **STAKEHOLDER GROUPS**
does the company communicate with?

employees, partners, suppliers and
distributors, investors, qualified job
seekers, customers, media,
government, community
and pressure groups,
general public

Which **VEICHLES**
of communication
does the company use?

newspaper headlines, radio stations,
TV channels, movie theaters,
exhibitions, trade fairs, search
engines, websites,
communities,
social media,
etc.

Which **TECHNIQUES**
of communication
does the company use?

advertising, public relations,
sponsorship, sales promotions,
personal selling, direct-marketing,
in-store communications,
public affairs (lobbying), etc.

ONE-TO-ONE
ONE-TO-MANY
MANY-TO-MANY

tactical decisions

Which **MEANS**
of communication
does the company use?

newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, internet, mail, phone,
brochures, leaflets, front-office, packaging, events, etc.
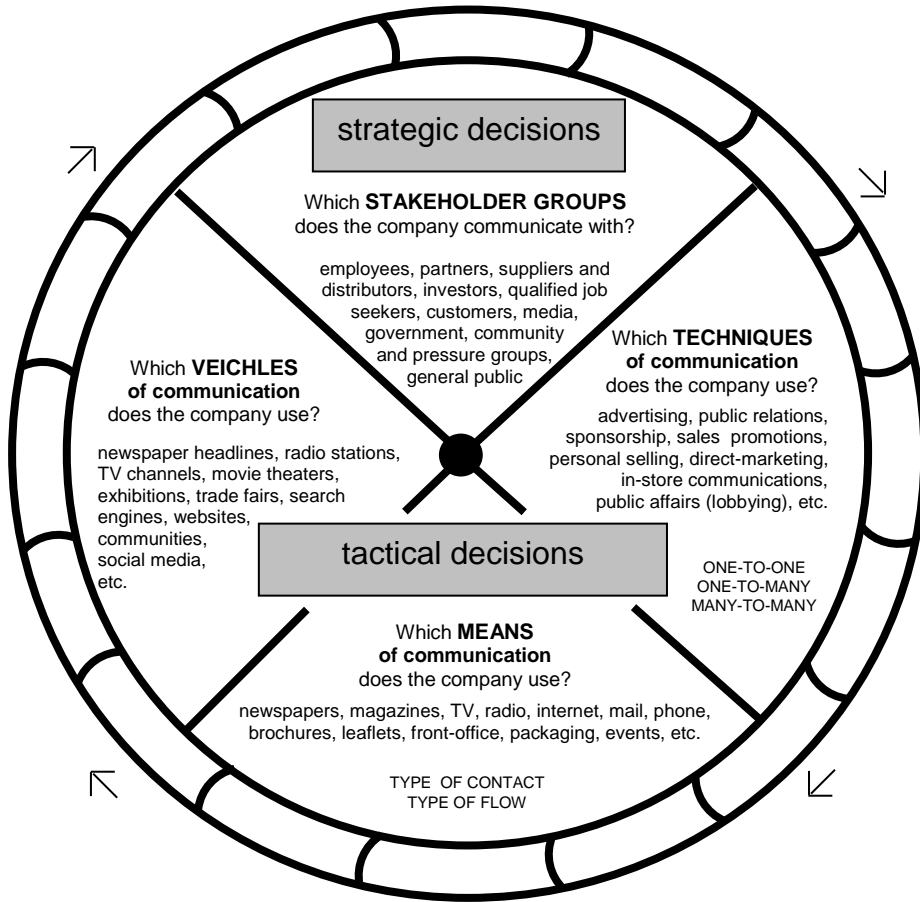
TYPE OF CONTACT
TYPE OF FLOW

Figure 2. The corporate umbrella metaphor and the message coordination

Customers (people and organisations)

CUSTOMER RELATIONS

General public (public opinion)

GENERAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

Investors (shareholders, bondholders) Banks Financial analysts and consultants

INVESTOR RELATIONS

Qualified job seekers (managers and technicians)

LABOUR MARKET RELATIONS

Employees (including direct sales force)

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

Consultants Channel partners (sales force) R&D centres Other companies

PARTNER RELATIONS

Suppliers Buyers (distributors, wholesalers, retailers)

SUPPLIER AND DISTRIBUTOR RELATIONS

Media Opinion leaders influencers

MEDIA RELATIONS

Local, regional, national and international government authorities Regulatory agencies

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

Local communities Interest groups (environmental, ethnic, consumer, etc.) Activists

COMMUNITY AND PRESSURE GROUPS RELATIONS

strategic decisions

horizontal-coordination (ICC)

marketing public relations

sponsorship

product advertising

consumer promotions

in-store communications

personal selling

direct-marketing

(IMC)

corporate public relations

sponsorship

corporate advertising

(ICCC)

financial public relations

corporate advertising

direct-mail

(IFC)

recruitment public relations

corporate advertising

(ILMC)

internal public relations

partnership public relations

channel public relations

trade promotions

personal selling

(IChC)

media public relations

public affairs (lobbying)

public affairs

tactical decisions

v e r t i c a l

c o o r d i n a t i o n

15