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**Integrated Communication for Universities?**

A Comparison with the Integrated Communication of Companies

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## Introduction

Increasing competitive pressure and an intensifying competitive context are increasing the pressure on companies and organizations. Therefore, traditional forms of advertising and thinking in classic marketing dimensions are no longer sufficient. Communication is no longer the sole responsibility of the press and communication staff, but has become a comprehensive task that affects all areas. In the past twenty years, the concept of integrated communication has proven to be the solution to the new and diverse challenges. The concept has already been sufficiently examined for companies and described in a variety of concepts.

There is still a scientific gap regarding the analysis of universities from this point of view. The present paper is attempting to minimize this research gap. The dissertation approaches the research field from a theoretical perspective, which is based on the integrated communication concept applied with regard to companies. As a result, universities and companies are first compared to determine differences and similarities. Based on this, established concepts of integrated communication are considered and their suitability for adaptation to universities is examined. In the empirical study, the theoretical knowledge is enriched and discussed using scientific methods.

The focus of the present work is the central research question:

*Based on the established concept of integrated communication for companies, how could a structured, theoretically based approach to integrated communication be designed for universities?*

The overarching goal is to minimize the existing knowledge gap and, based on the theoretical and empirical investigation, to develop a suitable theory-driven approach to integrated communication for universities, based on a concept that has already been established for companies. The dissertation therefore contains the following table of contents, which is included in full length for the sake of completeness:

**Keywords:** Integrated communication; Communication; Concepts of Communication; corporate communication; university; university communication

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## A comparison Between Universities and Companies

The comparability of universities and companies due to the individuality and heterogeneity of both organizational forms is difficult and cannot be generalized. The analysis can therefore only be carried out superficially.

At first glance, the impression can certainly arise that universities and companies have a lot in common. Kohmann summarizes the similarities and sees established structures, fixed goals, hierarchies and employees, logical organizational units and routine processes in both organizations (see Kohmann 2012: 179f). However, there are also numerous differences:

- **Purpose and goals:** For universities, an established purpose creates identity. Education and research are anchored in the foundations of universities. Companies, on the other hand, are able to adapt their purpose to the market and industry situation, since they do not have to establish identity to the same extent as universities (see Kette 2018: 35). In addition, the goals of universities are vague, ambiguous and unclear (see Kohmann 2012: 23f).
- **Employees and participation:** People have a central position in universities because they are necessary for organization to all extents (see Baldrige 1983: 40). Unlike in companies, where only a few employees are actively involved in management, the majority of employees in a university are involved in structural decisions through the involvement in committees. There are also two other special categories. Due to their participation in committees, students are both employees and customers (cf. Kohmann 2012: 70). Professors are not employees of the universities, but of the state and therefore have a high degree of independence and freedom (see the German Law which regulates the status of civil servants, art. 34), which clearly distinguishes them from employees in companies.
- **Financing and state dependency:** Companies not only have a profit and profit intention, but are also dependent on raising liquid funds to pay salaries and rents and to invest in innovations. This is a strong contrast to the state funding of universities, which are at the same time limited in their autonomy on this point and cannot refinance solely through the acquisition of third-party funds (see Kohmann 2012: 67).
- **Product:** While products in companies are subject to different cost and quality criteria, education is strictly related to trust (see Darby/ Karni 1973 from

Kohmann 2012: 68), since quality cannot really be assessed either when testing or when consuming the goods of a university. Consumers therefore have to take a leap of faith - other mechanisms for measuring success, such as the role of money in the economy, cannot be used (see Bolsenkötter 1976, p. 337).

## **Conclusion**

There are clear differences between companies and universities. In contrast to universities, autonomy, state independence and the definition of goals are significantly more pronounced. In addition, the banal principle can be derived that companies are active on the market to ensure their existence. Companies can act flexibly, are largely independent of third parties, and at the same time bear the risk of financial failure. The complexity of the universities is a challenge due to the many individual areas compared to companies, as well as the lack of hierarchy. This also applies to the unclear self-image of the universities due to the lack of detailed (corporate) goals. The suitability of the concept of integrated communication for universities will therefore depend on the extent to which the concept leaves scope for the heterogeneous structures at universities and can deal with an insufficient and equally heterogeneous goal definition for the overall organization.

## **The Integrated Communication**

The integrated communication in the dissertation was derived from the concept of communication, various communication models, mass communication and corporate communication. The basic approach of a company's communication is to convey a consistent, credible and clear picture to different audiences and target groups, that is both easily recognized and learned and, in the best case, is based on individual communication needs (see Kirner 2001: 33; Bruhn 2009: 1). Due to the increasing fragmentation and information overload, as well as the many new communication channels, there is a need to focus the communication efforts more strongly and to lead internally to a better orientation and externally to a higher success rate (see Bruhn 2009: 4; Kirchner 2001: 33f).



## Definition of the Integrated Communication

The concept of integrated communication is based on a holistic approach that tries to overcome the division into, for example, the disciplines of advertising, sponsorship, public relations and internal communication with an interdisciplinary solution. In recent years, and particularly in the German-speaking countries, Manfred Bruhn has prevailed with his definition: *„Integrated communication is a strategic and operational process of analysis, planning, organization, implementation and control, which is designed to create a unity between the different sources of internal and external communication of companies, in order to create a consistent image of a company and to convey the target groups with a reference object for communication.“* (Bruhn 2009: 22)

This definition forms the basis for the dissertation and the present understanding of integrated communication.

## Integrated Communication Concepts

In this chapter, central approaches of integrated communication for companies are presented. The selection is based on the fact that the concepts presented provide, on the one hand, an overview of the different approaches and orientations of integrated communication and, on the other hand, open up a certain perspective for transferability to the university type of organization. The models from Northwestern University, from Kirchner, from Thorson and Moore, from Duncan and Moriarty, from Gronstedt, Zerfaß and Bruhn are presented and critically discussed in the dissertation. As a result, the concept of integrated communication according to Bruhn has proven to be the most suitable concept.

## Summary and Conclusion Regarding the Models of Integrated Communication

The dissertation summarizes the discussion about the different models with regard to their use for universities. All models have strengths and weaknesses and each of them has a stronger theoretical or practical relevance.

A style of communication becomes clear, with the help of which the target groups should be convinced of the company's messages. The clear structure, the coherent structure and the high degree of clarification of the approach should be emphasized. The communication tools to be used are described in a differentiated manner and their

relationships are analyzed in detail. Overall, Bruhn's approach touches on a variety of aspects that are also important for the design of integrated communication for universities. This also takes into account relevant organizational and personnel aspects and lists the customers and other stakeholders as an important target group. The defining element of the approach consists in the detailed explanations regarding the individual tasks within the management process. The scientist develops a hierarchical system in which goals, statements and communication tools are coordinated in terms of content, form and timing. In the further course of the work, the focus lies therefore on working out the core and success factors of the integrated communication concept of Bruhn and discussing its implementation in companies and universities.

### **Integrated Communication for Universities - a Discussion**

At first glance, the similarities between universities and companies, such as established structures, fixed goals, hierarchies and employees (see Kohmann 2012: 179f), promote the introduction of integrated communication for universities. This is countered by the differences already described, such as the vague, unclear and ambiguous goals (see e.g. Kohmann 2012: 23f). The same applies to the corporate philosophy, which is characterized by the fact that universities are committed to the purpose of education and teaching, but remain ambiguous beyond that. Companies, on the other hand, adapt to market and industry conditions (see Kette 2018: 35). As a success criterion for integrated communication, Bruhn has identified support from the management level and commitment to everyone involved in communication. This creates a conflict with the organizational structure of the university. At first glance, faculties seem like departments and therefore comparable to the company, but people play different roles in both organizations. At universities, people are of central importance (see Baldrige 1983: 40). This means that a large number of potential communicators can be found in the universities. The large number of different expert groups within the universities lead to a high degree of complexity and a strong fragmentation of the organization, which is in clear contrast to the company. This makes decision-making concepts very complex and difficult to control (see Kette 2018: 35.)

The success and influencing factors, as well as the key points, are a few striking factors, the implementation of which initially seems applicable to a variety of organizational forms and which Bruhn has demonstrated in his studies (2005; 2008). It remains unclear

whether the structure of the university is the right organizational form to be considered for a concept of integrated communication. However, Bruhn also found that in practice his criteria are adapted and hierarchically aligned to meet heterogeneous requirements. Therefore, the theoretical consideration must be followed by an empirical investigation.

## **Empirical part: Integrated Communication for Universities**

After careful consideration of the methods (see e.g. Brosius 2016), a triangulative research design was used for the empirical investigation. This research design enables the integrated communication of universities to be examined from different directions in order to **gain** at a more comprehensive and valid **overview** (see Kelle/ Erzberger 2004: 300).

### **Research Questions and Methods**

The central research question of the Thesis is:

*Based on the established concept of integrated communication for companies, how could a structured, theoretically based approach to integrated communication be designed for universities?*

For the empirical investigation, this question should be broken down into three research questions:

*Are universities in Germany already using strategic and planned communication and to what extent can this be described as integrated communication according to Bruhn?*

*How do universities and companies differ when it comes to implementing communication in comparison to the external image?*

*Can the ideally described concept of integrated communication according to Bruhn be applied to universities?*

The first research question is answered by a quantitative online survey among all universities in Germany. The second question should be answered by a quantitative content analysis, while the third research question can be answered by a qualitative expert interview. The individual methods and their implementation are presented below.

### **Online Survey**

The aim of the survey is to gain insights into the current state of communication between

universities in Germany. The standardized online questionnaire was chosen for the survey of the universities, since this has now developed into an established empirical data collection method (see Zerback et al 2009: 15; Welker 2007: 25f). Since quantitative online surveys require a high degree of clarification, mostly closed questions were used. A four-level rating scale (see Mohring/ Schlütz 2010: 88ff; Brosius 2016: 108) with verbalized scales was used, as it supports the respondents in choosing their answers compared to verbally polar scales.

### Conception of the Questionnaire

According to Brosius, the question is divided into different dimensions (cf. Brosius 2016: 130). In the specific case, the questionnaire contains a breakdown into areas A), B) and C). In part A), statistical data are queried in order to compare the universities with one another in terms of size (measured number of students). Area B) includes the query of general and strategic communication. The focus is on trying to gain insight into the importance of communication in general and its anchoring and expression (in the sense of instruments and controlling) in particular. In area C) there is a more specific question about integrated communication, with particular reference to Bruhn's understanding.

### Pretest

The test was carried out in two stages (see Welker/ Sattler 2007: 351). First of all, the intelligibility as well as the technical and optical functionality were checked in a small group of five communication practitioners. After testing the functionality, the questionnaire was checked by a critical mass of ten people (including communication and IT practitioners). To prevent multiple participation, cookies were used (see Hippner/ Merzenich/ Wilde 2002: 11).

### Conducting the Survey

For the survey, an email was sent with the link to the survey. The information was sent via the distribution list of the Federal Association for University Communication, which includes around 83 percent of all communication officers at German universities. The time frame for the survey was four weeks, 2<sup>nd</sup> -30<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020. On March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the participants were called up again by email to be reminded to participate.

### **Answers and Data Evaluation**

Of the 1203 university communication officers contacted, a total of 114 participants took part in the survey. This corresponds to a response rate of around 9.5 percent. A total of 74 data records were completed. The online tool "Survey Online" from Enuvo GmbH was used for the technical implementation of the online survey. The online tool complies with the EU General Data Protection Regulation. The statistical evaluation is predominantly descriptive with a concentration on sum statistics, frequency distributions and mean values.

### **Descriptive Evaluation of the Results**

As part of the data evaluation, all 114 data records submitted were initially taken into account, even if the data records were not completed until the end. This form of evaluation is unusual, but seemed logical for several reasons. The questions do not depend on each other. The questionnaires, which were not completely filled out, show that either the respondent did not answer a question or that the questionnaire was terminated before or after a completed unit of meaning. Due to the relevance of each individual question for the overall investigation, the informative value of the individual questions was rated higher by the researcher than the informative value of the overall investigation.

### **Answering the Research Question**

The survey was carried out with the aim of answering the following research question: "Are universities in Germany already using strategic and planned communication and to what extent can this already be described as integrated communication according to Bruhn?"

As a result, it must be clearly stated that the results are very different. A basic understanding of communication regarding internal and external communication is required. This is largely the case. This statement also applies to the goal of uniformity, which is also one of the core goals of integrated communication. However, the success of the uniformity is more heterogeneous within the participants, which is why a need can already be recognized here. However, there are large gaps and an overall heterogeneous picture in the context of the strategic and planned anchoring. The communication concept, defined communication goals, the mapping of the philosophy and the achievement of the communication goals are more or less pronounced depending on the type of university

and the size of the university based on the number of students. There is also a connection between the size of the university based on the number of students and the presence of these strategic aspects. The centralization of human resources and communication activities also lie in the organizational anchoring. This shows that the majority of universities try to act centrally in a department, which corresponds to Bruhn's understanding. Most of the communication planning is coordinated with the university management, which also corresponds to Bruhn's understanding. In the area of communication instruments, the universities seem to be best positioned comparatively, since a variety of instruments are used that are timed and tailored to the target group.

Overall, the desire for integrated communication is perceptible at universities. At the same time, the universities estimate that they are not yet integrating their communication well. This results in a differentiated picture for answering the research question. There is a direct connection between a high degree of implementation of the integration of the university and the fulfillment of the individual query criteria from the questionnaire, which in turn supports the meaningfulness of the individual questions. On the other hand, all sizes are represented among the participants in the sample based on the number of students, which in turn means that integrated communication for universities can in principle be used regardless of the type and size of university. The majority of universities meet some of the criteria for integrated communication. In part, one can speak of planned and strategic communication. However, this cannot yet be completely described as integrated communication according to Bruhn, as there is a need to catch up, particularly regarding the strategic elements. Integrated communication is nevertheless suitable as a concept for communication at universities based on this survey and can contribute to increasing the performance of communication.

### **Classification of the Survey and Outlook**

One of the limitations of the informative value of the survey is the unclear situation of how many participants per university actually took part, which in some cases can lead to falsification of the results. In addition, it was not necessary for the participants to answer all questions by the end of the questionnaire in order to submit the survey. There is a certain risk of falsification of the results, since the dropout rate of almost 46 percent during the evaluation is quite high. Limitations in the evaluability of the results naturally also result from the small number of participants in the survey. Overall, however, the

assessment remains that the study has provided usable results and starting points for the further studies.

### **Quantitative Content Analysis**

The best way to compare communication activities, i.e. part of the external communication, between universities and companies, is where as many target groups with heterogeneous interests as possible should be reached through self-presentation and as many components of the communication work as possible. For this reason, the websites of universities and companies should be considered to be parts of the quantitative content analysis.

Elementar Transparency and intersubjective traceability are fundamental for the implementation of the method, which is why it is essential to create a code book and to form complete and clear categories. The formation of the categories is based on the knowledge from the theoretical part (see Brosius 2016: 183). The code book was created for the method, using the core factors of integrated communication according to Bruhn.

### **Research Questions**

The question for this part of the empirical study is: "How do universities and companies differ when it comes to implementing communication in comparison to the external presentation on the websites?"

The essence of the study is therefore to investigate how universities and companies deal with the individual components of communication work and to address the differences and similarities that characterize the communication work of universities and companies.

### **The Code Book and the Formation of Categories**

To answer the research question, a code book was created that differentiates between formal and substantive criteria. In particular, the success and core factors for the integrated communication concept according to Bruhn serve as a common thread (see Bruhn 2015). In the context of inductive consideration of the research material and a first precoding, the code book has initially proven itself fundamentally.

## **The Population**

For the content analysis, the focus was on generating a sufficiently large number of data records that allow the data to be abstracted onto the population. The size of a company is particularly described by its sales volume. For this reason, companies throughout Germany that have the highest annual turnover and are therefore suitable for comparison were included in the study. The top 50 German companies with the highest sales were selected to be relevant.

In contrast, the size of universities in Germany is measured by the number of students. In order to ensure an equal distribution in the sense of the research question, 25 universities and 25 universities of applied sciences with the most students were taken into account and compared with the 50 German companies with the highest turnover. As there were no reliable statistics for the current year at the time of writing, the figures from 2018 were used for both companies and universities.

## **Answering the Research Question**

The quantitative content analysis was used to compare the operational communication work of universities and companies, by using fixed categories and in particular to detect and reflect the main differences.

The research question aims at the differences between companies and universities. These differences are so marginal when looking at the external image on the websites that they actually do not exist. At least that's what the analysis shows. From this perspective, there is only one final answer to the research question. There are no differences between universities and companies in the implementation of external communication, taking into account the websites. Statements on integrated communication could also be derived from the content analysis. Universities and companies rely on a uniform and contradictory external presentation in various stages, which are, however, implemented primarily from a visual point of view. Likewise, various communication tools are used, which are at least necessary for integrated communication in order to carry out a content, formal and time integration. From the strategic and organizational point of view, there is mostly a philosophy that should be taken into account for the integrated communication in the communication goals and the communication concept. From a purely structural point of view, there seems to be a need to catch up when it comes to anchoring communication in



management or university management. A communication manager, on the other hand, is partially available, just as it can be assumed that the centralization of communication in a communication department is present in many cases.

What is generally positive is that there are no relevant differences between companies and universities from this point of view, so that the concept of integrated communication that was originally developed for companies based on the analysis of the external image is also suitable for implementation for universities.

### **Limits**

The content analysis can provide an overview and general knowledge, but is only able to make very specific statements to a limited extent and focuses on a very limited object of analysis. In this case, based on the examination of the website, no fundamental statements can be made for the entire communication work. The study only allows conclusions to be drawn about a limited part of the communication work and is therefore vague on certain points. However, the informative value also only refers to a limited part of the population of all companies and universities, since the focus was particularly on the size of the objects under investigation. Small universities are just as little included in the analysis as small companies. The total number of companies in particular is significantly more diverse than this investigation could depict.

### **Expert Interview**

The expert interview is based on the research question: "Can the ideally described concept of integrated communication according to Bruhn be applied to universities?"

The empirical studies have so far shown a heterogeneous picture that cannot yet be finally assessed. Under these conditions, the scientific qualitative method of the guide-based expert interview seems to be a suitable way to further describe the research field.

The guideline for the guideline-based interview was deductively put together from the findings of the previous scientific studies and the theory. The intention is to make the guideline as open and flexible, but at the same time as structured as possible (see Helfferich 2011: 181).

A tested method for conducting guided interviews is the procedure described by Mayring (2002; 2010). However, no new field of research is to be opened up by exploratory knowledge, but concrete statements on integrated communication and the possibility of its implementation are made within the previously defined deductive categories, which classify the previously made knowledge. From this point of view, a deductive approach that makes categories based on theory seems reasonable.

In the deductive procedure, main categories were derived from the guide, which resulted from the theory used in the previous chapters. After a first review of the material and an assignment of the relevant text passages into the appropriate categories, a coding guide has emerged. The coding guide includes defined categories, anchor examples from the text and, if necessary, additional written coding rules (see Mayring 2010: 106).

### **Course of the Scientific Investigation**

The selected interview partners Kerstin Steglich (focus on corporate communication) and Claudius Rokosch (university communication) received the interview guide in advance. The interviews were conducted from April to May 2020. An interview lasted approximately 40 minutes on average. With the consent of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The approximately 99 percent agreement between the statements of the experts is to be understood as a saturation and thus as a termination criterion for the selection process of further experts (cf. Blöbaum et al. 2015: 8). In this specific case, the further search for experts was stopped because it cannot be assumed that additional relevant information can be generated by additional data collection (see Pickard 2007: 91).

### **Conclusion of the Expert Interviews**

At the center of the guided expert interviews was the question of whether the ideal-typical concept of integrated communication according to Bruhn, despite its original application for companies, can also be applied to universities. The result is the realization that integrated communication according to Bruhn can be applied in practice to universities. The evaluation of the expert interviews does not allow any other conclusion. However, this assessment is associated with restrictions and information that relate to the Bruhn concept and the difference between universities and companies.

In practice, some of the core and success factors according to Bruhn require a reinterpretation, interpretation and reorganization, especially in terms of prioritization. The communication concept, the terminology of the communication manager and in particular the importance of the dominance of mass communication and the use of a key instrument seem to have to be adapted to current circumstances. In contrast, the target groups and the coordination of content and the development of messages from philosophy and brand have clearly gained in importance. In addition, the university has to adapt to the requirements of integrated communication. These adjustments, in particular the streamlining of processes and the extensive freedom of action of those responsible for communication within fixed, predetermined limits require rethinking in many universities. However, the implementation seems conceivable from today's point of view. The implementation of integrated communication also seems to improve the chances of success of the universities in the opinion of the experts in the constantly growing competition.

### **Limits of the Investigation**

In addition to the previously mentioned limits and challenges of the guide-based expert interview, interviewing just two experts seems to be manageable. However, it becomes clear from the interviews and the evaluation that their answers to the key questions are very similar. According to the termination criteria set out above, terminating the expert search is therefore legitimate if it cannot be expected that further experts will provide new knowledge. The research question has been discussed sufficiently and has produced new and relevant findings within the empirical investigation.

### **Answering the research question**

The present work is entitled “Integrated communication for universities? A comparison with the integrated communication of companies”. This title contains a question to which the present empirical work should contribute. The central question was therefore:

*Based on the established concept of integrated communication for companies, how could a structured, theoretically based approach to integrated communication be designed for universities?*

A central finding for the relevance of this work results from both the scientific literature and the empirical investigation. The first part of the research question focuses on the concept. The theory has shown that the concept of integrated communication according

to Bruhn has shown the highest practical relevance and is therefore most suitable for investigation. Based on the years of research by Bruhn himself and the recurring review of the concept in studies, it can clearly be assumed that the concept also meets the requirement of establishment. In this sense, two points remain open regarding the central research question. On the one hand, there is the question of the extent to which integrated communication for companies is also used at universities and, on the other hand, what are the requirements for this. The comparison of universities and companies took place in a theoretical discussion and an empirical investigation. The theoretical investigation has shown that the internal structure of a university is different from the structure of a company. This affects both the goals and the staff. The quantitative content analysis has revealed that universities and companies do not, or hardly differ, in their external presentation. The informative value for the implementation of integrated communication at universities remains initially ambiguous due to the two findings. However, the survey conducted with communication professionals of universities showed that many universities already use elements of integrated communication for their communication. However, the survey with university staff clearly showed that there is a need for integrated communication. The lack of clarity of the findings ultimately made it necessary to provide a clear answer to the central research question using a third method. The experts' answers not only confirmed the findings derived from theory and the previous quantitative studies, but also classified and relativized them. On the one hand, the challenge for universities remains to change the internal structures in such a way that agile integrated communication is possible, the communication relates to the philosophy or the brand essence and remains consistent. On the other hand, many of the core and success factors of integrated communication in practice are far less serious than the theory initially suggests. This in no way questions the informative value of the empirical part, but only clarifies the difference between theory and practice. Finally, taking into account the central research question, the insight remains that integrated communication according to Bruhn is a suitable and established concept for universities if the concept is adapted in practice according to the recommendations of the experts. It therefore seems advisable for universities to take an even closer look at integrated communication, to change internal structures and to push ahead with implementation. From the point of view of the universities, as well as from the point of view of the experts, this is an excellent opportunity for self-presentation in the increasing competitive environment.

## **Outlook and Need for Research**

The studies on integrated communication for universities represent a new field of research that has not yet been analyzed more intensively. The present work is therefore a first attempt to map the research field and to gain initial knowledge. In particular, the steady development of the field and the new challenges posed by individual communication should in future focus even more on the scientific investigation. By considering this field of research for the first time, further connecting aspects are conceivable, which are primarily concerned with the implementation of integrated communication at universities, as well as a stronger focus on the internal processes and procedures of integrated communication at universities. The greatest challenge for implementing integrated communication is still assumed here.

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