Reconstruction of the internal and external intergroup relations of the University of Ruse through the establishment of a communication strategy

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Abstract: In the times of extraordinary dynamics of the communication environment and a necessity for affirmation of a balanced and sustainable image of organizations, interactions with an organization's audiences are of the utmost importance. The paper presents the Communication strategy of the University of Ruse as an innovative approach towards the modernization of university intergroup relations within the frames of a traditional organizational culture. The separate stages in the creation of the university Communication strategy are described, namely: on-desk exploration of communication practices of foreign universities; a PEST analysis of the external environment in relation to positioning of the University of Ruse in it; a SWOT analysis of the existing conditions and prerequisites for the communicative interaction between the University of Ruse and its audiences; identification of the target groups of the university's communication policy. An empirical study of the communication needs of young university lecturers was used as an additional instrument for the identification of the priorities, objectives and measures of the strategic document.

Keywords: communication policy, communication strategy, communication needs, PEST analysis, SWOT analysis.

Introduction

In the context of growing competition, massification and marketization of higher education in an international scope it is extraordinarily important to present the strengths of a higher education institution in order to impose its competitive advantages. Fragmented advertisements of a campaign character perform their functions to some extent but they do not provide a holistic view about the organization and its identity. Moreover, it doesn't reach all target groups, does not adequately involve the internal audiences and does not cover all organizational levels. For large organizations such as universities a different approach is needed as well as a comprehensive conception of the communication with the external and internal environment, i.e. there is a need for a communication strategy reflecting the organizational specificity and including priorities, goals and measures oriented to all levels of communication interactions – advertising, public relations and intra-organizational communication. Based on a detailed SWOT analysis, such a strategy would identify the priority actions and the adequate tools for achieving the communication impact, as well as all audiences which should be accessed.

The current paper presents the experience of the University of Ruse "Angel Kanchev" in the development of a communication strategy by exploring the overall communication policy of the university under the conditions of strong competitive pressure on the market of the educational services, a worsened demographic situation and a decreasing number of candidates for all HEIs in Bulgaria.

Theoretical aspects of the development of a communication strategy

The conception for positioning in the space is at the core of the communication strategy of an organization. It defines the main communication message of the organization that should reach the target audiences and remain in their minds.

Krutushkina distinguishes three main types of communication strategy – presentation, manipulation and convention [1], presented in the table below.

Table 1

Types of communication strategy

Type of strategy	Character	Objective	Main tool
Presentation	Passive	To present the communication space in the organization.	Message
Manipulation	Active	To provoke the addressee to perform a certain action and to offer him/her an interpretation of a particular situation.	Message
Convention	Interactive	On the basis of a negotiation with the addressee to produce such structure of the communication environment which would allow to reproduce a conventional communication process in the future and to oppose manipulative communication strategies.	Dialogue

A communication strategy is an important element of an organizational communication policy. It includes a marketing strategy or a strategy for brand construction, a creative strategy and a media strategy.

The marketing strategy is based on a deep analysis of the potential users, competitors and the product or service itself. This information is the core of the conception for brand positioning.

The creative strategy is connected with a brand creation, its constituents and the model of its perception. In other words, at this stage, the key creative idea is born and developed, which is expected to be attractive to the target audiences and to serve as a basis of a dialogue with them.

Within the frames of *the media strategy* a selection of communication channels and tools is realized in order to facilitate the access of the communication messages to the target audience. [2]

The communication strategy of the University of Ruse, which is an object of interpretation in the current work, considers the theoretical ideas mentioned above. In the preparatory phase of its development an **on desk study** was conducted exploring the existing communication strategies of foreign universities, namely: University of Oxford, UK – Writing a communication strategy; Oxford blue. Visual identity guidelines [3]; University of Manchester, UK – Communications and Marketing Plan 2015-2018 [4]; University of Cincinnati, USA – Strategic Communication Plan, 2013 [5]; Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA – University Communications Strategic Plan [6]; South Dakota State University, USA - Impact 2018. A Strategic Vision for South Dakota State University. University Marketing and Communications [7]; University of Gothenburg, Sweden –

Communication Strategy for the University of Gothenburg [8]; Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia – Communications and Marketing Strategy of Tallinn University of Technology [9].

On the basis of this study an algorithm for the development of a communication strategy was identified, as follows:

1. Development of an introductory part of the strategy providing information about the organization's activities, its mission, functions and the environment in which it operates. In order to form the structure of this part of the strategy, it is necessary to know the strengths and weaknesses in the previous communication activity of the organization as well as the characteristics of the external environment, i.e. at this stage the information from a PEST and a SWOT analysis is used. Another useful tool at this stage in the development of the strategy is the analysis of the competitors according to certain criteria.

2. Formulation of a leading communication message which justifies the purpose of the strategic document – why the strategy is being created and what we want to achieve with it.

3. Achieving consistency between the goals of the organization and the objectives of the strategy. The latter should be formulated in such a way that their contribution to the organizational vision and goals is clear. The objectives of the communication strategy should be based on the SMART formula – specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely.

4. Identification of the target audiences of the strategy (external and internal).

5. Transformation of the organizational goals and values into messages to the target audiences. The key communication message should be consistent with the communication needs of the respective target audience.

6. Choice of a communication channel and communication tool. They should be differentiated and individualized with regards to the target audiences for whom the communication messages are intended.

7. Development of a communication plan and schedule with respective activities, budget and necessary resources.

8. Monitoring and evaluation of the efficiency of the communication strategy. Some communication risks as well as a plan to deal with them should be identified at this stage. [10]

Steps and empirical studies in the development of the Communication Strategy of the University of Ruse

In accordance with the presented above algorithm for the development of a communication strategy, a PEST analysis of the factors influencing the positioning of the University of Ruse in the external environment and a SWOT analysis of the communication policy of the university in the last 5 years were carried out.

The PEST analysis indicated the following results:
Political factors

1. Recent national policy of reforms in the higher education system which changes the way of financing of the state universities and causes concern and tension in their work.

2. Strong regional political and public support for the University of Ruse as a driver for the development of the city and the regions that it serves – Ruse, Razgrad, Silistra, Vidin (branches of the University of Ruse in the latter three cities and regions).

3. Policy of the European Commission for the development of the Danube macro-region (Danube strategy – EUSDR), which outlines the aspiration of the University of Ruse

for leadership in the Danube area. (The University of Ruse is the only Bulgarian university – member of the biggest association of the Danube universities - Danube Rectors Conference).

4. Successful programme for cross-border cooperation Romania-Bulgaria /INTERREG V-A/ in which the University of Ruse performs a leading role as project coordinator or partner in cooperation with Romanian universities.

Economic factors

1. Insufficient percent of GDP earmarked by the state for the development of higher education and science.
2. Unfavourable economic situation in the city and the region which resulted in a reduced supply of jobs for qualified alumni of the University of Ruse and lower labour remuneration compared to the capital and economically more developed regions in Bulgaria.
3. Necessity for increased activity and entrepreneurship of the academic staff of the University of Ruse for attracting additional funds and project financing.

Social factors

1. Heavy demographic crisis in the country causing a decrease in the number of applicants for the Bulgarian HEIs.
2. Unfavourable economic development of the city and the region leading to poverty, high share of the unemployed among the graduates and a steady trend of migration of the young people to the capital and more developed regions.
3. A steady trend among secondary school graduates for continuing their education abroad.

Technological factors

1. Fast technological development in all spheres of the public life which provokes the growth of innovations in the area of higher education and research.
2. Strong position of the University of Ruse in the development of the technological base, information resources and application of innovative educational technologies in the study process.

The SWOT analysis of the communication policy of the University of Ruse in the last 5 years indicated the following results:

Strengths

1. Strong presence of the university in the media space of the city and the regions which it serves.
2. Great event activity of the university making it a preferred object of media publications.
3. Continuous efforts of the university to inform its external and internal audiences about all facts and events from the university life.
4. Usage of different channels and tools for communication with the external and internal audiences of the university – official and local university web site, specialized sites (of the Career centre, of Erasmus programme, of the Centre for PhD students, of the Department for the development of the academic staff and others), monitor information system, newspaper of the university, press-conferences for the media and others.
5. Usage of contemporary tools for communication with the external audiences – Information portal for business partners, Online survey site, Alumni network site and others.
6. Accessible information resources about the normative documents of the university, internal quality assurance system, decisions of the Academic Council and others.

Weaknesses
1. Insufficient usage of print and electronic advertisements.
2. Insufficient number of publications about the university in the national media space.

Opportunities
1. Increasing the share of the digital content in order to satisfy the needs of the digital generations.
2. Increasing the communication with the representatives of the national and international academic community through creation of more electronic journals and network links.
3. Intensive communication with the representatives of the students' community and the candidates for the university in the social media.
4. Media presence of the University of Ruse abroad – in the cross-border region and Danube area.

Threats
1. Media presence of the University of Ruse only within the framework of the region because of continuous centralization.

As a result of the analyses above a **leading communication message** was formulated, justifying the main objective of the Communication Strategy and summarizing the strengths through which the university imposes its uniqueness and its influential presence in the national and international educational and research space:

The University of Ruse is an influential higher education institution with strong positions and prestige at a national and an international level, a driver for the development and prosperity of its regions in the country, a leader in the cross-border Bulgarian-Romanian region, a reliable partner in the Danube space, Europe and the world.

The University of Ruse successfully performs its mission and socially responsible functions and works in dialogue and cooperation with its external and internal audiences, defending tolerance, transparency, objectivity and active communication as values and guiding principles in its communication policy.

The next stage in the development of the Communication Strategy of the University of Ruse is the identification of **its target audiences**, which include: graduates from secondary schools - potential applicants for the university, principals and teachers from secondary schools, parents of the potential candidates, firms and institutions - potential employers of the university graduates, other universities and research institutes, alumni of the university, national and international partners of the University of Ruse, citizens of the city and the region, internal audiences of the university – students, lecturers, administrative staff.

In order to identify the **communication needs** of the internal audiences of the university, a survey was carried out in 2016 among 28 recently employed assistant professors and young lecturers within the frames of the traditional school "Young lecturer of the University of Ruse". In the selection of this target group were considered the following motives:
- The young lecturers are in the process of adaptation to the organizational culture of the university, to its guiding principles and values and need more information to understand and join effectively to the new academic environment.
- The young lecturers should "take the relay" from their more experienced colleagues, they should be active participants in the knowledge management, part of which is the information about the higher education institution and its functioning.
- The young lecturers are closer to the students and can communicate the key messages of the university.

- If it is necessary, the young lecturers can be "the agents of change" and can contribute to the changes in the communication policy of the university.

On the basis of the dominating answers to the questions from the questionnaire the following communication needs of the young lecturers from the University of Ruse were identified:

Table 2

Communication needs of the young lecturers from the University of Ruse

№	Identified communication need	% of the respondents
1	Awareness about different institutional rules and regulations	67,9
2	Awareness about different documents, connected with the higher education system in the country	53,6
3	Understanding and application of professional principles and responsibilities on the levels of the department, faculty and university	50,0
4	Awareness about the internal quality assurance system of the university	50,0
5	Development of a capacity for management and evaluation of syllabi, study activities and materials	42,9
6	Development of a capacity for control, auditing and participation in procedures for quality assurance	39,3
7	Understanding the trends in the higher education and its potential application in the educational system	35,7
8	Awareness about the researchers' rights in an international scope	35,7
9	Understanding the context of the national and international research	35,7
10	Knowledge about the development and progress in the higher education system	32,1
11	Awareness about different practices for quality assurance on institutional level	25,0
12	Understanding and application of the rules of behavior in the university	17,9

As can be seen from the percent of the dominating opinions, the young people at the beginning of their academic career have firstly a strong need of information for orientation in the institutional environment and in the acting internal rules and procedures. Another priority in their communication needs is the awareness about the normative base of the higher education system on national level. Next, half of the respondents underline the need for information about the professional principles they have to follow as well as for their responsibilities. Also, 50 % of the respondents are interested in the institutionalized system for quality assurance in higher education.

With its information resources for open access in the official and local web sites, the University of Ruse is able to satisfy the communication needs indicated above. More attention should be paid to the need for understanding and application of the professional principles on different institutional levels. Here the university departments have to take the responsibility to familiarize the young people with their rights and obligations. A good practice in this relation

is the scientific seminar at the department and also the mentorship of scientific supervisors. It is clear that there is a necessity of specific actions on university and faculty levels and they are planned in the Communication Strategy.

The results and the empirical data, indicated above, present a solid preliminary basis for the Communication Strategy of the University of Ruse. In accordance with them the Strategy includes the following strategic objectives:

1. Popularization of the sustainable positioning of the University of Ruse as the only state university on the territory of the districts Ruse, Razgrad, Silistra and Vidin and also the biggest multi-profile university in the cross-border region along the Danube river.
2. Popularization of the leading positions of the University of Ruse in the Danube space and its role for the implementation of the European strategy for the Danube macro-region through participation of the university in flagship projects.
3. Imposing the active international activity of the university as well as the established network of international partnerships.
4. Imposing the great number of professional fields, bachelor, master and PhD programs offered by the University of Ruse in reply of the needs of the users and the requirements of the labour market.
5. Imposing the advantages of the qualified academic staff of the university covering a broad spectrum of research areas.
6. Imposing the active cooperation with university business partners from the region and the country.
7. Popularization of the importance of the University of Ruse for the development of its regions and its role as a driver of their economic prosperity.
8. Popularization of the significance of the University of Ruse as cultural center and disseminator of spiritual values in the city and the region
9. Popularization of the active students' life and the variety of students' clubs.
10. Popularization of the excellent material, technological and information resources of the university, making it an attractive place for education and research.

In its entire format the Communication Strategy of the University of Ruse includes an introductory part and 10 sections corresponding to the above-mentioned strategic objectives expanded with specific objectives and action plans. The document was approved by the Academic Council of the University of Ruse and envisages the period until the end of 2019 when the current rector's mandate expires. An overall assessment of the university's communication policy will then be carried out and if an update of the strategy is needed, it will be realized.

So far, the implementation of the Communication Strategy indicates very positive results, as follows:

- Better popularization of the activity of the University of Ruse and increase of its influence and prestige. This is largely due to the more diverse communication messages to university's external audiences, e.g. 9 promotional spots created in 2016 and a presentational video about the university created in 2017. https://www.uni-ruse.bg/education/Pages/from-first-person.aspx.
- More active media reflection of the activity of the University of Ruse. For example, in comparison with 2015, in 2016 and 2017 the number of media publication was increased as a result of the published press-releases about university events.

Table 3

Media reflection of the University of Ruse

Year	Press-releases	Press-conferences	Public events	Publications	Ratio-regional/national
2015	189	12	86	1756	1461/ 295
2016	218	25	93	2551	2240/ 311
2017	209	19	116	2834	2367/ 467

- Usage of a large variety of communication channels: official and local university sites; university information systems; events and groups in the social networks; print and electronic editions of the university and others.
- Usage of digital technologies as a basic form of communication with the external and internal audiences of the university – online students' admission, online surveying, information portals for communication with different target groups and others.
- Undertaken actions towards the development of a Strategy for international branding of the University of Ruse which will be an integral part of the Communication Strategy and will enrich it.

Conclusion

The development of the Communication Strategy of the University of Ruse is the first step in the efforts for improvement of its communication policy in benefit of the university's external and internal audiences. The implementation of this strategy contributes to the better positioning of the university in the external environment, more intensive contacts with its external audiences as well as to consolidating the university's internal audiences around the values of its organizational culture.

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