

Chapter 13

COMMUNICATION FUNCTION: INTEGRATED MULTI-CHANNEL COMMUNICATION (IMC)

13.1 EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Having many targets and methods, the Altrad Group uses many ways of communicating with the outside world through:

- the products and services, according to their technical characteristics and objectives;
- trademarks – particularly the Altrad brand – according to their personalities and their images;
- the companies, through their performance (economic, technical, social, etc.);
- the institution, i.e. the identity, culture and values of Altrad.

Everything “communicates” so Altrad communication is both commercial, to build awareness and to appreciate and consume Altrad products and brands, and corporate (institutional), to build a positive image of its companies – their skills and know-how, their focus on quality and service – and the Group itself – its performance, its identity and its culture.

The main methods of corporate communications are presidential speeches, press releases, economic and financial communication (financial statements, letters to shareholders, annual reports, the website and all actions aimed at

promoting the company with institutional investors, analysts, the press, etc.), sponsorship and patronage, not forgetting institutional lobbying, indoor and outdoor signage on sites and premises or even advertising in major media, highlighting not just a product or a brand but the Group itself and/or its entire range.

This double commercial/corporate dimension also applies to two distinct types of target: firstly, professional partners (the galaxy of suppliers, consumers, dealers and construction industry professionals), and, secondly, financial and banking partners, credit guarantee and warranty companies and shareholders involved in the external growth that is part of the Altrad strategy.

From a commercial point of view, the fact that, from the outset, its products were sold directly to professionals quickly prompted the Group to turn away from the usual policy of attraction (pull strategy*) that is the cornerstone of major advertising media (press, television, radio, display, cinema), towards multi-channel communications and focusing on non-media communications – particularly trade shows and fairs, sales promotions, directories, direct marketing and, of course, all the material aids for the sales force, the spearhead of Altrad. At the time, these types of communications accounted for about two thirds of the cost of communications of advertisers in France (source: France Pub).

The weight attached to finance in the development of the Altrad Group explains and justifies the importance attached to economic and financial information transmitted through a variety of periodic or permanent methods of communication:

- the annual report, a key document for financial communications, published in French and English, presents the range of activities worldwide – trades, internal organization and the transverse Group services – and manifests their importance, through figures from the annual consolidated accounts whose accuracy and sincerity are guaranteed by the auditors;

- an annually updated Strategic Memorandum;
- a film for institutions;
- customized information sent regularly to various banking and financial partners;
- regularly published communiqués in the national and international press, giving the evolution of the activity and results as well as growth opportunities and important events;
- the briefing, at the close of the executive seminar held at the end of each calendar year, to which the Group invites its partners and major figures in its economic and financial environment. This is centred on a corporate film followed by a speech by the President on the performance and the projects of the Group and an open dialogue with the audience;
- articles and essays on management written by the Group or its President destined for internal and external audiences, including *Stratégie de groupe* (“Group strategy” – Chotard, 1989), and *Écouter, Harmoniser, Diriger. Un certain art du management* (“Listen, Harmonize, Lead. A certain art of management” – Les Presses du Management, 1992) or *L’Échelle des valeurs* (“The Scale of Values” – Actes Sud, 2006, translated into six languages), which present the Charter of the Group, its managerial philosophy and its ethics;
- finally, the website, www.altrad.com, online for several years and regularly updated in eight languages (French, English, German, Dutch, Polish, Spanish, Italian and Chinese).

The external communication of the Altrad Group is based primarily on a privileged partnership with the Montpellier Hérault Rugby Club (MHR; www.montpellier-rugby.com). Mohed Altrad became the majority shareholder in May 2011.

The values of rugby (team spirit, courage, fighting spirit, solidarity even in failure, conviviality, etc.) are similar to those

of the Altrad Group. The performances of the club, both at national level (French runner-up in 2011, quarter-finalists of the Top 14 in 2012 and 2013) and in Europe (regular presence in European cups), are a great showcase for the Altrad Group. The presence of Mohed Altrad, as President of MHR, in the specialist press (Midi Olympique in France) is also important.

This partnership considerably increases the recognition of the Group and its trademark in France and in Europe.



13.2 INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

In relation to a company, the term “internal communications” has several meanings. It refers to interpersonal relations between members of the same organization and also to the various means of transmission of information and instructions about work to empower employees and give them the desire to work well. Communication primarily ensures the daily functioning of the company, but its objectives are being expanded with the emergence of participatory management: it must satisfy employees and make sure that they enjoy their work, feel integrated, are aware of their importance and enjoy working together in the general interest. To federate employees around shared values is a real managerial challenge: “A company must develop an annual plan which aims to relay its strategy, encourage the adherence of its employees, create links and develop a common

culture”.¹ According to IBM’s philosophy, a satisfied employee results in a satisfied customer.

According to many authors, internal communication promotes understanding of everyone’s objectives, the circulation of information and the cohesion of the whole of the personnel, who are thus incorporated into a common culture. By responding to the gap that inevitably widens between the men and the structures within an enterprise – a gap that is particularly sensitive in the case of a rapidly-developing multinational Group based in over 30 countries worldwide – internal communication is an essential part of the IMC*.

In companies, communication is a highly present theme: “Communication is very often seen both as the cause of all troubles and as the remedy likely to provide a solution to any problem; it has become common (and convenient) to define all organizational dysfunctions as ‘communication problems’”.²

Thus, good communication is complex: “Nothing seems more necessary and more prevalent than to communicate in order to work, and yet communication remains a difficult process which has only partial success”.³ Internal business communication is therefore the subject of recurrent criticism: companies suffer from a lack of (or poor) communication, unfounded rumours, etc. Two-thirds of executives say that they do not know the company’s strategy and are thus ill-informed as co-workers.

1. Jean-Marc Décaudin, Jacques Igalens et Stéphane Waller, *La Communication interne*, Dunod, 2013.

2. Philippe Cabin et Jean-François Dortier, *La Communication. État des savoirs*, Éditions Sciences humaines, 2008.

3. Michèle Lacoste, “Peut-on travailler sans communiquer”, in Anni Borzeix et Béatrice Frankael, *Langage et Travail*, CNRS, 2001.

13.2.1 Definition and stakes of internal communications

Internal communications has several meanings: “Communication most often involves two distinct aims: to convey content and to define the relationship between the parties”.¹ It responds to a functional need for information so that work can be done in the best possible conditions.

It also meets a social need by creating relationships, links between individuals. These two issues are obviously interrelated: indeed, “an act of communication is a complex, dynamic system that produces meaning and carries issues for the participants: it has multiple purposes of which the transfer of information is only one aspect. Because to communicate is also to define a relationship, assert one’s identity, negotiate one’s place, influence the recipient and share feelings, values and, more broadly, meanings”.² Within a company, communication creates a dialogue that creates transparency and develops trust.

It has become more complex with time and the evolution of management: it no longer consists only of transmitting information from the hierarchy to the employees, but also of motivating and encouraging the members of the organization to become fully involved.

Communication starts by listening; indeed, displaying a willingness to communicate well is equivalent to conveying to other people that they are listened to and heard. Through listening, a connection is established and messages pass more effectively.

Companies often have structures responsible for internal communications: the HR Department, Communications Department or directly through General Management.

Altrad does not have a Communications Department: it is the job of the General Management, but, like change, it is also

1. Edmond Marc et Dominique Picard, *L'École de Palo Alto*, Retz, 1984.

2. Edmond Marc et Dominique Picard, *Relations et Communications interpersonnelles*, Dunod, 2008.

at the initiative of all. This is a valuable aspect, but has the risk of a loss of overall consistency.

The role of the holding company is therefore fundamental; internal communications is, in fact, a generic term that covers very many domains (information from employees about the strategy of the company, the transmission of operational information, etc.).

Each type of communication must therefore be the subject of specific tactics while maintaining the coherence of the whole; methods of communication must be adapted to the nature of the communication and the target population. Communication must be ascending, transverse and participatory according to its subject; this creates great complexity in implementation and coherence.

Internal communications are not disconnected from the external communication to stakeholders outside the company: clients, bankers, investors, institutions, the press, lobbies, recruitment, etc. The two types of communication must be consistent with each other.

The functions of internal communication are to:

- transmit the information necessary for work;
- keep employees informed of economic, financial and social objectives as well as production objectives;
- accompany the business plan by sharing the values and ethics of the Group; to bring people together around shared values;
- create understanding of the vision and strategy of the Group in the employees who will be its actors; to explain the business plan;
- motivate by giving meaning to what is asked of employees;
- create conditions for a climate of trust to obtain feedback and thus understand the general atmosphere and the problems and expectations of everyone;
- reduce or deflect resistance in times of crisis (restructuring, consolidation, rationalization, modernization, etc.);

- avoid the insidious rumours that often arise from the fear of the unknown.

Therefore, communication is about both information and relationships. It is built on the history of the Group to strengthen the feeling of belonging and it centres on symbols, codes and rituals to create a company culture. Communication is formed around a need for identity – even unionized workers, opposed in principle to the management, can be proud of the logo and the slogans of their company.

A company is a network of competences. Communication begins by listening, and then it consists of producing information, distributing it, driving it, advising, planning and coordinating by creating social ties.

Communication reflects the objectives and ambitions of the Group; it allows a dialogue to be constructed in order to improve the understanding of employees and the interaction with them. It must be regular, frequent and accessible at all times.

Different channels can be used:

- written means (company newspaper, notes, press reviews, brochures, etc.);
- oral means (meetings, workshops, seminars, interviews, videos, etc.);
- new technologies (website, Altrad TV).

Direct communication promotes the individualization of the message and familiarity (appointments, email, face-to-face) while event-based communication addresses mass audiences (website, email, seminars).

It is important to keep in mind that people generally retain 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they see and hear at the same time, 80% of what they say and 90% of what they say when they

are involved; this justifies the importance of good listening and reformulation.

Participation is fundamental. This makes communication flows more complex because they are not only descendant, but should, wherever possible, be horizontal and ascendant. Communication is a central element of participatory management that promotes sharing with fellow workers to promote adhesion and motivation and also to develop information and dialogue to increase efficiency.

13.2.2 Communication problems and solutions

As the word “communication” can have multiple meanings, every, or almost every, member of an organization has his own definition of a problem related to it. If communication is lacking, the consequences can be serious:

- Information necessary for work is not available and the company may lose customers or competitive advantages.
- An informal system of communication is created conveying often harmful rumours; social networks can participate widely in their diffusion.
- Relationships within the company are of poor quality, causing stress incompatible with the necessary pursuit of productivity.
- Confidence is lost, etc.

In general, the meaning given to the term “communication problem” varies depending on the position of the employee within the company. Schematically, for workers, a communications problem will generally be relational in nature, whereas for managers and senior management it will be informational.

In fact, in using this term, workers complain about recognition and relationship with authority. This is a product of

history: to be a blue-collar worker equates to a way of life in which it would be unnatural to communicate with superiors. There is often a societal distance between the worker and his superiors, meaning that exchanges are few. The worker feels a lack of consideration about his work and thinks that even if he expressed ideas, he would not be heard. There is often a lack of confidence (as described previously), workers suspecting the management of bad intentions. Their need for recognition of their existence and their worth is often not satisfied; they feel a lack of consideration for their professional skills and see themselves as the bad elements of the business.

A lack of sense of belonging to the Group may therefore emerge. The solution is first to restore the relationship and the human dimension of work. Respect the status of all workers contributing to wealth creation and let this be known. Multiply contacts and give a voice to those who don't often have one. As such, the light hierarchical structure of the Altrad Group is again an asset, horizontal and upward communication is easier. The values of the Group also introduce a respect for the word of all and the recognition of experience-based knowledge.

The higher one is in the hierarchy, the less the relational dimension seems to be a problem; a high position is inherently a mark of recognition. Communication problems become problems of information. Failures may concern:

- the transmission medium: the means used to convey information is not suitable;
- incomplete feedback because people do not dare to take initiatives;
- a lack of information;
- an overabundance of information: too many meetings for example, and not enough time to get involved in a relationship with subordinates; a dissemination of non-priority or confidential information; a problem of access or encoding;

- an action not in accordance with the transmitted instructions, etc.

Executives must properly filter, prioritize and retransmit the information they receive. A communication problem can sometimes be likened to an overload of work; this error becomes a fault when the executive retains information, thinking to increase his power.

13.2.3 Direct internal communication

Listening is essential to effective internal communication, because the speaker feels recognized and confidence develops. Listening is a critical managerial capacity for mobilizing collective energy. It also makes it possible to do the following:

- to get the kind of bottom-up information that is so important in decision-making and in the development of Group strategy and vision. Listening leads to better decisions; the manager becomes more judicious by understanding context and expectations; this allows him to take appropriate decisions;
- to develop participative management and mobilize all talents;
- to generate adhesion, because individuals know that their comments have been heard and see their ideas put into action. They derive a well-deserved pride from this and have more self-confidence;
- to establish the trust that is essential for effective communication;
- to put the principle of exemplarity into practice;
- to know and recognize people in order to coordinate the contributions of all personnel; knowing people allows individualized management adapted to every individual, while recognition is a sign of respect;
- to stimulate reflection and progress in people who are listened to;

- to promote self-analysis and change through an open attitude, etc.

Listening can be passive, in a situation of dependence of the listener on the speaker, or it can be active. Active listening is the sustained attention to the word and thought of others: it is a positive situation of interdependence. It is achieved by empathy, and it sends non-verbal signals of hesitation, doubt or approval.

Active listening must therefore be developed according to a few simple principles:

- Question the purpose of listening: discover the cause of dissatisfaction, collect information on a topic, show interest, etc.
- Understand the other person's point of view without trying to modify or change his personality.
- Be aware of the behaviour, words and phrases that put the other person on the defensive; know his prejudices. Tend towards using affirmative rather than negative forms: the brain does not register negation, so if one says, for example, "It's not serious", the listener only unconsciously retains "serious" and may lose confidence.
- Be attentive to emotions.

Other practical tips are as follows:

- Prepare in advance.
- Look the person in the eye.
- Don't talk too much.
- Practise empathy.
- Do not interrupt or anticipate the thought of the other person.
- Concentrate.
- Take notes.
- Reformulate systematically what the other person said or ask him to rephrase what he has understood from what was said.

- Ask questions if in doubt or not understanding.
- Listen to the ideas and not just the words; go beyond the meaning of the words.
- Show interest.
- Do not let personal worries interfere.
- React to the ideas and not the personality of others.
- Never conclude hastily.

13.2.4 Indirect internal communication

The Altrad Group has not waited until this stage of its expansion to understand that internal communications meet a real need for information for the members of its staff (information whose lack could result in a series of perverse effects: demotivation, staff rotation, negative rumours, strikes, etc.). In addition, far from the mind-set of some entrepreneurs who see internal communication only as a source of expenditure without immediate benefit, the Altrad Group has always considered it a real investment for the future and a privileged means to build its own culture. And it has therefore, quite naturally, developed over time, a wide range of tools for this purpose.

Means of communication	Frequency
Written documents (paper) Budgetary control by profit and cost centre Report of activity Strategic memorandum Press pack about the Group	Monthly (abroad), bi-monthly (in France), quarterly or every four months, according to the company
Written documents (on the Internet) — emails — website — Intranet	Permanent

Means of communication	Frequency
Meetings — management meetings — seminar	Every four months Annual
Altrad TV	Permanent Supplied for preference in the prolongation of the seminars

Two internal targets need to be distinguished: operational staff (blue-collar workers and salaried staff) and those responsible for sites and subsidiaries (managers, executives, supervisors, foremen). With regard to the first, internal communication is largely delegated to company heads, all of whom – of course with the assistance and under the control of the Group’s Human Relations Department – enjoy a degree of autonomy to participate in the dissemination of the Altrad spirit and culture to their staff by any appropriate means. Thus, while certain documents from the General Management – like notes or the Altrad magazine that is in preparation – are broadcast to all staff in the Group, others are communicated solely to company heads who then take the initiative to relay them to their staff or not.

Altrad TV (web TV in French and in English) is the latest communication tool created by the Altrad Group in 2014. It is like the Group itself: modern, progressive and reactive. It makes subsidiaries and staff feel valuable.

Everyone must be able to consult the Altrad heritage. As such, Altrad TV offers:

- films offering portraits and points of view;
- films about countries and publicity films;
- photos from all the seminars since 2007;
- links to the websites.

ALTRAD TV

Accueil | La presse en parle | Films groupe | Portails | Vie des filiales | Séminaires

Accès réservé | Login

JW Player

Construire notre vie

Interviews de PDG

Films groupe

Ceux qui font Altrad

Vie des filiales

Altrad vu par...

Altrad par Altrad

Visiter le site Groupe

Building is our life

ALTRAD TV

La presse en parle
- France 24
- Presse généraliste
- Groupes Altrad
- Météo

Films groupe
- Film 2013
- Notre organisation
- Notre histoire
- Notre business
- Nos réalisations
- Film groupe

Portails
- Ceux qui font Altrad
- Altrad vu par...
- Vie des filiales
- Films partenaires
- Altrad par Altrad
- Film play
- P&A

Séminaires
- 2012
- 2013
- 2014
- 2015
- 2016
- 2017

LOG IN

Accès réservé

Each subsidiary, from the company head to line managers, must be able to share and exchange with colleagues the culture and heritage of Altrad based around the themes of the December seminar.

Thus, Altrad TV is a powerful tool for spreading the culture of the Altrad Group and its multiculturalism.