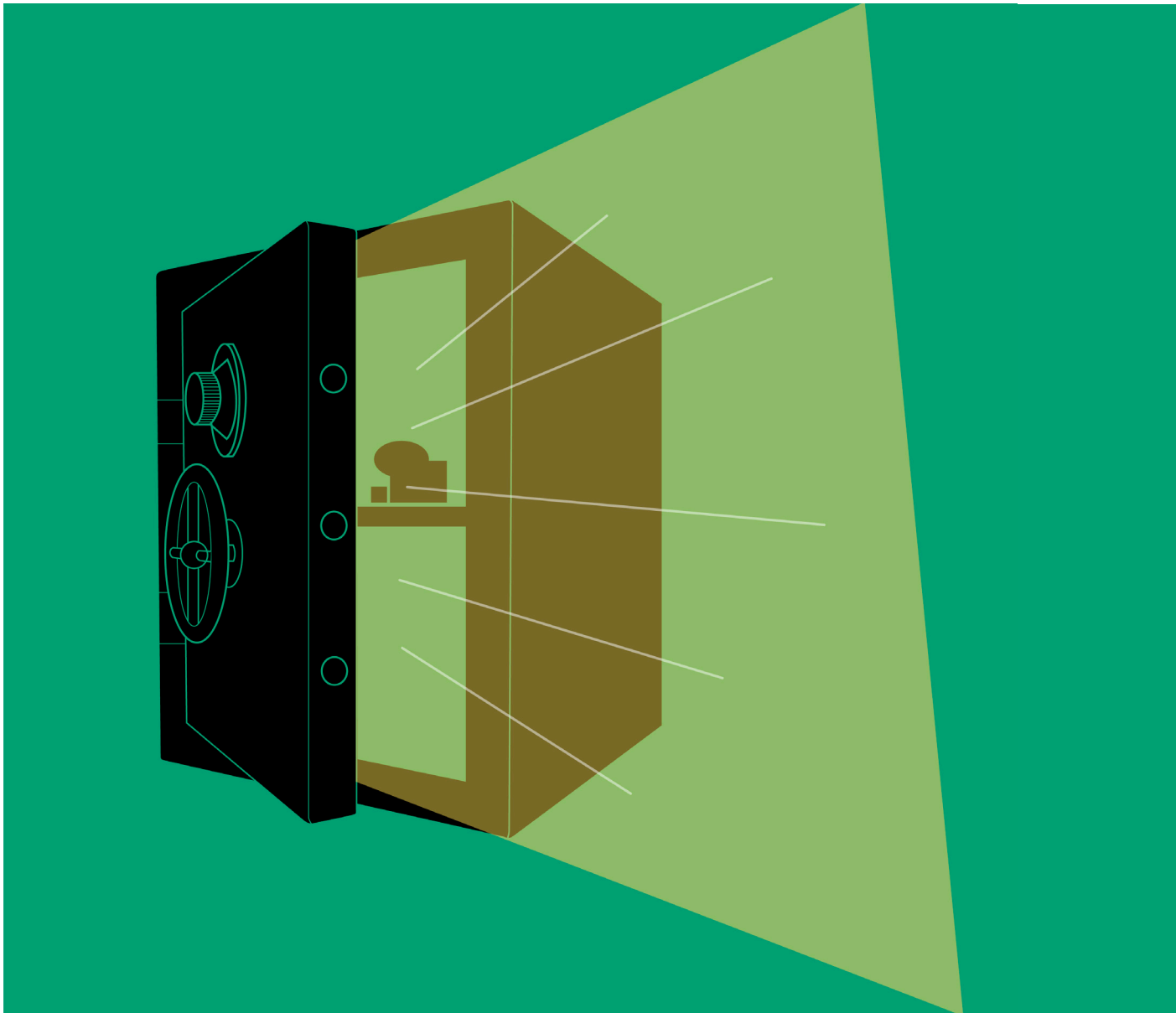


COMMUNICATIVE ASSETS

The European Communication Monitor 2013 discloses the importance of CEO positioning and international communication, the new gatekeepers on the social web, and how communicators are equipped to deal with them.

By Dejan Verčič, Ángeles Moreno and Ansgar Zerfass



Effective communication is essential for organisational success. The communicative assets and reputations of chief executive officers and other top leaders are important for organisations managing relations with internal and external stakeholders. With social media gaining power, employees, followed by customers, bloggers and online community managers become the most important digital gatekeepers. These are just some findings of the seventh consecutive annual survey of public relations professionals in Europe: the 2013 European Communication Monitor.

Eight out of 10 practitioners working in communication departments communicate internationally on a regular basis. More than half of them with more than five countries, and nearly a quarter with more than 20 countries. Professional communication is becoming international in its essence.

But there is a schism in the communication profession in Europe paralleling divisions in the broader economic and political environment. While practitioners in northern Europe report increasing influence and status with good prospects for their development, their counterparts in southern Europe are clearly lagging behind.

THE SURVEY The European Communication Monitor is a longitudinal transnational survey in strategic communication. It is the most comprehensive study in the field and has been conducted annually since 2007. Responses were received from 2,710 professional communicators in 43 European countries. The study

is conducted by a core group of five university professors, led by Professor Ansgar Zerfass from the University of Leipzig in Germany, and supported by a wider professional advisory board totalling 11 renowned universities across Europe. It is organised by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EU-PRERA), the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD), Communication Director magazine, and supported by Ketchum, Europe's leading public relations agency.

Respondents are based in western Europe (35.3 per cent, countries like e.g. Germany, Netherlands, France), northern Europe (26.2 per cent, countries like Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom), southern Europe (24.5 per cent, countries like Italy, Spain, Croatia), and eastern Europe (14.1 per cent, countries like Poland, Czech Republic, Romania). The average age of respondents is 41 years. There were more female than male respondents (58 to 42 per cent), more than half (58.3 per cent) work in communication for more than 10 years and a further quarter (25.5 per cent) between six to 10 years. 43.2 per cent are heads of communication in their organisations or agency chief executives, and a further 28.4 per cent are responsible for single communication discipline or are unit leaders.

CEO'S COMMUNICATIVE ASSETS Successful organisational leaders need to be good communicators: according to the study, they must be able to deal with the media and large audiences, they must have interpersonal and small group communication skills, they must have positive personal reputation and – to a lesser extent – knowledge of

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strategic communication. The reputation of the chief executive officer is a capital that must be properly managed. The majority of professional communicators pursue programmes to position their chief executive officer and other executives, develop specific communication strategies and instruments for them. All of that is stronger in business than in government and non-profit organisations.

There is also a remarkable difference among the practice in various European countries. CEO positioning is most commonly found in the United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic and Denmark, whereas it is less relevant in Belgium, Portugal, Italy, Serbia and Croatia.



Obviously the awareness or appraisal of leadership and leaders in different cultures has to be taken into account.

Among the dimensions at the centre of the positioning and communication strategy for the chief executive officer are their functional competencies, followed by ethical and cognitive competencies; only a minority stresses personal aspects like behaving appropriately and being smart (see figure I). However, nearly half of the organisations in Europe have not established routines for monitoring the chief executive officer's reputation. This is a challenging topic. Taking into account that negative messages have a stronger impact than positive messages, and that a successful positioning strategy has to be based on knowing about stakeholders' perceptions and expectations, talking without listening about the chief executive officer is not enough.

“Social media is not just another communication tool... discourses on the social web influence perceptions of organisations and constructions of reality.”

DIGITAL GATEKEEPERS Social media is not just another communication tool. More fundamentally, discourses on the social web influence perceptions of organisations and constructions of reality. Almost three quarters (72.5 per cent) of the surveyed professionals state that social media content changes the perceptions of external stakeholders about the organisation, and 57 per cent perceive this to be true for employees. Employees who are active on social media are perceived as being the most important gatekeepers, followed by consumers who raise their voice on social media, and bloggers and online community managers (see figure II).

At the same time, only 37.7 per cent of the European communication professionals confirm that their organisations have developed adequate strategies and instruments to deal with new gatekeepers on the social web, while the practitioners themselves display rather moderate capabilities when it comes to their skills and knowledge of social media in a professional context. Respondents feel more competent in messaging on the social web, social media strategy development or knowledge about social media trends. Competencies for more advanced aspects like knowing the legal framework for social media and initiating web-based dialogues with stakeholders are rated below average. An interesting approach which seems to gain in relevance are communication strategies for different

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Survey highlights

- ➔ There is strong agreement on the importance of communicative assets of top executives; yet only every second organisation in Europe has established monitoring routines to evaluate reputation of its highest representatives.
- ➔ Social media influence perception of organisations, with employees, consumers, bloggers and online community managers being the most relevant gatekeepers.
- ➔ Communication practitioners display rather moderate capabilities when it comes to their skills and knowledge of social media in a professional context.
- ➔ Digital natives (those under 30 years of age) are perceived to be more interactive, more involved in communication and demanding more feedback than people over 30.
- ➔ Communication professionals are 'intercultural interpreters': of respondents who have an international outreach at work, the majority do so with more than five countries and nearly a quarter with over 20 countries.
- ➔ Empirical results prove that effective crisis communication involves a range of situational strategies and instruments.
- ➔ Differences in influences and status of communication professionals are very strong across Europe: they are developing positively in Norway, Denmark and Germany, while Croatia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic lag behind.

generations. Digital natives – those under the age of 30 who have grown up in an online environment – have some specific characteristics. They are perceived to be more interactive, as reported by 89 per cent of the professionals interviewed, more

Figure I Dominant approaches in CEO positioning and communication

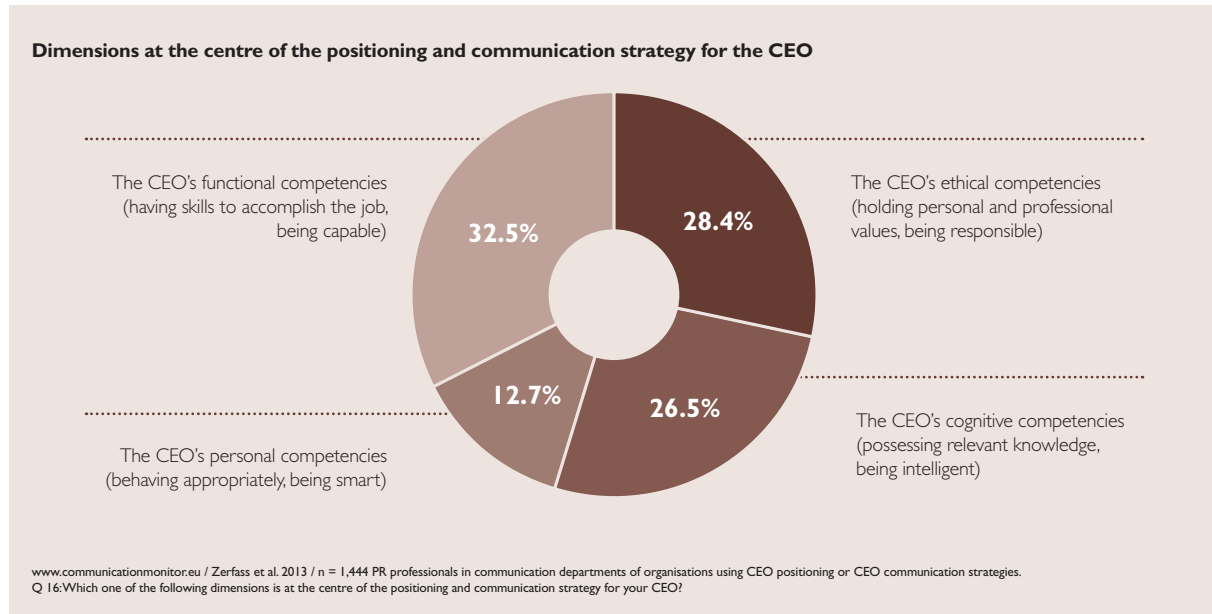
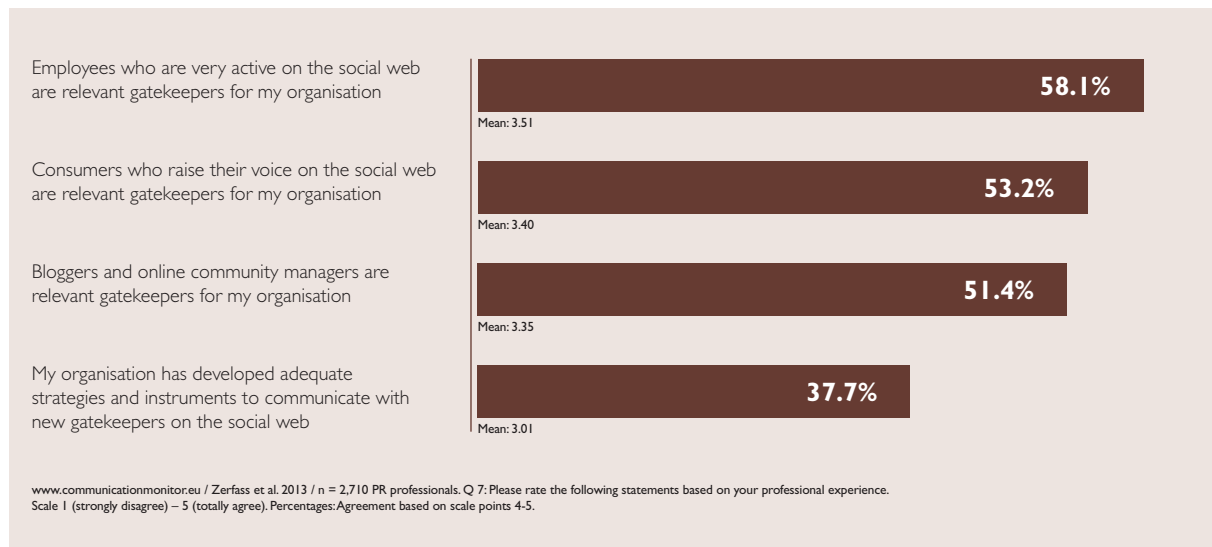


Figure II Digital gatekeepers on the social web: perceived relevance and communication strategies

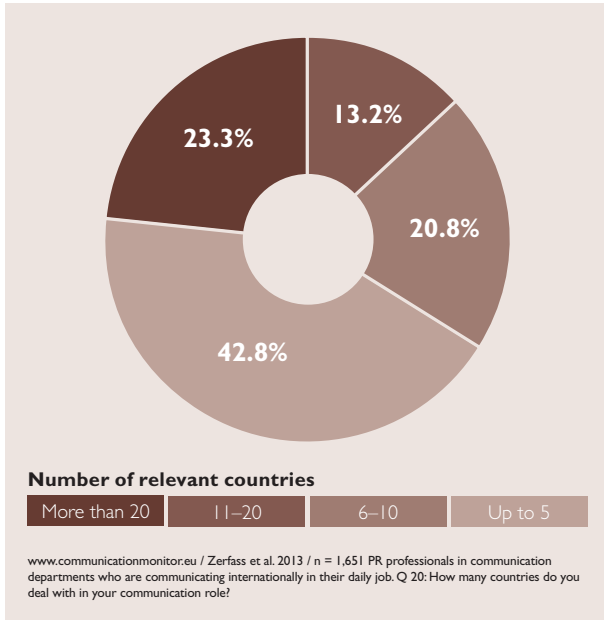


involved in communication (76 per cent), and they are demanding more feedback (75 per cent). Based on this experience many organisations use specific communication strategies and media to approach different age groups. 20 per cent do this

often, 40 per cent sometimes and 21 per cent not yet, but have planned such diversified communication. Only 19 per cent of the organisations are not doing this and are also not planning to do so in the near future. However, the majority of practitioners also state that they do not observe significant differences in communication behaviour between the different generations and that the digital



Figure III Number of relevant countries for international communication

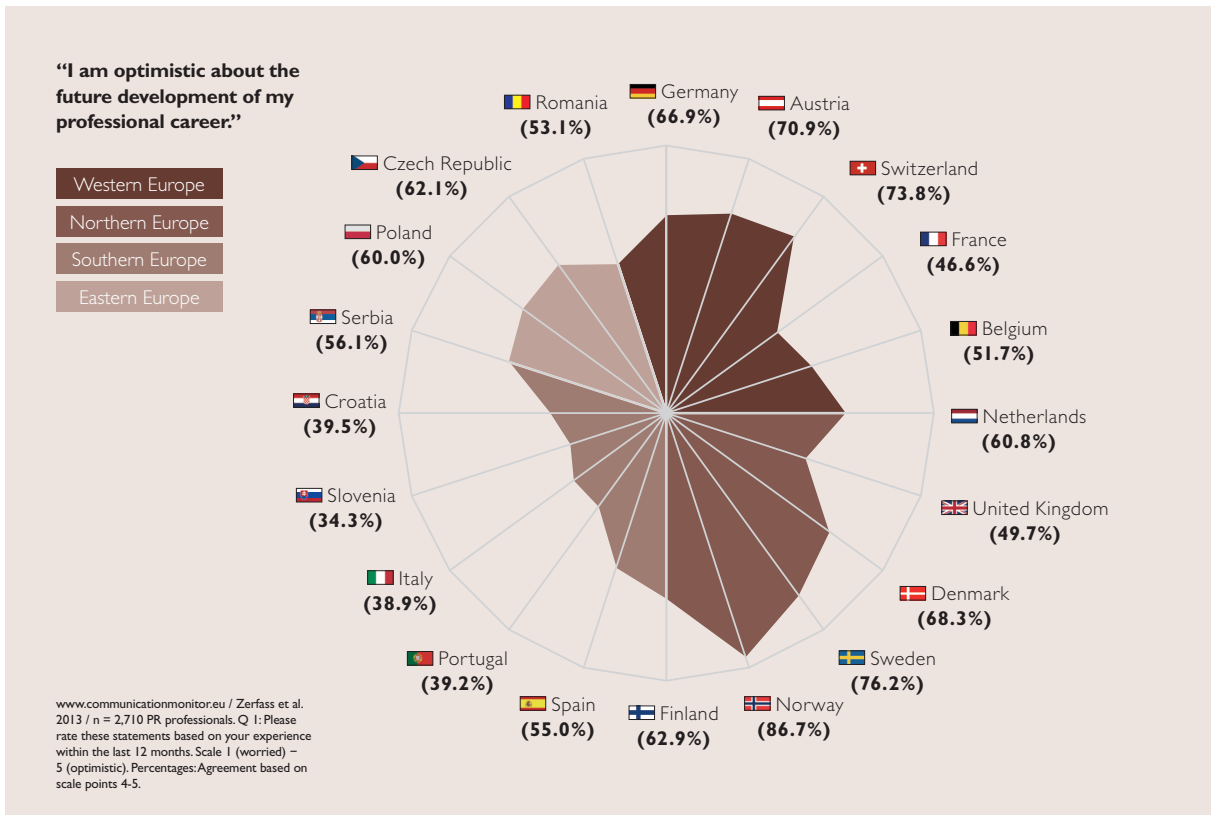


gap between the generations is closing. Answers are somewhat contradictory here, and more research is needed to understand the influence of media usage and media dependency in the context of strategic communication.

COMMUNICATORS AS INTERCULTURAL INTERPRETERS

International communication is considered a part of daily business for 81.5 per cent of the surveyed communicators. Many handle more than 20 countries on a professional basis (see figure 3). 68.3 per cent agreed that international communication was important for their organisation and 72.5 per cent acknowledged that it will become even more important until 2016. In

Figure IV Positive self-perceptions about the future of communication careers in different countries



FULL RESULTS



A detailed report is available online at www.communicationmonitor.eu, and as a booklet published by Helios Media: Zerfass, A., Moreno, A., Tench, R., Verčič, D., and Verhoeven, P. (2013): European Communication Monitor 2013. A Changing Landscape – Managing Crises, Digital Communication and CEO Positioning in Europe. Results of a Survey in 43 Countries, Brussels: EACD/EUPRERA, Helios Media, ISBN: 978-3-942263-21-4

contrast to this, only a minority of organisations have already developed solid structures and strategies for international communication.

Perhaps inevitably given the ECM sample, the majority of targeted international communication activity is within Europe (98.8 per cent), with North America the next highest response (42.2 per cent), followed in third place by east Asia (28.3 per cent) which takes in China, Korea and Japan as major countries. The most challenging issues in international communication are: developing communication strategies with social, cultural and political sensitivity (73.7 per cent), monitoring public opinion and understanding stakeholders (72.2 per cent), and understanding structures of media systems and public spheres (67.5 per cent). These are pragmatic and analytical topics, underlining the early status of institutionalisation in this field.

Photo: Private

EUROPE: A DIVIDED CONTINENT? The most important strategic issue for European communication professionals until 2016 is aligning communication strategies to overall business strategies, dealing with the digital revolution and the necessity to build and maintain trust with the public and society.

The majority of practitioners (58.5 per cent) are optimistic when thinking of the future of their career. Values for this positive outlook are even higher in some western and northern European countries, with Norway, Sweden and Switzerland being above 70 per cent. On the other extreme are countries of southern Europe, where positive feelings are much lower: less than 40 per cent are optimistic in Slovenia, Croatia, Italy, and Portugal (see figure IV).

The division in influence, status and perspectives of communication professionals between north-west and south-east of Europe is also mirrored in salaries: working in a strong or a weak economy makes a difference. However, striving for excellence continues to be an important goal for communicators across Europe.

Our Monitor shows that progress has been made, but also that more effort is still needed in many areas. This also means that communication is an important field for achieving competitive advantage for those who lead the game. |



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