Keller-Bacher, J., & Zerfass, A. (2019). How strategic communication facilitates the internationalization of firms: A situational framework. In *F. Frandsen, W. Johansen, R. Tench & S. Romenti (Eds.), Big ideas in public relations research and practice* (pp. 1-21). Bingley, UK: Emerald. https://doi.org/10.1108/S2398-391420190000004002

How Strategic Communication Facilitates the Internationalisation of Firms:
A Situational Framework

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Abstract

This study examines the specific role of strategic communication as a facilitator for business internationalisation. It provides a new and comprehensive rationale for explaining the contribution of strategic communication to the global success of companies and shows communication leaders how they could demonstrate the value of communication for internationalisation.

The article identifies an important contribution of strategic communication in today's globalised world, which demands further attention in academia and in practice by addressing three research questions: (1) How can strategic communication be conceptualised as part of the internationalisation of firms? (2) Which specific objectives, responsibilities and practices can be assigned to strategic communication within the process of internationalisation? (3) Does the theoretical framework capture the significant components of strategic communication within internationalisation, appropriately from the point of view of senior experts in the field?

The chosen approach is conceptual and empirical. A cross-disciplinary literature analysis has been performed to construct a framework that links possible forms and manifestations of strategic communication to different situations of international business development. Qualitative interviews with senior communication executives were conducted to verify the plausibility of the theoretical framework from a professional point of view. The study identifies four core fields of strategic communication within the internationalisation processes: initiation, transformation, expansion and integration. Communication should be implemented differently within the typical periods of internationalisation, and communication management should focus on different aspects during these processes. Empirical findings indicate that the core fields depicted in the framework are either already applied in practice or perceived as plausible and doable.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study emphasises the value of a cross-disciplinary perspective on corporate communications, which helps to bridge gaps between management research and communication studies. The study expands the body of knowledge in strategic communication by integrating new objectives and activities.

Keywords – strategic communication, business internationalisation, communication value

Introduction

Globalisation is widely seen to be a main tendency of our time (Mathews, 2006). It has created a truly international business environment during the last decades through worldwide deregulation, trade liberalisation and integration of financial systems, as well as through an ongoing cultural, economic, and social homogeneity (Clark and Knowles, 2003; Mathews, 2006). New patterns of economic interwovenness have been established. Today, companies might utilise, import or export activities, run international joint ventures or establish global value chains. Markets for most goods, services and financial instruments are, nowadays, truly international. Thus, executives as well as communication professionals can no longer look upon markets as clear cut, autonomous regional entities. They must cope with the characteristics of multiple environments, changing political landscapes and dynamic media markets, as well as heterogeneous stakeholder demands (e.g., Cavusgil, 1980).

Communicating and collaborating with customers, employees, co-workers, suppliers and partners from all over the world has, thereby, become a common and essential practice. Differences in cognitive patterns, leadership, strategies, verbal images and value structures need to be listened to and managed with great care (Marchazina and Wolf, 2015). Consequently, a growing need for harmonious and powerful border-crossing relationships that transcend cultural differences has emerged for businesses competing in global markets (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009). With the emergence of this overall ambition, strategic communication is becoming an important driver for international business success in today's hypermodern world.

However, the specific role of corporate communications within internationalisation has largely been neglected and never been systematised. Even though the international dimension of public relations and communication management has stimulated a growing body of research throughout the last two decades, existing approaches and definitions are mainly highlighting the practices of communication departments and professionals in different regions, or the practices for communicating and managing communications across borders. A broader approach that examines how communication can support the overall process of business internationalisation is missing until now.

This research takes an initial step towards closing this gap by answering three research questions: (1) How can strategic communication be conceptualised as part of the internationalisation of businesses? (2) Which specific objectives, responsibilities and practices can be assigned to strategic communication within the process of internationalisation? (3) Does the theoretical framework capture the significant components of strategic communication within internationalisation, appropriately from the point of view of senior experts in the field?

The first question will be addressed by linking concepts from communication management to theories of internationalisation (framework development). A new situational framework for explaining the influence that strategic communication departments can have on different forms of international development will be introduced in a second step (framework explication). Finally, the plausibility of the theoretical framework will be tested through qualitative interviews with senior communication executives (framework validation).

Theoretical approaches to the internationalisation of firms

Current debates in management research support a dynamic and processual approach for the understanding of internationalisation, rather than a more traditional comparative and static understanding. The literature on dynamic internationalisation describes a movement of the enterprise towards other countries, driven by competitive advantage and economic objectives, as ‘the process of increasing involvement in international operations’ (Mathews and Zander, 2007, p. 9; McDougall and Oviatt, 2000; Welch and Luostarinen, 1988, p. 36). This rationale implies an unilinear sequential process of rising involvement in international operations. For extending this understanding towards ‘born global companies’, Calof and Beamish (1995, p. 116) suggest understanding internationalisation as ‘the process of adapting firms’ operations (e.g., strategy, resource, etc.) to international environments’. Thus, international engagement is not necessarily bound to any specific direction of development, for example, from the home country to foreign countries.

At the same time Mathews and Zander (2007, p. 9) emphasise that internationalisation may be defined as the entrepreneurial process of the firm becoming integrated in international economic activities. Here, the term integration includes both push and pull and provides a more comprehensive view, depicting the global economy as pre-existing and offering resources to the firm that acts upon entrepreneurial learning insights. This broad definition encompasses internationalisation as a process of engagement and creation of inter-firm linkages within the global economy, ‘driven by entrepreneurial observation, calculation, and strategic action’ (Mathews and Zander, 2007, p. 9). Thus, internationalisation evolves by an interplay of competitive advantages and objectives (push) as well as of newly arising opportunities (pull).

The introduction of behavioural theories from international marketing and management will allow us to link this dynamic understanding of internationalisation to characteristics of strategic communication. These theories analyse business decisions made when approaching new markets and capture several dimensions frequently discussed in literature: skills, knowledge and resources. They provide insights on how the role of communication can be theoretically captured, situationally differentiated and designed in accordance with strategies of internationalisation.

For many years, business-related theories on internationalisation have introduced different courses of development, temporal patterns and phases of internationalisation. Three major approaches for explaining behaviour within internationalisation can be identified: the stage approach, the network approach and the international entrepreneurship approach.

Stage models of internationalisation

Stage models depict internationalisation 'as a linear and sequential process composed by a series of distinctive stages' (Lin, 2010, p. 2). They are supported by two major research streams: the *Uppsala Internationalisation Model* (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977; Johanson and Wiedersheim-Paul, 1975) and the *Innovation-Related Internationalisation Model* (Bilkey and Tesar, 1977; Cavusgil, 1980; Czinkota, 1982; Reid, 1981). Both approaches conceptualise internationalisation as a gradual process, following certain steps to reach foreign markets. This sequential development is based on a series of decisions and incremental commitments based on perception, expectation, experience and managerial capabilities. Each step consecutively represents a higher degree of internationalisation. The process, thereby, develops through successive phases. Starting with an initial situation characterised by no interest in internationalisation or a comfortable situation in the home market, it evolves from psychologically close countries to more distant ones as decision makers become more experienced.

The *Uppsala school* defines four linear stages: (1) irregular export activities, (2) export through independent agents, (3) establishment of an overseas sales subsidiary and (4) overseas production or manufacturing units. The gradual pattern of the internationalisation process is mainly attributed to two reasons: (1) the lack of knowledge by the firm, especially 'experiential knowledge'; and (2) uncertainty associated with the decision to internationalise. Due to the lack of international experience and information about the business environment in other regions, firms tend to enter foreign markets with caution (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977). Acquisition, integration and utilisation of knowledge in international operations explain an incremental participation in foreign markets. A combination of successive learning processes and the gradual commitment of resources to international environments sheds light on the dynamics of internationalisation. Apart from learning process theories, the concept of psychic distance has been an important contribution to theory development by stage models. Psychic distance refers to the sum of cultural, political and linguistic differences, as well as other differences that influence information circulation (Khayat, 2004; Lin, 2010). It can be conceptualised as a significant factor for companies to decide on whether or not to enter international markets. Johanson and Vahlne (1977) argue that weakening the psychic distance will make firms less hesitant to enter foreign countries. With growing international experience, psychic distance decreases and internationalisation gains momentum.

By considering internationalisation as an innovation for the firm, the *Innovation-Related Internationalisation Model* provides a complementary perspective on the incremental development of internationalisation. According to Bilkey and Tesar (1977), Cavusgil (1980) and Reid (1981), each subsequent step of export development is based on a management decision affected by 'push' or 'pull' mechanisms. Firm-specific characteristics and managerial factors facilitate or inhibit the process. Among others, Reid (1981) proposed a taxonomy that encompasses five stages, that can be supplemented along the work of Bilkey and Tesar (1977):

(1) Export awareness: management is not yet interested in export. The stage addresses the problem of opportunity recognition and the arousal of need.
(2) Export intention: the management is partially interested and willing to fill unsolicited orders, but makes no effort to explore the feasibility of active export. The stage emphasizes the need for motivation, attitude, beliefs and expectancy regarding export.
(3) Export trial: management actively explores the feasibility of active export. The stage addresses the importance of personal experience from limited export (exploring need).
(4) Export evaluation: the management is now actively involved in exporting to countries psychologically closer. The stage focuses on the importance of results from engaging in export (experimental need).
(5) Export acceptance: the firm now is an experienced exporter. The management explores the feasibility of exporting to other psychologically more distant countries The stage addresses the decision on further adaption or rejection of export.

Thereby, the authors illustrate that the attitude, the motivation, the experiences and the expectations of decision makers have a significant impact on the progress of internationalisation. Export business is believed to require a favourable attitude towards international expansion within top management, foreign market opportunities and the presence of spare resources within the firm (Zapletalová, 2013). In this sense, the role of decision makers as well as factors influencing their decisions are integrated within the concept of gradual internationalisation of firms.

Stage approaches are applicable in many ways. However, empirical studies have shown that international business development does not necessarily follow a unilinear learning model, and it is not always built on a one-way pattern of development (e.g., Oviatt and McDougall, 1994). Thus, other internationalisation approaches, like the network approach or the born global research, need to be taken into account as well.

Network approaches of internationalisation

The network approach (Johanson and Mattson, 1988) improved the original Uppsala model (1977) by outlining the importance of understanding any firm in its multilateral network. Incorporating concepts of model knowledge, commitment, on-going activities and decision making, the authors use the intra- and inter-organisational relations to explain motivations for and modes of internationalisation. Thus, a firm’s expansion is seen as a way of anticipating the interests of more and more stakeholders or building networks of external relationships. Such network positions may be associated with a privileged and early access to knowledge and information, or the attractiveness or value as a collaborator that further enhances knowledge assimilation capabilities (Kogut, 2000; Mathews and Zander, 2007, p. 6). Consequently, relations in existing networks can encourage the mode of market entry, facilitate internationalisation and, thus, accelerate business growth.

For Johanson and Mattson (1988), internationalisation is conducted through three steps of network activities: (1) extension, (2) penetration and (3) integration. Extension serves the company to impel the foreign network, either through own achievements “or by attaching itself to an existing network” (Lin, 2010, p. 7). Therefore, the company engages ”itself into new types of *immaterial investments*, like information, contractual relationship and partnership that will connect the enterprise to its foreign partners” (Lin, 2010, p. 7). Penetration describes the further development of a company’s position within the network as well as its growing resource commitment. Integration as an advanced step refers to the company’s linkage to several networks and the coordination among those. Network theories emphasise that internationalisation strategies are influenced by the company’s position within its specific set of stakeholders. Relations with foreign partners are established and maintained in continuous ways to gain information access or human capital and, thus, accelerate internationalisation. Despite the growing importance of inter-firm alliances for competitive and cooperative advantage, network relationships must be conceived as complementary to the traditional drivers of successful internationalisation, like ownership, location and other advantages (Dunning, 2000; Mathews and Zander, 2007).

International entrepreneurship approach of internationalisation

Whereas traditional frameworks provide powerful insights into the characteristics of gradual internationalisation, they are not able to describe the internationalisation of so-called ‘born global’ companies (Shrader *et al.*, 2000). These companies either start fully international or emerge as global industry leaders in sometimes incredibly short periods of time (Mathews, 2006). The International entrepreneurship approach, as part of the Born Global research (e.g., Madsen and Servais, 1997), tries to capture the reality of such corporations. It provides a radical, non-incremental understanding of internationalisation through an alternative view on learning and knowledge-building (Jager, 2010, p. 38-39). According to this perspective, firms do not only gain experience and knowledge through internationalisation, as outlined by traditional management approaches, but they also use existing internal know-how or resources to initiate and influence the internationalisation process itself (Jager, 2010). Thus, internationalisation rather depends on previously gained expertise that can be defined by elements, such as networks, entrepreneurial experiences, international experience, market knowledge, stakeholder relations, etc. (Brennan and Garvey, 2009). Internationalisation is driven much more by the entrepreneur’s social capital, knowledge or interest than by the company itself and its environment. This provides a more adequate model for observing companies with a strong engagement in international business even before organisational and industry maturity sets in.

Along these lines, the GAINS paradigm (“Gestalt Approach to International Business Strategies”) by Macharzina and Engelhard (1984, 1991) provides key insights on both perspectives – the continuous and the accelerated growth of multinational firms. The approach describes the dynamics of internationalization as an interplay of phases of calm and change. Based on empirical observations, Macharzina and Engelhard (1991) state that a period of ‘relative’ standstill or stability is always followed by a period of radical change. While the stable period can be translated into further adjustment or differentiation of existing corporate structures, the radical period describes a significant change or reversal in development direction, corporate strategy, organisational structure or management system (Macharzina and Wolf, 2015). Usually stable phases occur more frequently than sudden transition phases during the patterns of corporate development (Miller and Friesen, 1980). Companies can develop gradually from a national to a multinational enterprise as well as radically with different designs of internationalisation (Macharzina and Wolf, 2015). Thus, internationalisation can be compared to a process-oriented development with longer periods of relative stability and shorter periods of revolutionary change. This also includes the possibility of reversion to a national enterprise through divestment or renationalisation.

Conclusion

The application of theories and models that capture internationalisation processes provide a profound explanation of the ways and reasons of business development within foreign markets. Successful internationalisation requires a strong capability to learn new concepts and ideas, competences to manage external networks and an aptitude to adapt to different cultural environments. The kind of competition, the use of human capital, of organisational structure and cooperation clearly contribute to international success. Internationalisation also means openness to adjustments in general strategy as well as innovation itself. A company’s approach to internationalisation can be characterised by shaping, developing and creating an internationalisation strategy, a long-standing development of relationships with foreign entities and selected markets; as well as knowledge acquisition, the use of internalised asset transfer and global value chains to maximise competitive advantage, the deployment of internal resources and structures, the shaping of partnerships and perception management within the network environment (e.g., Buckley and Casson, 1998; Dunning, 1988; Martynoga and Jankowska, 2017, p. 72).

As it turns out, various objectives and preconditions of business internationalisation are closely linked to strategic communication. Processes of building visibility, managing alliances and relationships – as well as multi-stakeholder demands, meaning, reputation, innovation, culture, commitment and knowledge transfer – and dealing with the dynamics of power and conflict are highly relevant in internationalisation processes. They can be reinforced by communication techniques and strategies. Since there is no existing literature about the role of communication in internationalisation, it is necessary to develop a new model that takes into account all factors of internationalisation that are related to communications.

The international dynamics framework for internationalisation

The study proposes that the salient features of a firm's international expansion are best captured in a framework that is based on entrepreneurial dynamics. Following this understanding, the *international dynamics framework* outlines entry points and pathways mapped by firms as they enter international business areas as well as the key factors that influence further behaviour and strategic choices.

In line with the literature discussed above, four periods of international development are relevant: (1) *pioneer period*, (2) *stabilisation period*, (3) *growth period* and (4) *maturation period*. Each period can be linked to milestones like the discovery of opportunities, the deployment of resources or the engagement with international competitors (Mathews and Zander, 2007). The framework further suggests that the basic orientation of each period differs, moving from *expansion* to *consolidation* (cf. the GAINS paradigm). Pioneering moves like starting export activities need to be stabilised after a certain period of time, and markets that have been opened up need to be integrated and transformed into a productive international portfolio. Following these thoughts, each period of internationalisation requires one particular approach of strategic communication. Even though business processes always involve the parallel execution of a many activities, the significance of diverse international dimensions is highlighted by distinguishing between different scopes for each period.

(1) Pre-involvement (the pioneer period): the initial stage of internationalisation, prior to firms having established their sources of advantage, remain a relatively unexplored area within the international business literature (Mathews and Zander, 2007). At this early stage, firms are seeking to establish themselves in a multinational environment to exploit new business opportunities created by globalisation (Mathews and Zander, 2007). The discovery of new business opportunities is often associated with the identification of new solutions for international customer demands or the application of business concepts that have been proven successful in familiar contexts (e.g., Ward and Smith, 2004). Strategic growth and international expansion come to the fore. This process takes place in a disequilibria setting (Mathews and Zander, 2007) caused by a deficit of information and genuine uncertainty. Little knowledge about international target markets and about the management of internationalisation exits. Thus, market development is often limited to export activities, licensing or local agents and distributors as precursors of an independent sales branch abroad. With limited foreign relations, the geographical movements and pre-venture activities primarily take place in countries with a similar language and cultural setting close to the home base.

(2) Reactive involvement (the stabilisation period): the decision to pursue international business opportunities typically leads to a period of reactive resource deployment (Katz and Gartner, 1988). This reflects the second phase, the adaption of a firm and its operations to international

requirement. Both internal and external resources, activities, structures and routines must be coordinated and continuously translocated abroad (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994). Within this period of stabilisation companies tend to rely extensively on international cooperative agreements that reduce the high level of risk involved in their internationalisation strategy (Mathews and Zander, 2007, p. 9). Strategic consolidation and gaining access to resources, skills and knowledge comes to the fore. Among others, this includes establishing an international customer base, reducing political and economic risks as well as tapping the resources of leading firms by global alliances. Market development is focused on export business, franchising agreements, the initiation of new sales companies and the establishment of first affiliates.

(3) Active involvement (the growth period): once a firm is established within the global market, the target of building new capacities or extending existing ones lead to further cooperative agreements and to competition with other international firms (e.g., Gulati and Gargiulo, 1999). Based on internalised resources, activities and routines, supported by learning processes and stable relationships, firms aim to upgrade their position. Whether driven by force or by cooperation, the pattern of market expansion is often accompanied by international mergers and acquisitions, by establishing wholly owned subsidiaries and by forming international joint ventures. A differentiation of existing business operations is a key feature characterising this period. This stimulates a need for coordinating multiple interests. At this stage, the firm and its network are highly international, often shown by an extended transfer of strategic resources like know-how and a competitive network in which members operate mostly on international markets. The geographical movements and ongoing processes continuously take place within new oversea regions as part of a corporate ambition to show worldwide presence.

(4) Committed involvement (the maturation period): this advanced period of internationalisation is characterised by a high involvement in corporate globalisation. In terms of consolidating and restructuring internationally engaged companies' focus on integrating foreign markets in which they are involved, often organised by subsidiaries spread around the globe. Many activities focus on managing the global business portfolio, such as purchasing subsidiaries through mergers and acquisitions or by relocating processes into strong growing markets to tap emerging business opportunities. In consequence, the prevailing position of the home market is slowly reduced. Companies also tend to focus on their network structures to control a greater percentage of relevant resources as well as cooperative agreements with international counterparts. The vast majority of firms in this phase shares an intense commitment to their markets and networks and has built a comprehensive market experience. International business linked to this strategy clearly refers to all parts of the world.

This perspective emphasises that internationalisation must be described as a process of discovering, integrating and adapting new business ideas into the structures and networks of international markets

(Mathews and Zander, 2007, p. 12). While identifying four distinct periods in which corporations can be classified during internationalisation, the framework is flexible enough to include a number of further considerations. By allowing the existence of multiple entry points, the framework circumvents the need of determining a strict and commonly agreed-upon pathway when entering the field of international business. Instead, it states that there is no distinctly noticeable point marking the start or end of internationalisation. Although the model structure implies a linear course of internationalisation, it is open to alternative pathways based on disruptive strategies and to 'born global' organisations. The periods can be passed through one after another as well as in batches or cumulatively. Defining different kinds of situations, in which also radically internationalising or re-nationalising companies can be positioned, all periods can also occur parallel or conversely.

Strategic communication and goals of the firm

For answering the question of how strategic communication is conceptualised in the current body of knowledge and how it should be conceptualised when integrating business knowledge, a common understanding of strategic communication becomes necessary. Defined as 'the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission' (Hallahan *et al.,* 2007; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015), strategic communication is conceived as an integral function for managing and positioning a company by communicative means (Argenti, 2016; Hallahan *et al.,* 2007; Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). Such communication takes place in the public sphere and is conducted by 'communication agents' speaking on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2013; Zerfass and Viertmann, 2016, p. 3). Along this line, strategic communication can be conceived as a process that manifests itself along strategic planning and top-down decisions to support organisational effectiveness. Yet, in today's constantly changing and unpredictable world, corporations are faced with multiple stakeholder relations and emerging forms of communicative participation within the public sphere. Many voices shape a corporation's identity, not only one single department or spokesperson in charge (Zerfass and Viertmann, 2016). Therefore, strategies often require multiple adjustments throughout the process of implementation itself.

In consequence, strategic communication research has parted from a traditional, unidirectional view towards a more dynamic, process-driven perspective on managing communications including new concepts, such as polyphony (Hamrefors, 2009, 2010; Zerfass and Franke, 2013). Defined as 'a communicative construct derived from interaction between reader/hearer response, situated context, and discursive patterns' (King, 2010, p. 20), strategic communication is not necessarily tied down to a definite plan, department, person or target audience, but, instead, implemented into a 360 degree model integrating all stakeholders. The managing process evolves dynamically through dialogue and interaction with all key stakeholders and enables corporations to adapt to dynamic environments more adequately. Thus, Linke *et al.* (2018) define strategic communication as a goal-directed action that tries to contribute efficiently and effectively towards fulfilling corporate goals, but it also reflects itself as a social interaction bearing in mind its own restrictions.

The shift towards such a practice of strategic communication underlines the need for new management concepts in corporate communication. Communication leaders must move their professional focus from leading and organising communication processes towards developing the organisation's communication skills on all levels (Hamrefors, 2009, p. 19). Beyond classical aspects of goal setting, steering and positioning, specific types of communication consulting, enabling and empowering other actors outside traditional communication departments come to the fore. Consequently, the communication unit becomes a pivotal factor in achieving alignment with more complex and continuously shifting (international) environments and, thus, in creating business value.

Dimensions of value creating communication

Explaining the value of communication to the firm's goals, purpose continues to be one of the most important challenges in the professional and academic field. Due to variations in business models, corporate structure and corporate culture, alignment processes differ widely across companies. Previous research has confirmed a conceptual lack of common understanding for aligning communication targets with business strategy. Recently, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) have introduced the *Communication Value Circle (CVC)* in an attempt to incorporate and systematise the multitude of concepts and existing approaches into one homogenous general concept. Referring to the understanding of communication 'as a cross-sectional function that aims to fulfil the organization's mission in many different ways' (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015; Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017, p. 69), the model identifies different facets of value creation within corporations, as well as multiple concepts of how communication can contribute to generic organisational goals. Within the study, the CVC is used to illustrate the process of value creation through communication in internationalisation processes (see Figure 1).

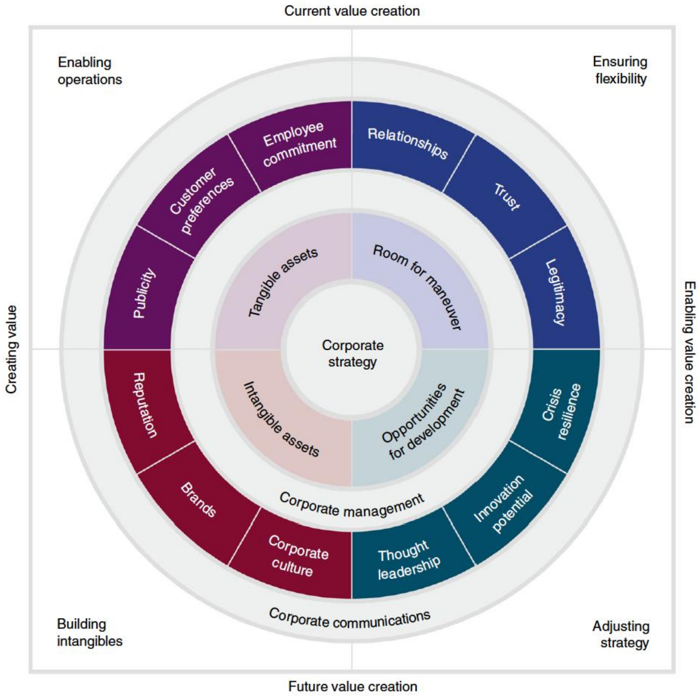

Figure 1. The communication value circle (Source: Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017, p. 73)

Value creation, from a general view, describes the transformation of resources into goods or services with a higher financial value (Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017). Traditionally, value-based management (e.g., Porter, 1985) tries to maximise corporate value measured in terms of shareholder value and return on investment (ROI). The stakeholder theory (e.g., Freeman, 1984) expands this perspective towards sustainable relationships and legitimate interests of those who are affected by corporate value creation. In such an extended view, value creation is not only related to a corporation's position in markets but also to its legitimacy in social and political environments (Zerfass, 2008). Consequently, strategic communication becomes an integral part of any company's value chain.

For aligning communication effectively to business strategy, corporate goals and related indicators need to be identified systematically. Strategic management theory identifies liquidity, success and potential for success as generic dimensions of corporate value (Gälweiler, 2005). These dimensions can be expanded and differentiated further into tangible assets, intangible assets, room for manoeuvre and opportunities for development (Van Riel, 2012; Zerfass, 2010; Zerfass and Viertmann, 2017). Along this line, the CVC describes value creation on two levels: corporate management and corporate communications (see Figure 1). The corporate strategy, which should be the starting point for all organisational decisions, is represented in the middle of the framework. The four generic corporate goals circle around the corporate strategy to create a matrix in the inner circle: Tangible and intangible assets contribute to *creating* corporate value, whereas room for manoeuvre and opportunities for development contribute to *enabling* value creation. Tangible assets and room for manoeuvre represent the *current* value creation of the corporation, while intangible assets and opportunities for development foster *future* value creation. These generic dimensions of corporate value are applicable to every function of the corporation. As such, human resource management, sales or, as in the current case, corporate communications can support goal attainment. Following this, the CVC identifies four overarching goals of communications in each of the framework's corners. These goals encompass twelve further communication value dimensions in the outer circle, clustered along the core corporate goals. Those dimensions can be derived from corporate strategy.

- Enabling operations: strategic communication can support day-to-day operations of the firm by stimulating publicity, customer preferences, and employee commitment. Publicity strengthens the visibility for any organisation and facilitates involvement and dialogue with key stakeholders. Customer preferences typically influence customer loyalty, recommendations and positive word of mouth towards products, services, brands or companies. A high employee commitment is positively correlated with increased satisfaction, engagement and motivation, and often results in more efficient internal processes.
- Building intangibles: intangible assets, such as reputation, brands or corporate culture can also be built and developed by communication. As part of the overall value disposition, a strong reputation can have a positive impact on overall financial performance or purchase intentions of potential customers and serve as a buffering shield in crises. A strong brand provides identification and differentiation from competitors, engenders trust in the consumer and typically leads to brand loyalty as well as brand preferences. Thus, strong brands developed through communication command a higher price, boost sales and market share. By stimulating a strong corporate culture, communication contributes to higher productivity, lower employee turnover rates and higher attractiveness for potential employees.
- Adjusting strategy: by encouraging thought leadership, innovation potential and crisis resilience communication can contribute to strategic positioning and generate competitive advantage. By positioning the organisation as an opinion leader for new, compelling and innovative ideas communication raises awareness, increases reputation and recognition by influencers in the public sphere. Innovation potential fostered by a communication culture that promotes creativity and openness among employees can initiate innovative business models and functional strategies. A strong crisis resilience enables to respond quickly and effectively to any incident and protects against threats.
- Ensuring flexibility: having relationships that are based on trust or, at the very least, on a perception of legitimacy of the corporation's purpose, values and actions enable a firm to steer through unstable environments. Communication can foster high quality relationships with key stakeholders that safeguard the organisation's room for action. In doing so, communication helps to build trust that is important for future-oriented decisions. By strengthening the perceived appropriateness of corporate actions and the confidence in the organisation's responsibility communication fosters legitimacy and, thus, ensures the license to operate for corporations.

The CVC provides a consistent explanation of what constitutes strategic communication by building a typology of corporate and communication values. It is customisable and, thereby, applicable in accordance to a multitude of possible variables and situations in practice; for example, type and size of organisations, functional areas and departments, situational contexts, stakeholders and fields of actions. This also means that the approach can be transferred to the specific characteristics and situational needs of internationalisation of the firm.

Combining the international dynamics framework and strategic communication

Based on the previous considerations, the international dynamics framework states that strategic communication should be implemented differently in each phase of internationalisation, and that the objectives of communication management change during such processes. Following this perspective, we can identify four approaches of strategic communication by which communication leaders can respond specifically to internationalisation: (1) *initiation*, (2) *transformation*, (3) *expansion* and (4) *integration* (see Figure 2). Each approach encompasses specific objectives and forms of communication practice that ensure success in this specific phase of internationalisation. Together they reflect the overall need for communication during a corporation's process of internationalisation, illustrated by a four-field matrix. Depending on the business goals of each period, each communication field is driven by differing manifestations of the four core contributions of the CVC: (1) *adjusting strategy,* (2) *ensuring flexibility,* (3) *enabling operations* and (4) *building intangibles*.

Degree of development / *Direction of development*	Low Internationality	High Internationality
Expansion	Initiating Communication	Expansive Communication
Consolidation	Transformative Communication	Integrative Communication

Figure 2. Key areas of communication within the internationalisation of firms

Initiating communication

The field of initiating communication is aligned to the pioneer period of internationalisation. It creates international business opportunities and supports steps towards entering foreign markets. Limited managerial resources, uncertainty and a deficit of information as well as intended international expansion characterise this stage. For contributing efficiently to corporate challenges in such situations, communication targets need to be closely aligned to the following goals: (1) Strategic growth and international expansion; (2) Successful international market entry; (3) Evolve as multinational venture and exploit business opportunities abroad; (4) Minimise uncertainty, complexity and psychic distance in target market; (5) Ensure room for manoeuvre in pioneer markets.

The pioneer period is crucial to manoeuvre the company into new areas of knowledge, change and innovation. Also, the process of strategic adaptation and adjustment takes place when pioneers ultimately meet in international markets, or when they are challenged by internationally active firms. The strategic profile of initiating communication, thus, encompasses six specific communication goals: (1) Adjust strategy towards thought leadership in pioneer markets, innovation thinking and a competitive global-related positioning; (2) Legitimise market entries and generate acceptance in pioneer markets; (3) Increase international awareness, publicity and product interest; (4) Design the international brand; (5) Establish cultural and communicative competences; (6) Interpret and sensitise for country-specific realities (i.e., minimise psychic distance).

For *enabling operations*, communication leaders should train all organisational members, especially top executives, in communicating within daily business activities, closing knowledge gaps and completing information (e.g., in language or expression). They must raise the visibility of global products and raise attention for foreign market entries through (social) media publicity. For *ensuring flexibility,* they must legitimate the internationalisation strategy internally and externally by conveying the company's contribution to pioneer markets (i.e., sensemaking and managing meaning). New relationships are tied, and confidence will be generated by facilitating dialogues with decision makers and key stakeholders abroad. For *building intangibles*, the firm's global image and brand that support competitive advantage must be designed. At the same time, the company's core values must be protected by trying to foster consistency in stakeholder perceptions across countries. For *adjusting strategy*, communication leaders must guide decisions and strategies by analysing, for example, behaviour patterns in target markets, trend profiles or opinion building, as well as themes for thought leadership, public emotions and the company's strategic development within a global environment.

Transformative communication

The field of transformative communication relates to the stabilisation period of internationalisation. It aims at stabilising international business activities and promoting transformation. As described above, reactive resource deployment and relationship building come to the fore. Strategic communication, thereby, must support several organisational goals: (1) Strategic consolidation, transformation and adaption of organisational structures; (2) Efficiency and access to resources, skills and knowledge; (3) Strategic potential through reflection and optimisation; (4) Make use of knowledge flows across foreign markets; (5) Minimise resistance and international risks.

The stabilisation period is crucial to the firm's adaption towards international conditions. It requires a change in culture related to a new design of shared values, beliefs, identities and commitment at an international level to support internationalisation strategies in an effective way. By fostering relations through cooperation, mediated and personal interactions communication can facilitate a strong international network based on trust. The strategic profile, thus, encompasses six specified communication goals: (1) Generate ability, motivation and commitment to international change; (2) Create a global corporate culture; (3) Promote knowledge sharing and accelerate communication flows; (4) Establish reliable relations and partnerships; (5) Foster global reputation, legitimacy and communicate strategies; (6) Ensure crisis resilience in foreign markets.

To *enable operations*, communication leaders must shape internal attitudes and the willingness to support international change. By supporting international role enactment and encouraging executives to act as role models for international change, communication professionals can reduce uncertainty as well as resistance (e.g., towards changing routines or translocating activities). The initiation of cross-national dialogue formats and events, thus, promotes knowledge sharing and the efficiency of global internal processes. For *ensuring flexibility,* communication leaders must build trust and mobilise potentials for support in the increasingly unstable environment, for example, by fostering high quality relationships with customers and global decision makers or by entering relevant business networks. For *building intangibles,* communication leaders need to initiate a global culture that represents a universal collection of key values, symbols, meanings, beliefs and assumptions that all employees share, including an international mindset and a common global vision. Based on shaping impressions and expectations on a global level, they should also build international reputation. For *adjusting strategy,* they need to guide decisions by raising awareness for potential flashpoints that could destabilise global subsidiaries or risk communication-related crisis and, thus, contribute to crisis-response capabilities.

Expansive communication

The field of expansive communication relates to the period of growth within internationalisation. It supports further expansion and responds to an increasingly competing environment. Strategic communication must contribute to an excellent global position for growth and, thereby, should be aligned to the following organisational goals: (1) Increase international business growth and market shares; (2) Open new foreign market sectors and foster existing ones; (3) Strengthen and extend external network capital for competitive advantages; (4) Remove international market barriers; (5) Create new strategic potentials of success and exploit advanced global opportunities.

Expansion in global markets is crucial to any strong global brand and reputation. This requires shared knowledge, good communication flows, agreed-upon strategies as well as congruent norms and values. The strategic profile, thereby, encompasses six specified communication goals: (1) Adjust strategy towards innovation thinking, competitive advantages and risk management; (2) Create a strong positioning of strength and success; (3) Illustrate corporate opportunities and attract investors; (4) Support global transitional and takeover projects; (5) Foster social network capital; (6) Encourage willingness to cooperate.

For *enabling operations*, communication leaders must support international day-to-day operations, especially following mergers and acquisitions, for example, by balancing global interests and mobilising engagement of (new) employees. By rising awareness of the organisation's quality, reputation and competitive advantages, they generate new customer preferences and may attract investors, for example, by an international relationship management. For *ensuring flexibility*, professionals should guide dialogues as well as initiate information and exchange structures within external networks. Thereby, they create high quality, beneficial partnerships in target markets and contribute to social capital as trust, loyalty and mutual willingness to cooperate. For *building intangibles*, they must establish the global brand within all markets and, thus, raise corporate value and reputation. For *adjusting strategy*, communication leaders need to guide decisions and strategies by analysing, for example, global network patterns, existing alliances and agreements that could offer new opportunities, such as synergies, but also barriers that need to be overcome, especially high-risk issues and general threats.

Integrative communication

The area of integrative communication relates to the maturation period of internationalisation. It aims to consolidate multiple global activities and to reduce increasing complexity. The integration of new markets, projects and production lines in a global strategy is a core challenge in this phase. Strategic communication must be closely aligned to the following organisational goals: (1) Global market leadership; (2) Higher efficiency and optimised value creation through internationalisation; (3) Profitable coordination, stabilisation and integration of the international market portfolio; (4) Minimise complexity of differentiated foreign markets; (5) High quality relationships and network capital.

Advanced international business operations are often associated with accelerated innovation across geographical distances and the need to permanently coordinate, optimise and consolidate cross-national business structures. Strategic communication should, thus, address several communication objectives: (1) Create new potentials for innovation; (2) Create cross-national crisis resilience; (3) Support global restructuring; (4) Integrate, coordinate and adjust global network relations; (5) Positioning global market portfolios; (6) Position network structures within an international environment.

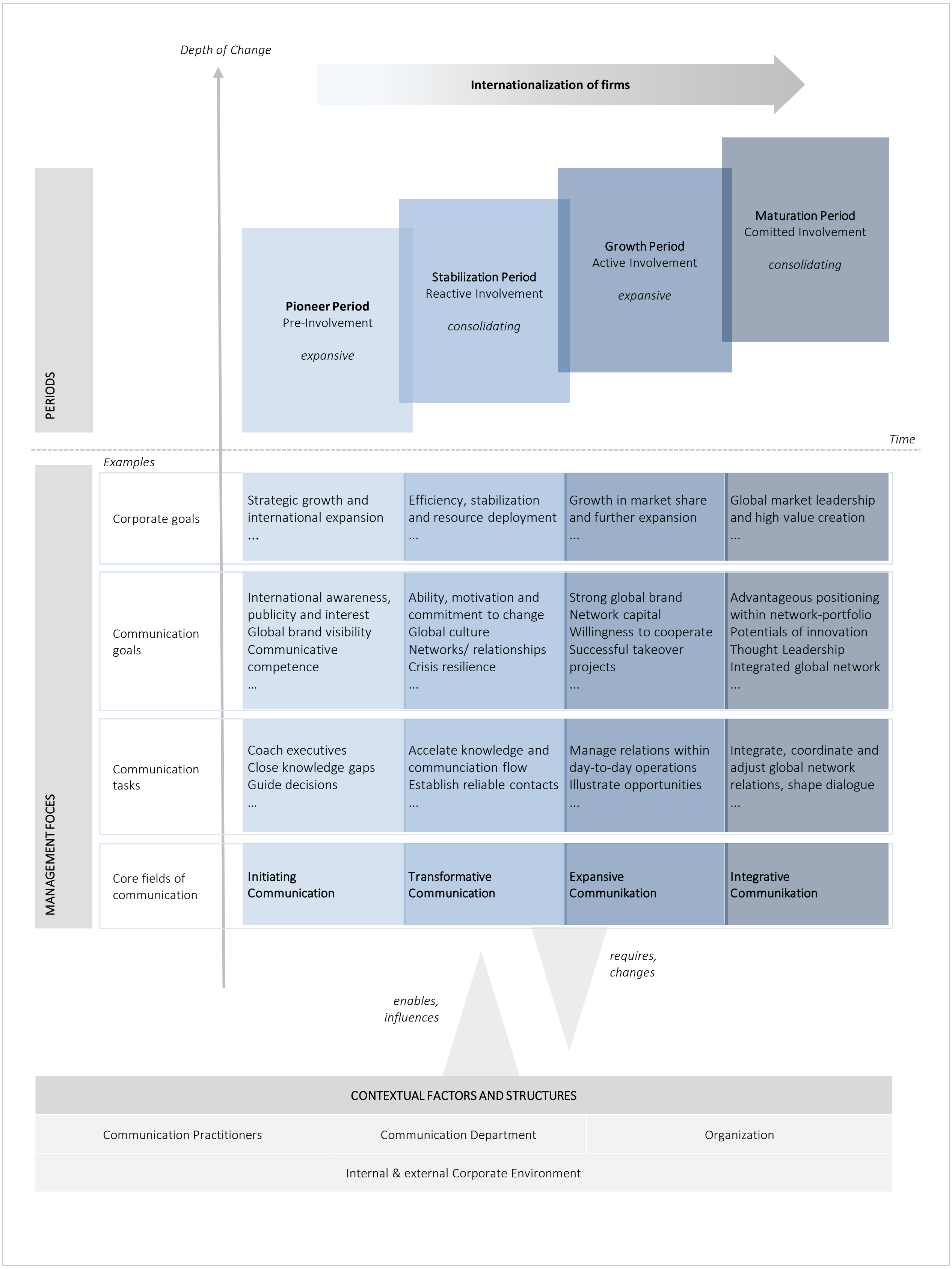

Figure 3. The international dynamics frameworks of strategic communication

For *enabling operations*, communication leaders must empower every (new) organisational member to become an ambassador for the organisation's mission and values by engaging in constant dialogues with all employees and by endorsing unique identity statements that are relevant on a global scale. For supporting daily operations, such as restructurings or relocations, communication professionals should focus on reinforcing exchange and information, facilitating understanding and helping to make use of cross-national knowledge. To *ensure flexibility*, communication leaders should inspire existing networks and create new connections with entrepreneurs, policy makers or opinion leaders in foreign markets by focusing on long-term, reliable partnerships in foreign markets and global relationship capital. For *building intangibles*, communications should promote a cooperative external network culture and raise awareness of inspiring networks in the public sphere (network positioning). Global reputation can be boosted by positioning the firm as a thought leader for new, compelling and innovative ideas in relevant communities of interest. For *adjusting strategy*, communication management needs to make sense of the complex environments and, for example, help to better understand future trends as well as regulatory institutions on a global scale.

The *international dynamics framework of strategic communication* (see Figure 3) complements current conceptual tools used in international business literature and strategic communication research. It shows that strategic communication can be defined along the firm's goals, situation and direction of internationalisation within four core fields of action. These four specifications outline an overall concept of strategic communication within the internationalisation of firms. Every communication leader or at least every communication department should be able to cover all of these dimensions. However, not only personal abilities but also self-perception and acceptance by others are crucial for fulfilling a strategic role within business (e.g., Röttger and Zielmann, 2009). Also, various context factors on the functional or organisational level determine the choice of specific forms of strategic communication within internationalisation.

Validation of the concept: Qualitative interviews with communication managers

A qualitative empirical study has been conducted to verify the practical comprehensiveness and plausibility of the theoretical framework, as described in Figure 1. Twelve in-depth interviews (Gubrium *et al.*, 2012) with male and female senior communication executives of major European organisations (e.g., Porsche, BASF, Henkel, etc.) were conducted in 2017. The interviewees were either head of communications or public relations or responsible for international communications within major companies or consultancies. Interviews lasted between 35 and 50 minutes, and they were recorded and transcripted. A qualitative content analysis (e.g. Krippendorff, 2004) was performed to identify common answers and concepts.

The study confirmed that supporting the international development of firms is a relevant part of corporate communication practice in global corporations. The findings indicate that goals and tasks depicted in the framework are either already applied in practice or perceived as plausible and doable.

Thus, it can be confirmed that the framework sheds light on a highly relevant but mostly neglected question of strategic communication. Since the actual application differs widely in practice, the four periods of pre-, reactive, active and committed involvement (as shown in Figure 3) were discussed as potential scenarios for strategic communication. By focusing on and distinguishing between each situation, it became obvious that all dimensions of communication outlined above are considered as part of the professional role set of communication leaders today. Within the pioneer period, all experts see responsibilities in preparing ‘market entry documents’, such as key messages and advertisements or building key contacts in target markets (e.g., to journalists and influencers). Several interviewees also mentioned the need for listening structures within pioneer markets and a high demand for intercultural competencies, which the communication department should respond to. Three interviewees also consider the assessment of possible risks and implications as part of the task profile of communications within initial decision-making processes.

In the stabilisation period, the development of an ‘international mind set’ or a global corporate culture is rated of great importance when establishing international communication structures. However, it is seldom reflected as a contribution to successful cross-national organisational structures. Yet, managing internal anxieties within the entire company induced by global change is seen as a pivotal responsibility. Some experts also emphasised the necessity of helping executives in foreign countries to establish communication structures, for example, by defining job profiles or by setting content agendas. Others mentioned the responsibility of initiating a company-wide exchange between headquarters and markets to increase stabilisation.

In the growth period, facilitating a strong company-wide reputation, image or brand are seen as core responsibilities of strategic communication. Acquisitions, transactions and international investments as well as launching worldwide plants, international projects or cooperation are associated with a great need for strategic communication by most interviewees. This is especially true when parts of corporate headquarters are relocated to other countries. Some respondents stated that communication managers must take on strategic leadership roles in new markets, such as Asia, Africa or South America, due to the very different ways of public opinion building. Occasionally, the need for supporting beneficial external partnerships was confirmed.

When reflecting about the maturation period, the experts highlighted the relevance of strategic communication for international positioning as well as for international restructuring and closings. One interviewee emphasised the importance to assess and recommend new cooperation to regional units, depending on corporate goals and the intended reputation. Also, company-wide relationship management is rated utterly important, together with promoting internal collaboration, managing networks and strengthening company-wide commitment and identification.

Overall, the interviewees stated that a centralised unit for managing international communications is pivotal when trying to implement a strategic role for communications within the internationalisation of the firm. This unit is often referred to a ‘cross-sectional function of all communicational functions’, a ‘strategic interface’ or just a ‘link’ between corporate headquarters and country operations or companies. To enable value contribution, the unit should coordinate and control communication activities strategically and act as an interface for demands in international markets and on a global scale. Thus, the unit is mostly characterised as providing a ‘governance function’ with guidelines and cross-national standards. This shall help to build a consistent corporate image and to protect the brand’s core identity. Occasionally, the unit is also compared to a ‘consulting function’ that serves to enable and promote exchange between international business units, for example, when launching a new product on foreign markets. Such a cross-divisional function, which drives internationalisation by advising colleagues from foreign markets, has been established by approximately one quarter of interviewed companies within the last two decades. Typical reasons, as mentioned, are the growing complexity and increasing ‘opacity’ of the corporate network structures, rising risks of crises as well as changing demands in corporate communications.

The role concept of communication leaders within internationalisation is related to a ‘strategic impulse emitter’, ‘gatekeeper’ or ‘boundary spanner’, who operates at the interface of the global company and its international environment and, thus, supports the headquarters’ priorities on cross-national levels. In order to align communication practices to international business strategies, any communication leader needs a clear understanding of international business goals as well as access to them and must be involved in the decision-making process – according to the interviewees. Additionally, network abilities, strategic consulting competences, an understanding of international contexts, seniority and emotional intelligence are rated as highly important on a personal level.

In sum, most dimensions of the international dynamics framework for strategic communication were validated as forms and objectives for communications in global business environments. The actual implementation of each specification, however, differs according to personal experience and organisational settings. Although it was not possible to conduct a quantitative survey in the course of this research project, this article helps to explain specifications and clarify multiple contributions of communication to the internationalisation of firms.

Outlook and implications for research and practice

While much is to be learnt about the origin and nature of international ventures, the different priorities of communication in various periods of international development have been unveiled by this research. Theoretical assumptions and models identified in the literature analysis were summarised and contrasted with empirical interviews conducted with twelve heads of communication at global corporations. This allowed us to build and verify a framework for explaining the four core contributions that communication departments can deliver to organisational international success: *initiation, transformation, expansion* and *integration.* The conceptual framework explains and predicts a set of typical periods of internationalisation and supportive communication approaches; thereby, it should be extended through future studies. The framework stimulates reflection and can be used as a reflection tool for strategy processes in communication departments and consultancies. By adding this perspective to the traditional debate on international public relations, communication departments and their leaders go beyond optimising their own practices. They are also capable of delivering specific contributions to the core business in global environments.

Beyond that, the study emphasises the value that is attached to a cross-disciplinary perspective in our discipline. The integration of specific requirements of international business into the paradigm of strategic communication helps to expands it towards new objectives and activities. In this way, the study provides a new, comprehensive rationale for explaining the influence of communications on international development and the success of companies. The article provides direction for future research in an increasingly important field of strategic communication. Future research might use these conceptual insights to empirically explore each core field of strategic communication in detail. Much more can and needs to be done to map out the manifestation of different communication elements within the process of internationalisation and to understand practices and performance. Scholars might also be interested in identifying competencies required for performing multiple responsibilities of this kind and exploring how communication leaders could demonstrate the value of communication for internationalisation in an appropriate way. Within the international dynamics framework, these questions are all open for further examination.

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