

PROMOTING THE IMAGE OF NGOS IN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the importance of communication in NGOs as well as their promotion in society. The first part of the paper explains how communication can help NGOs in their efforts. The second part of the paper describes the most important communication tools and channels which NGOs could use in order to solve the community problems, to keep in touch with all target audiences and improve their image and credibility. The last part of the paper provides an overview on the image of the nongovernmental sector in Romania.

KEYWORDS: *communication tools, web communication, channels of communication, social networks, models of public relations, credibility and image*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have always depended on their image as it has a heritage value and it is often essential for their credibility (Pârlea, 2010). A good management of the image leads to increasing public confidence in the activities conducted.

NGOs activity often reflects the efforts of people who want to contribute to solving problems of general interest. Although the work of these organizations is intense and generates positive effects on beneficiaries, some of them will not know it and will not appreciate it unless it is made public (Dan, n.d.; Silver, 2003).

Therefore, the organizations of the sector should communicate in order to attract human and financial resources (Ajibade, 2009; Duhalm, 2010), to achieve the desired changes on the target group, etc. This involves directing attention to the following aspects (Păceșilă, 2016):

- Providing realistic answers to questions about their existence and activity to create a professional image in the society;
- Knowing the modalities of communication with the external environment and preparing informational materials describing the organization and its area of interest.

An NGO has to proactively communicate what it does without teasing journalists with information that has no news potential. It is proof of transparency, seriousness and responsibility to tell the sponsors and partners how their support has improved the community life. That is why a several public relations materials can be of real use (Dinu, 2011):

- A press release announcing the launch of a new program service, but also the results of a campaign;
- A newsletter informing all target audiences (beneficiaries, sponsors, partners, volunteers, government leaders, journalists) about NGO activities and results
- An annual activity report where the NGO should give thanks to sponsors and accurately state how the organization's resources were used.

Particular attention should be paid to the message sent (Hovland, 2005), the communication time and the modalities chosen for communication (Walsh, 2013). Some organizations exhibit a high degree of selectivity for the messages received due to the purpose of their activity involving contacts with a great number of interlocutors. If the institution is situated at a great distance from the town where the nongovernmental organization operates, it is good to pay a higher attention to the content of the messages.

Each organization has its own rules, operates under certain values and has a specific organizational culture that distinguishes it from others. Moreover, there are organizations characterized by a predominantly informal working style, while the bureaucratic style is in force in others. On the other hand, opening to what is new or accepting proposals from the external environment varies from one organization to another.

Cutlip only creating a department of communication and public relations or hiring a specialist, but conducting information campaigns, a constant communication with all target audiences, a good relationship with journalists who are among the most important partners, events and raising campaign funds for the cause they support (Dinu, 2011).

According to Cutlip et al. (2000), the public relations in a nongovernmental organization aimed at:

1. Accepting the organization's mission
2. Developing the communication channels with the people that the NGO serves
3. Creating and maintaining a favorable climate for fundraising
4. Supporting the development of public policies favorable to the organization's mission
5. Informing and motivating the key organizational components (such as employees, volunteers and Board members): to be dedicated and work productively in order to support the mission, goals and objectives of the organization.

With the support of public relations, an NGO could communicate effectively with all target audiences: beneficiaries, partners, sponsors and volunteers (Bhati, 2013). The target audience should know what services and programs are provided by the NGO, who are the beneficiaries and which are the results. The permanent communication with beneficiaries and sponsors allow the NGO to improve its projects, to know better the needs of the target audiences and to use more efficiently the resources from the supporters (Agenția BDR Associates, 2012).

According to Bobaru et al. (2004), communication with the external environment should be approached from two different perspectives, each of them requiring a certain type of relationship and the adaption of the message:

- The external environment as the target audience of the organizational communication. In this case, the purpose of the communication is directly influencing the behaviors and/or attitudes among the various groups and institutions;
- The external environment as intermediary in the process of organizational communication: the organization wants that the exponents of various groups and institutions send the positive messages about it and/or its activities and its results.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research was designed to be a qualitative study with the goal of showing the usefulness and importance of communication in NGOs. The study is based on the document analysis method which is a form of qualitative research involving documents' interpretation by the researcher (Bowen, 2009) in order to highlight directions, attitudes, subjects, values or patterns. The data have been collected from scientific journals, books, magazines, online reports, websites and other related reviews.

The reasons for using this method in the present paper are the following:

- It is an efficient and effective way of collecting information while the documents are easy to manage
- There are different types of documents which represent an accessible and reliable source of information.
- Some documents are open-access and it is not necessary to pay money in order to get them.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

As regards communication, NGOs are less studied than other types of organizations or public institutions (Pârlea, 2010). Communication is at the heart of the non-governmental sector (Mathew & Ogedebe, 2012) because its organizations should communicate with their internal and external audiences (Wu, 2012). Modern nongovernmental organizations work on the principle of disseminating information about their activities and objectives (Apaydm, 2012; Cimrmannova & Hubinkova, 2016). That is why, the leadership of NGOs should understand and be aware of the importance and need for communication (Brooke, 2012), both in terms of credibility and of their image in the community (Hager et al., 2004; Shaheen & Haneef, 2014; Carter, 2017).

Communication has an important contribution to attracting resources (De Castro, 2005) (which is a problem of the sector), increasing the trust of beneficiaries, sponsors, donors and all of categories of citizens in this sector, as well as its credibility (Bhati, 2013). A similar opinion belongs to Kelly (1991) who considers that public relations play an important role in the fundraising process, as well as in the effective management of communication between NGOs and their donors or sponsors. Moreover, Dimitrov (2008) considers that communication becomes the main element both in terms of obtaining long-term funds, and in terms of obtaining competitive advantages. In the same spirit, Prasad and Tata (2015) attach great importance to reputation and legitimacy of NGOs which are essential in obtaining the necessary funds for their activity.

According to Josan (2010), Philip Kotler mentions two models of public relations used by the third sector organizations: the traditional model based on the institutional image; the model close to the contemporary public relations (public advocacy) aiming at initiating the social action.

Furthermore, web communication is an important channel through which NGOs can deliver their messages and gain public support in solving problems (Kang and Norton, 2004; Hart et al., 2005; Waters and Feneley, 2013). In the same spirit, Gerodimos (2008) considers that NGOs websites are better built than those of public institutions, but they depend heavily on traditional media in disseminating information, which requires that these organizations focus on other ways of communicating. However, according to different authors (Kang and Norton, 2004; Nugroho, 2008; Pavlovic et al., 2014), most NGOs are not aware of the potential of the Internet and do not use the social networks to communicate with beneficiaries, sponsors, local authorities, mass media, etc.

4. COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS FOR NGOs

Although the organization's identity is well defined, and its activities aimed at solving the community problems, if the organization does not make them known to the citizens, authorities, partners and donors, its credibility and image will suffer over time.

The most important communication tools which NGOs could use are the following (Bobaru et al, 2004, Păceșilă, 2015; Păceșilă, 2016):

- The brochures and the leaflets. They usually contain a lot of information, and if their design is well done, they draw more attention. The advantage of these materials is that they could be kept by the receiver in order to be studied.

- The leaflet provides an introduction and a brief overview about the purpose of the organization or the aim of the project. It could be used to promote an organization or an event and to convey a specific message. It addresses a broad audience (the public) or a specific one (the financiers).
- The letters sent directly to the organization's beneficiaries or to the potential donors. They could be greatly customized to comply with the beneficiaries or donors' needs. Other advantages are the low cost and the ease of development. Moreover, the letters create a sense of appreciation among those who receive them.
- Succeeding in written communication requires compliance with the following aspects: selecting the words which enable the reader to interpret the message accurately and precisely, using the right words as well as the phrases and the short sentences, developing a pleasant way of presenting the work.
- According to Străineanu and Ardelean (2008), the classic structure of a business letter contains the following elements:
 - the organization's letterhead (including the name, logo, address, telephones, faxes and emails, web page);
 - the letter's number and date of registration in the register of the organization;
 - the reference of the letter;
 - the person receiving the letter;
 - the content (should include a brief summary and the text; if the text is too long, it will be included in the annex to the letter);
 - the signatures of a person from the board members as well as the organization's stamp.
- The newsletter: contains relevant information about the organization's activities and current services provided, provides transparency and contributes to increasing the trust of citizens, sponsors, beneficiaries, volunteers and journalists in the organization (Dinu, 2011). The newsletter could be printed as a newspaper or a small magazine and it is an important tool for providing information about the organization and communication with volunteers and members, as well as with citizens. It could be printed monthly, bimonthly or quarterly, depending on the volume of information the organization wants to make available to readers.
- The press release: is usually a short and accurate way of informing with the nonprofit entity sends to the media. It summarizes what the organization wants to be published (Krajnc, 2007). The press release is used when the organization wants to announce an event (the launch of a publication or campaign, the inauguration of a space), a special date for the organization (one year since the start of a project, three years since the establishment of an organization) or completion of a project or activity.
- The press conference: requires careful preparation and planning, setting the time and day that is intended to take place being extremely important. The organization should check if the conference date does not overlap with another important event which could jeopardize the conference audience, especially the presence of journalists.
- The interview with the press enables communication of detailed information about this organization and its projects. The interview is an interactive method involving a structured dialogue based on a list of questions established with the interviewer. The interview could be held live on the radio or television or recorded and processed, being subsequently broadcast on the radio or television or published in a magazine or newspaper.
- The posters and banners are used to announce events or to draw attention to harmful behaviors in the community. They could be composed of both graphics and text, but also only of graphics or only of text. These communication tools are designed to turn heads and to convey information or a certain feeling.

- The promotional materials involve printing the organization's logo or special messages on shirts, mugs, pens, caps that could be subsequently used at certain events. They can be handed to those who visit the organization or to the organization's partners, distributed to people in public places, in the conferences, to the new volunteers, members, or attached to an application for funding, etc.
- The activity reports: could be written periodically or annually. They show the results achieved by the organization in a certain period of time, as well as its financial situation and donors. Moreover, they represent a formal and reliable tool ensuring communication with the stakeholders of the organization: members, donors and partners.

The annual activity report provides an overview of the objectives, activities, results and future actions of the organization combining factual data with photos and quotes in order to create a suggestive image over the activity of the organization. Usually, it is addressed to external audiences (donors, nongovernmental organizations, partners), but also to internal audience (members, volunteers, staff, board of directors).

- Email messages: can be sent both within the country and abroad.

5. MAIN MODALITIES OF COMMUNICATION USED BY NGOS

Known as channels of communication, they represent ways to convey the message of the nongovernmental organization.

- The radio. Since its appearance in 1920, the radio has allowed communication from one point to another. Under social impact, it has evolved to communication over a large number of auditors, subsequently becoming a member of the media
- The television has developed since 1940 in the United States and then in Europe. It has a greater impact on people due to the visual materials and reports. The video spots used in social campaigns have amazing effects, which could not be provided by any other modality of communication. The disadvantage of using television is the huge cost.
- The magazines can publish articles, advertisements of launching projects, special events or send messages of organizations. The NGOs can use the magazines in their field of activity, or from other sectors.
- The newspapers publish various press releases, announcements about events, articles about NGOs' activities. Although only the central press has a national coverage, the local newspapers are often more readable.
- The special events are used by organizations to attract attention to themselves and their activities. In this regard, the plays or contests with honorary awards are appreciated by the public and often have strong impact.
- The relationships with people from public institutions and similar entities in other regions of the country could help to promote the organization.
- The fax. Sending documents via fax has the advantage of quickly reaching to the beneficiary. Moreover, the information is considered official if the document is signed and stamped. The fax can be used especially when certain materials cannot be sent by e-mail because they were developed through special programs that cannot be decrypted by the receiver.
- The phone. In general, the phone can be used to convince some people to perform in a way that they do not want, for example, to participate in an event. A letter by mail or e-mail is easy to avoid compared with a promise obtained through telephone conversations.
- The mail. It is a modality of communication still widely used by nongovernmental organizations. The NGOs should know all the rules regarding the possibilities of sending the

materials.

- Taking into account the dynamics of the information technology throughout the world, some modalities of communication such as email and websites, become increasingly important (Păceșilă, 2016).
- The email is a modern way of communication, very easy to use allowing communication over long distances (including abroad) without spending the organization's budget. It gives the users the possibility of sending business letters (with electronic signature), working documents, etc. Sending and receiving the message takes only seconds, and the receiver could provide the response when he desires.
- The web pages represent data stored in a virtual space which could be accessed by anyone interested and connected to the internet. The organizations could publish announcements, releases and studies about the ongoing activities, promote its products, projects or other organizations and/or partner institutions, present their contact details, etc.

In recent years, the social web networks have turned into national and worldwide ways of communication. A social network is a network of information for the internet users, based on certain websites where users can register and interact with other users. An increasing number of NGOs use these networks due to the possibility of collecting and disseminating information throughout the world (Galvez-Rodriguez et al., 2015): Facebook, Twitter (for the rapid spread of short news), Google+, LinkedIn (for career management and professional relationships) YouTube, Flickr (for photo or image information) etc.

In addition to these advantages, these social networks have some disadvantages: the information cannot be voluntarily deleted, or may be wrong or outdated. Moreover, there are no clear regulations regarding the use of these networks, which could lead to abuses on the data provided by users.

Another way of communication especially used by companies is the blog (SEGAL Family Foundation, 2014), which is closely related to other social networks. It can resize the organization's communication strategy, optimizing the interface of the public communication. The blog is similar to a website, being used by both individuals and organizations to quickly and easily publish information and opinions as well as to generate discussions.

The blog allows leaders of various organizations and politicians to promote their ideas and maintain regular contact with the target audience. This new social phenomenon allows those who use it to turn into true leaders for the audience by exposing their own ideas and beliefs. The essential feature of blogs is the interaction of users with the published messages because they can make comments.

6. COMMUNICATION AND IMAGE OF THE NONGOVERNMENTAL SECTOR IN ROMANIA: PERCEPTIONS AND TRENDS

The organizations of the third sector contribute significantly to shaping the Romanian society. Although the effort behind the campaigns and initiatives carried out by these actors is huge, communication is often inadequate (IQUADS, 2018).

In the medium-sized Romanian NGOs and the larger professional ones, there are specially appointed persons who are responsible for communication. As regards the other organizations, the executive director or manager deals with this area.

According to Năstase (2013), the existence of a communication manager does not justify whether that entity has anything to communicate, deliver externally, explain what it does. It is necessary to create a stable context and organizational structure, with an external impact in order to have what to communicate. The author mentioned above believes that there are also organizations that work a lot, but they do not know how to communicate what they do, which represents a problem. On the other

hand, the Romanian NGOs rarely have access to national media, where they can promote their initiatives, and therefore the Romanian citizens do not know about their activities and the reason for their existence. However, they are very active on the social networks and the internet which they use to educate people and show them more aspects of their work.

The Romanian NGO environment is in a continuous change of image, and non-governmental organizations educate themselves every day in order to achieve the highest performances through their activities. However, the perception of Romanians towards NGOs is harder to change (Imparte.ro, 2013).

Nonetheless, NGOs are becoming more mature because they have just begun to take into account the professionalization. The image of a begging NGO still exists, but more and more citizens and companies are starting to realize that the request for funding represents the signing of a partnership (Năstase, 2013).

7. CONCLUSIONS

The importance of communication in NGOs and their promotion in society have been analyzed in this paper by investigating several publications in the field. The purpose of this paper is to increase the knowledge and understanding about the tools and modalities of communication used by NGOs in order to improve their image and credibility. NGOs should communicate with all target audiences: beneficiaries, partners, sponsors and volunteers. Moreover, the target audience should know what services and programs the NGOs offer, to whom and with what results. The permanent communication with beneficiaries and sponsors gives NGOs the opportunity to improve their image and credibility as well as their projects in order to better understand the beneficiaries' needs and to use effectively the resources provided by the supporters.

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