

Triangle of credibility, a practical tool of marketing communication

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Those who control the amount and the quality of information that people work with, also control to a certain extent, how people will eventually think and react. It is evident that the mass media transmit information to the public while the opinion leaders shape their final attitudes.¹ Therefore it is necessary to work on the assumption that a media message on its own cannot usually create the desired behavior among its recipients. It is the combination of several basic factors that plays the decisive role in a message being accepted and subsequently producing the desired behavior on the part of the recipients. For the purposes of effectively influencing opinion (obtaining the consent of consumers or citizens, achieving the desired effect), it is vital that the recipient accepts the communication, identifies with it and then reacts according to the needs and expectations of the originator (the one who created, processed and distributed the information).

For successful transmission and especially for acceptance of the communication the following factors are critical:

- 1 quality of information – credibility of the source,
- 2 availability of alternative information,
- 3 receptive environment (especially recipient's own experience and character).

If there is no hiccup in this „triangle of credibility“ it is more likely that the target group will accept our message and start to understand things according to it!

¹ With a view to this fact, which was already observed during the promotion of World War I in the United States, E. L. Bernays claimed that if we manage to influence opinion leaders to engage in our interest, whether consciously or not, we automatically influence the group they lead, control or inspire.

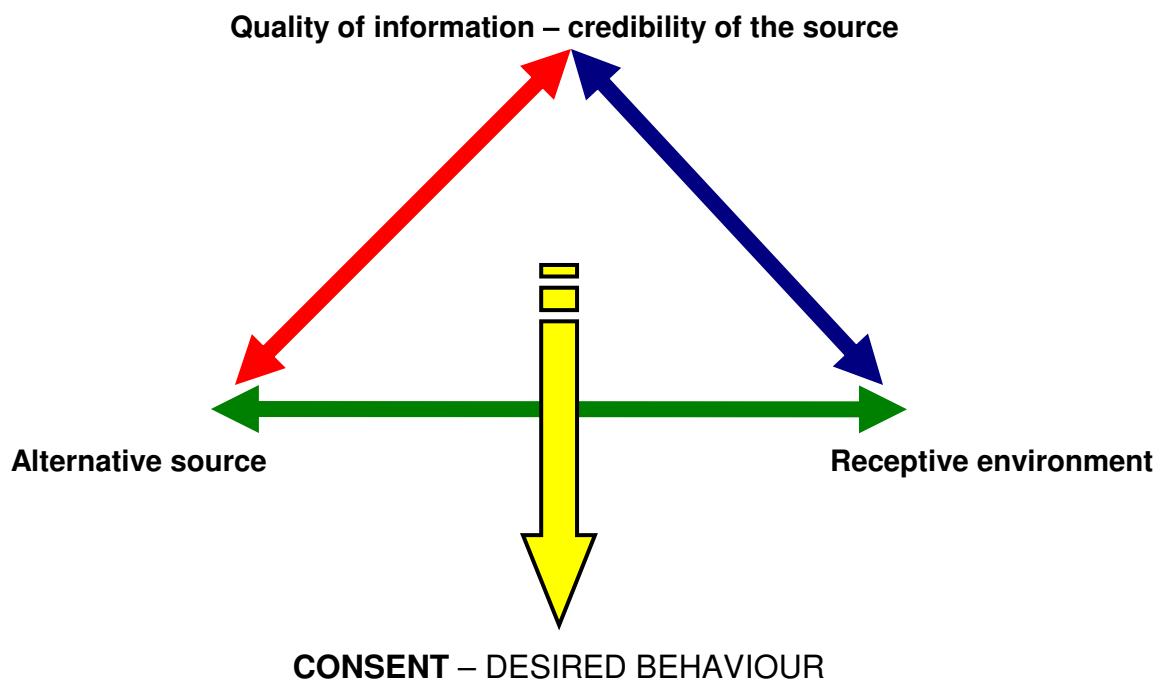


Fig.: Triangle of credibility

1. Quality of information – credibility of the source

The credibility of the source is a key part of the quality of information. Other parts are topicality, the method of delivery and the cultural status of the media. An important role in the acceptance of the message is also played by the technical possibilities of the medium. Equally important is the compatibility of the broadcast's codes (aesthetic, ideological and linguistic) with the codes of the recipient. If a male speaker or newsreader looks tired and unshaven and has long hair and an earring, a large proportion of the audience (with the exception of those who like such a style) automatically distrusts his presentation and the information it conveys, regardless of whether the information is correct or not. Similar doubts can be caused by technical problems during the broadcast, even if the presenter looks perfect. If the reception is disrupted by technical problems, such as sound and vision dropout, the effect of the communication is greatly weakened.

If the presented content is in sharp contrast with the firmly grounded ideological preferences of the recipient (especially political views), the likelihood of manufacturing consent is significantly limited.

An indispensable role in the question of credibility of the source (the media) and the final effect of the content is also played by its cultural status. For example, news coverage, journalism and film work with a different sensory and semantic context than conventional advertising. We approach traditional advertising in the knowledge of its manipulative intent.

Unlike conventional advertising, journalistic media output, where PR is most often applied, has the form of a description of events. It brings a different (aesthetic, technical and ideological) quality of information, and therefore appears more credible. This is why it is more likely to influence opinion and result in the desired behavior among its recipients.

The personnel policy of an organization that produces a particular communication is another factor which affects its quality and final effect. To a great extent, the way the speaker, PR specialist, reporter or presenter manages to convey a specific message depends on his education, skill and professional experience.

1.1 *Credibility and quality of authority*

The views and statements of a public authority (whether local or cosmopolitan) are crucial for the final attitude of an individual and the public as a whole. Public authorities are made up of people who have achieved exceptional results in their field, regardless of their political views and social status, as well as those who enjoy general trust and respect due to their behavior in significant, real-life situations. For most people, public authorities are sources of inspiration and compasses for forming their opinions, decisions and actions. This is also why they are called opinion leaders.

The authority of opinion leaders, in concrete terms of many GPs, played a significant part in shaping the attitudes of the world's general public towards the so-called Mexican swine influenza, which later turned into a flu pandemic. It was first diagnosed in spring 2009 in Mexico. The outbreak of this dangerous infectious disease allegedly started in a rendering plant which processed dead pigs from factory farms. Within a short time, several previously very healthy people died in Mexico of the disease, which was caused by a new form of influenza virus. This new Mexican influenza virus was supposed to be much

deadlier than the previously known viral strains. A few dozen deaths among a population of one hundred million in Mexico, and later more deaths in the United States, contributed to a worldwide panic spread by the global media.

Newspapers, radio and television all over the world were bombarding the global public with information that caused alarm. The Mexican, or swine flue, was compared to the Spanish flu which shortly after World War I killed tens of millions of people all over the world. The concerns about history being repeated led to enormous efforts by national governments and international organizations; all this with the assistance of the media who love drama and want to bring their clients (readers, listeners and viewers) socially important information (and even, in the case of the expected flu pandemic, life-saving information). The World Health Organization (WHO), an organization with a long tradition (founded in 1948) and of high international renown, issued a pandemic warning in June 2009 and classified the threat of pandemic at grade five (out of six). The WHO, which is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN), declared the threat of the swine flu to be of a pandemic character because of the speed with which it was spreading via transportation links between the continents. Researchers in the laboratories of the leading pharmaceutical companies, such as Novartis and GlaxoSmithKline, introduced several vaccines shortly after the pandemic was declared which were supposed to lower the risks connected with the epidemic of the H1N1 influenza virus. Immediately, governments purchased vaccines for hundreds of millions of EUR for the protection of selected groups from their populations.² Within several months, the new influenza viral strain really did spread globally as a pandemic.

Despite this fact, the public had been, right from the start, very cautious about preventative vaccination. Their attitude reflected the reservations of many GPs and other medical staff who themselves refused to be vaccinated, despite their belonging to the priority group. Doctors called attention in particular to the new vaccines not being sufficiently tested, the non-standard way they had been introduced, the many administrative irregularities (vaccine batch labels often did not agree with the batch numbers in their documentation), and the

² The priority in allocation of vaccines was given to the professions important to the functioning of the state, its apparatus and infrastructure. In addition to government officials and key politicians, these were members of the security forces, employees of energy companies, medical staff and other selected or vulnerable groups. Later, when there was no demand for the vaccines, the state authorities extended the option of vaccination to other groups including young children and pregnant women. In the end, governments tried to sell the unwanted vaccines abroad.

relatively mild course of the disease in the majority of infected people. The number of deaths caused by this flu was even smaller than with the usual seasonal flu.

A very interesting situation concerning communication thus existed in the society. On the one side, there were the state authorities and organizations buying expensive new vaccines against swine flu from the pharmaceutical companies, perhaps in a good faith. On the other side, there was the skeptical professional and the general public. Somewhere between the two were the media. During the autumn and winter of 2009, the media reported on the attitudes and opinions of both camps in a fairly representative way. The journalists themselves, who the situation concerned just like everyone else, had their own doubts, and so they did not pamper to the state and the pharmaceutical companies. In the words of B. McNair, the media became the arena for competing ideologies. The dominant players - nation states, global organizations and pharmaceutical companies - were obliged to compete for the attention of the recipients of media content with other groups - organizations of general practitioners, who did not necessarily have the economic resources, but who did possess the necessary know-how and learned the media grammar (the rules of their functioning); they introduced an attractive topic which was impossible to ignore, if for no other reason than that we all have only one life. The catastrophic scenarios predicted concerning the swine flu pandemic did not come to pass. The governments had a completely different problem now – what to do with millions of doses of vaccines that no-one wanted.

A real bomb in the case of the swine flu was detonated in the first week of January 2010 by Wolfgang Wodarg, a physician and epidemiologist, chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Health Committee and chairman of the German federal committee for the Health Sector. In the French newspaper L'Humanité, Wodarg said that the swine flu pandemic was one of the greatest medical scandals of the century. He stated that the pandemic of H1N1 declared by the World Health Organization was a fake.³ He alleged that it was the pharmaceutical companies that were responsible for the pandemic emergency. They had used the worldwide scare of a new, dangerous disease to rake in huge amounts of money. According to Wodarg, pharmaceutical companies influenced

³ Odent, Bruno. Influenza A: "They Organized a Psychosis". ORIGINAL FRENCH ARTICLE: Grippe A : « Ils ont organisé la psychose ». Available at: <http://www.humaniteinenglish.com/spip.php?article1427> (2019-05-03)

scientists and public agencies responsible for the quality of health care with the goal of getting patients for their drugs and vaccines against swine flu. They caused the frantic reactions of governments all over the world. Wodarg pointed out the connections between some public officials and the pharmaceutical companies. The vaccines themselves were developed too fast and some ingredients were not sufficiently tested. The vaccine developed by Novartis was, according to Wodarg, made in a bioreactor out of rapidly proliferating animal cancer cells, using a technique that has never been used before. It could not be ruled out that the proteins, the remnants of cancer cells present in the vaccine made in a bioreactor, could generate a tumor in vaccinated people. Based on Wodarg's findings, the German government terminated their contract with Novartis. At his instigation, the Council of Europe launched an investigation into WHO practices. Wodarg's accusations flew round the world.⁴

The negative attitude of a large number of opinion leaders (general practitioners) to the declared swine flu pandemic significantly contributed to the reluctance of the worldwide public in relation to government advice on how to protect against the threat of the potentially deadly disease.

In addition to the negative attitude of GPs, public restraint concerning the publicised swine flu pandemic was also caused by previous experience with bird flu.⁵ According to Wodarg, even then the WHO caused great alarm after a few cases of death were reported and transmission to humans was documented. Many countries bought new and untested drugs, like the well known Tamiflu.

2. Availability of alternative information

The sources of alternative information are not only the mainstream media, but alternative media, opinion leaders, family and friends or trustworthy witnesses of a particular event. Nowadays, various internet servers represent a valuable

⁴ Shortly after his statement for the global media, Wolfgang Wodarg gave an interview to the Czech daily Lidové noviny in which he reiterated his critique. Thus the wider Czech public could also be acquainted with his views.

⁵ The bird flu H5N1 pandemic "raged" between 2005 and 2006. Only a few years earlier and in a similar, although much more hysterical manner, bird flu dominated the global media and the minds of many people. Exhibitions of ornamental birds and poultry were prohibited by hygienists' regulations. Some people were scared of any contact with birds. Concerns about their life and health lead some people to think about disposing of their own stocks, including exotic birds. Just as during the time of mad cow disease, people were reluctant to consume meat, especially poultry. The media vied in reports of dead birds being discovered. Bodies of many dead birds were subjected to autopsy. Any bird – alive or dead - could be host to the deadly virus. The contemporary hysteria is well illustrated by the case of a woman who rang a vet to ask what to do after she found a dead tit on her balcony.

information source (on line alternative). They also create a platform for free public debate. The mainstream mass media cannot usually act as an adequate alternative, as the majority use identical sources of information. While covering national news, they rely on the services of the national news agency. When reporting on events from abroad, they take information from international news networks.

2.1 Dominant sources and information monopoly

It is easy to observe and prove that information on world events is provided and distributed to world audiences by three global news agencies. These are the originally British Reuters agency, the French Agence France-Presse (AFP) and the American Associated Press (AP). With the exception of the public AFP, these are private, joint-stock companies that work on a commercial basis. They supply up to 90% per cent of the world's newspapers, magazines and radio and television stations. That is why in many countries the reports from abroad are virtually identical, or at least very similar, at any given time. Editors decide what news will be published, and in what form, using the same, regularly updated news agency database, from which they pick available information about world events. The key for choosing these is their 'news value' and the expected attractiveness for audiences of the given media. Two thirds of the reporters from the global news agencies work in the western world (Europe and North America). At present, Reuters enjoys the greatest popularity. Its headquarters are in London. A single reporter from such a global news agency often covers several countries in a given region. Central and northern Africa, for example, is covered by only one reporter, for economic reasons; and the rest of the world perceives developments in the area through this pair of eyes. The final news output of a particular regional reporter is, understandably, influenced by his personal and unavoidably subjective observations and impressions and his own professional contacts (these can be ideologically uniform and non-transparent). In their final effect, these factors shape the resulting picture of events which is distributed by the agency to the whole world. The locals might be very surprised, while reading or listening to foreign media, by what is reportedly happening in their country and which regional 'authorities' express themselves on the situation. But this cannot be judged by foreign audiences. They perceive reality via information on foreign news in their national media, which buy their news from reputable news

agencies. They often present the news without giving the source. This often means that news from abroad is in reality only one person's view of the situation. A single person can thus create a picture of political and social reality, which is subsequently taken up the whole world, especially when no alternative sources exist.⁶

3. Receptive environment

The receptivity of the environment largely depends on the character of the recipient, which is determined by his:

- experience, age, education, social status, and gender,
- current physical and psychological state,
- access to the code used by the media (literacy and presence of a TV set, radio or internet connection),
- linguistic compatibility (same language), aesthetic and ideological codes.

When the ideological preferences (usually political views) of a recipient are in sharp contrast with the broadcast content, the chance of his identifying and therefore being influenced by it are considerably reduced (see quality – credibility of information).

Generally, it can be said that: "The more credible the source of communication, and the less contradictory the alternative sources of information (including the personal experience of the recipient), the more likely it is that the communication will create an effect and lead to the required behavior on the side of the recipients."

Simply stated, when the presented parameters of " „Ftorek's triangle of credibility" are adopted, desired effects of interest information are more likely to be reached.

⁶ The absence of professional news sources was apparent for example during the anti-government demonstrations in Teheran during the Iranian presidential election in July 2009. Foreign media were banned from reporting on the demonstrations (allegedly for reasons of hostile and biased reporting). News editors of global mass media had to rely on the information spread by Iranian bloggers on the internet (mostly those that commented it at English). The personal experiences of the bloggers and their subjective descriptions of events were presented to the world as news of the events in this closed and closely-watched country torn by political strife (violent opposition protests took place mainly in the capital).

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