The power of effective communication: How the corporate value of 'hospitality' can be promoted through intranet news items

Hilde HANEGREEFS, Hotel Management School Maastricht & Research Centre for International Relationship Management, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (NL)

Mark PLUYMAEKERS, Research Centre for International Relationship Management, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (NL)

Armand ODEKERKEN, Hotel Management School Maastricht & Research Centre for International Relationship Management, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (NL)

Lonneke DE GRAAF, Hotel Management School Maastricht, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (NL)

Jackelien ROELOFS, Hotel Management School Maastricht, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (NL)

Eline TE VELDE, Hotel Management School Maastricht, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (NL)

Anne VERBEEK, Hotel Management School Maastricht, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (NL)

Ruben DE WINTER, Hotel Management School Maastricht, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (NL)

Abstract

This study was conducted at the request of a recently merged Dutch health care institution that wanted to learn how they could use their intranet more effectively to disseminate their new corporate identity and the associated values, in particular the hospital's core value of hospitality. Interviews held with employees from different departments revealed that, although everybody knew the intranet, they did not think its contents reflected the corporate values in any way. In a subsequent experiment, we demonstrated that improving the text quality of the intranet news items led to a significant decrease in perceived level of difficulty and reading time. Moreover, adding explicit lexical references to the core value of hospitality improved the hospitality image of the organisation among the employees. This suggests that it is indeed possible to turn the intranet into a more effective communication platform that can serve as a 'vehicle' for corporate values such as hospitality.

Key words *Hospitality, Corporate values, Effective communication, Text quality, Intranet*

Theme *What's going well in your own specialism?*

Focus of paper *Practical / Industry*

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Context

In a time when the information landscape is constantly changing, high-quality professional communication has clearly acquired a new urgency (Gallagher, 2011; Graham & Perin, 2007). For organizations it is pivotal to optimize the quality of interaction with their stakeholders, be it through oral or written communication (Bateman, 2014, Knispel 2012). Effective professional communication is, after all, a powerful tool to influence the knowledge, attitude and behaviour of people, whether they are internal or external to your organisation. As far as internal stakeholder groups are concerned, effective communication has been shown to positively influence the engagement of employees (Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011; Schulman, 2005; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) as well as their willingness to change (van Praet, 2015; Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Wanous, Reichers & Austin, 2000). As such, communication, which is often taken for granted in present-day educational settings (Janssen, van der Loo, van den Hurk & Jansen, 2012), is not just a soft skill (Waldeck, 2012; Wanous, Kearney & Plax, 2000). It is critical to building trust, educating and informing stakeholders, creating a strong image, sharing ideas and participating in a wide range of business situations (Knispel & Gupffert; 2008, Kuppenveld & Sterk, 2007). People who communicate clearly are well-equipped to serve as representatives of their company or brand and are generally more effective in their jobs than people who lack communicative competence.

The current study was conducted at the request of a recently merged Dutch health care institution, henceforth referred to as 'the hospital'. Since the merger in January 2015, the hospital's different departments were spread over a larger region. Given this geographical dispersion, the Board of Directors, aware of the importance of corporate health care communication (Eeckman & Van San, 2015), wanted to revive the use of the intranet as a means to interact with their employees, manage organisational information electronically and unite employees working from different locations (Singh, 2009). In the first phase of this transition process, they wanted to gain insight into how the intranet texts, as textual artefacts of the organisation, reflect the hospital's 'espoused' or stated values (Schein, 2009) - in particular, the hospital's new core value of hospitality - and, as such, incite the employees to act accordingly (Michels, 2013; Riel, 1995).

We tried to provide these insights using the 3C-scan ("Complete Communication Check-up"), an audit tool developed by the Research Centre for International Relationship Management with the aim of helping organisations improve their professional written communication (e.g., newsletters, web texts, press releases, e-mails, letters, etc.). It is a diagnostic tool that helps disentangle an organisation's communication problem, using both quantitative (readability tests, word count analysis) and qualitative (usability tests, spelling and grammar check, channel choice, CCC-model) methods (Flesch, 1951; Scott, 1997; Renkema, 2012). The outcome of the scan is an advisory report that meets the specific demands of the organisation, with the possibility for further follow-up training in writing. In this way, the 3C-scan approach guarantees tailor-made and research-based communication advice in a relatively short time span. Paradigmatically, the 3C-scan ties in with the frameworks of Content Analysis and Text Linguistics. On the one hand, it can be considered a research technique for the objective, systematic, quantitative and qualitative description of communicative content (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorf, 1989). On the other hand, it deals with texts as part of a communication system, a broader communicative context that always has to be taken into account (Halliday & Webster, 2014).

The 3C-scan methodology follows a stepwise approach, starting with an orientation phase, followed by a main research phase and, finally, the delivery of an advisory report containing concrete guidelines for improvement. In the orientation phase of the current project we wanted to gain insight in the sender's intentions, the receivers' expectations, their experiences with the intranet and their knowledge of the new corporate values. Therefore, we interviewed 30 employees selected by means of quota sampling. They were all asked the same questions related to their use of the intranet and their knowledge of the new corporate values. They were also asked to name some words they would associate with the value of hospitality. This exploratory study revealed that the intranet was commonly used amongst all employees and divisions, and that the employees were well familiar with the new corporate values. In the eyes of the interviewees, however, the link between the two was practically absent: the content posted on the intranet was not perceived as being specifically related to the corporate mission or values.

These results gave rise to further in-depth analysis of the intranet news items. As a first step in the main research phase, 609 texts were scanned with the help of quantitative and qualitative tools. This analysis revealed two main shortcomings. Firstly, although the texts had an overall acceptable Flesch-Douma score of ± 60 (which corresponds

to the difficulty level of a standard text), they contained some deficiencies in terms of cohesion, coherence, lexical consistency and paragraph structure. Secondly, we noted a total absence of lexical references to the new values (e.g., in the form of adjectives).

This led us to conclude that the intranet was not used to its full potential: the text quality of the news items was sub-optimal and absolutely no reference was made - implicitly nor explicitly - to the hospital's core value of hospitality. To demonstrate that improving these two aspects would indeed lead to positive outcomes in terms of the employees' understanding and appreciation of the texts, we conducted an experiment, which is the main focus of the remainder of this paper.

Research questions

Given the findings described above, the purpose of the main study was to determine how the hospital could use the intranet news items more effectively to disseminate the core value of hospitality. The research questions, which are visually presented in Figure 1, were as follows:

RQ1: What is the effect of readability on effective communication, in terms of comprehension, understanding, interpretation, attitude towards the text, emotions, hospitality image, and reading time, all on behalf of the receiver?

RQ2: What is the effect of explicitly referring to the value 'hospitality' in the texts on effective communication, in terms of comprehension, understanding, interpretation, attitude towards the text, emotions, hospitality image, and reading time, all on behalf of the receiver?

The dependent variables were selected on the basis of prior literature (Pinto, 2007), as well as needs voiced by the hospital that commissioned the research.

Figure 1. Visual representation of the research questions
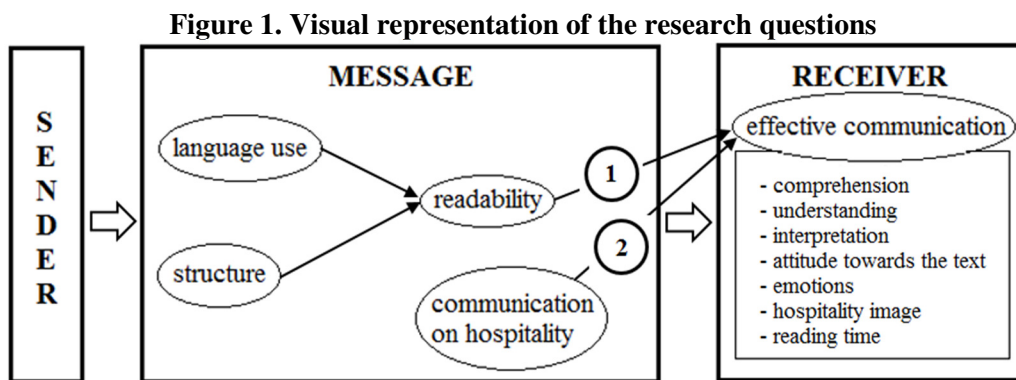
Methodology

In the experiment, we presented participants randomly with one of four manipulated news items (cf. *Design and procedure*). After reading the text, participants answered questions related to readability, the communication on hospitality and other relevant variables (see Figure 1). The entire experiment was conducted digitally in NetQuestionnaire. In this section, we describe the design and execution of the experiment and the content of the questionnaire in more detail.
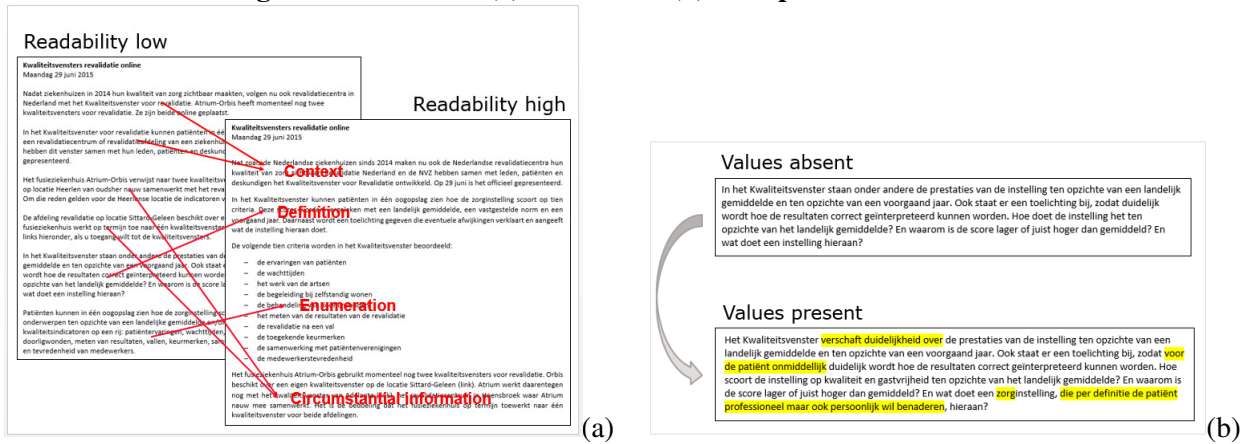
Participants

The population targeted for this study consisted of current employees of the hospital, working at the different levels (care, cure, service and staff) and locations of the organisation. The participants were selected by means of quota sampling (Hair, 1984). 190 employees participated in the experiment. Three of them were excluded from the analysis because they took significantly longer to complete the experiment than the others, which would suggest that they had been interrupted or distracted. As a result, the final data set contained the responses of 187 participants (49 men and 138 women, M_{age} = 44). 5% of the participants had completed lower education, 49% intermediate-level education and 46% higher education.

Design and procedure of the experiment

Since we wanted to measure the effect of two independent variables - readability and the presence of explicit lexical references to hospitality - on a range of dependent variables related to effective communication, we adapted an original intranet news item with a relatively low readability score (Flesch-Douma = 29.66) to create three new versions (see Figure 3). We manipulated the original text on the basis of two features: the text's readability in terms of structure, coherence and lexical consistency (structural manipulation, see Figure 2a), and the number of times an explicit lexical reference was made to the value of hospitality (lexical manipulation, see Figure 2b). In the text versions that scored high on communicating hospitality, we added six words, expressions or parts of a sentence to the original text that the employees participating in the exploratory interviews had associated with hospitality (marked in yellow in Figure 2b).

Figure 2. Structural (a) and lexical (b) manipulation of the text

So, in the experiment, participants were randomly assigned to one of these four text versions:
- Version A, the original news item, that scored low on readability and low on communicating hospitality
- Version B, with an equally low score on readability and a high score on communicating hospitality
- Version C, with a high score on readability and a low score on communicating hospitality, or
- Version D, that scored high both on readability and communicating hospitality.

Figure 3. Experimental design: four text versions
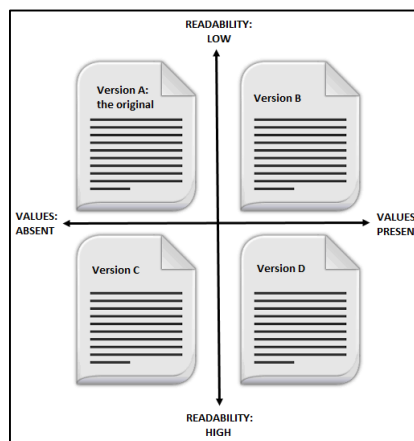
Instrumentation

After reading the text, all participants were presented with the same questionnaire. Their *comprehension* of the text was assessed by means of a Cloze test (Taylor, 1953; Jansen & Boersma, 2009), while they indicated their understanding by identifying the number of difficult words in the text (1-5, 6-10 or more than 10). *Interpretation* was evaluated with one question concerning the goal of the text, the answer to which was subsequently marked as either correct or incorrect. *Attitude towards the text* was measured by means of three items derived from Das, Kerkhof & Kuiper (2008). *Emotions* were measured before and after reading the text using the Circumplex model of affect (Larsen & Diener, 1992), and the differences in positive and negative emotions between the pre- and the post-test were included as the dependent variables in the final analysis. *Hospitality image* was operationalized by means of six Likert-type statements concerning the hospital's accessibility, clarity, client-centricity, competence, personal attention and willingness to answer questions. Finally, the *reading time* was tracked by NetQuestionnaire. Since the distribution of this last variable turned out to be skewed, it was logarithmically transformed prior to the analysis.

Analysis

The experimental results were analysed using different statistical procedures. If the dependent variable was nominal or ordinal (i.e. for comprehension, understanding and interpretation), a Chi-square test was run for both independent variables separately. If the dependent variable was continuous (all the other variables), a factorial ANOVA was used with readability and communicating hospitality as the independent factors. All assumptions for using these techniques were met.

Results

The results of these analyses are summarized in Tables 1 and 2. Significant effects are marked by a *.

Table 1. Results for the readability manipulation

Dependent variable	Statistical test	*p*-value
Comprehension	Chi-square	0.07
Understanding	Chi-square	0.00*
Interpretation	Chi-square	0.38
Attitude towards the text	Factorial ANOVA	0.71
Positive emotions	Factorial ANOVA	0.58
Negative emotions	Factorial ANOVA	0.75
Hospitality image	Factorial ANOVA	0.15
Reading time	Factorial ANOVA	0.00*

As can be seen in Table 1, the readability manipulation turned out to have a significant effect on two dependent variables: understanding (χ^2 (3) = 14.81, $p < 0.005$) and reading time (F (1,184) = 13.05, $p < 0.0001$). For understanding, the main difference between the low and high readability conditions turned out to be in the category 6-10 unknown words. Participants who read a low readability version of the text checked this box more often than could be expected on the basis of chance (Expected N = 39; Observed N = 49), whereas participants who read a high readability version of the text checked this box less often than could be expected on the basis of chance (Expected N = 42; Observed N = 31). Therefore, it appears that increasing readability had a positive effect on perceived understanding, even though the actual lexical content did not differ between the low and the high readability conditions. For reading time, the direction of the effect was straight-forward: participants who read a high readability version of the text took less time to do so (M_{high} = 4.36) than participants who read a low readability version of the text (M_{low} = 4.69).

Table 2 shows that the communicating hospitality manipulation did not have any significant effects at the .05 level. However, the effect on hospitality image was marginally significant at the .10 level (F (1,184) = 3.15, $p = 0.08$). Participants who read a text in which the value of hospitality was communicated explicitly, rated the

hospitality image of the hospital more positively (M_{high} = 4.90) than participants who read a text that did not contain explicit references to hospitality (M_{low} = 4.61).

Table 2. Results for the communicating hospitality manipulation

Dependent variable	Statistical test	*p*-value
Comprehension	Chi-square	0.89
Understanding	Chi-square	0.37
Interpretation	Chi-square	0.47
Attitude towards the text	Factorial ANOVA	0.72
Positive emotions	Factorial ANOVA	0.25
Negative emotions	Factorial ANOVA	0.94
Hospitality image	Factorial ANOVA	0.08
Reading time	Factorial ANOVA	0.15

Conclusions and discussion

The results presented above provide answers to our research questions. With respect to RQ1, higher readability resulted in better understanding and a shorter reading time on behalf of the employees, both of which are indicators of more effective communication. With respect to RQ2, the effect of communicating hospitality was limited to a marginally significant difference in the hospitality image of the organisation between the low and the high condition. Although small, this difference is already quite remarkable, since it could be observed after reading only one text with no more than six references to hospitality.

These findings can be translated into several guidelines for rethinking the current intranet and its contents. First and foremost, news items on the intranet should be kept short and straightforward. Creating a clear structure and avoiding long and difficult words will add to the efficiency of the text. Adding explicit (yet subtle) references to the corporate values was shown to have a marginally significant effect when applied to one text. Imagine what this could mean when this strategy is applied to all the intranet news items? All in all, the hospital was pleased with the advisory report that resulted from this investigation. They planned on sending it to all the text writers in their ranks and using it as a checklist to monitor all texts sent in for publication. Obviously, this approach and the resulting findings can also be used to rethink the external communication, such as web-based communication directed towards the patients and other stakeholders.

Finally, the results presented above generally prove that, although it comes with a cost, effective communication does create value for all the stakeholders involved: for the sender, since it enables him to tell and sell the corporate story, as well as for the receivers, since they become part of the corporate community. The electronic channel, the intranet, also enhances the contact with remote or on-the-road employees.

The current study also has its limitations. We did not take into account the power of images in electronic interfaces, nor the lay-out/design of the intranet website or other macro-level features of web communication that could enhance the receiver's interest in the medium, such as target differentiation. Of course, these are issues that can be addressed in future research.

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