The necessity of communication and the significance of its status within any area and in any activity results from the need of a thorough knowledge of the environment, of the opinions and interests of any subject and also from the necessity to offer the most efficient way how to solve these requirements. A part of the communication process are also several crisis and problematic circumstances and expressions of disagreement. They have to be anticipated and it is necessary to prepare procedures to eliminate them. It is important to recognize these elements on time and to systematically look for answers to them and for the possibilities of corrections. An important role in the creation of a communication plan is therefore played by the analysis and the prediction of the development of existing and potential sources of crisis and disputable questions (the so called issues) and by the identification of means in order to suppress them.

**Keywords**

communication, crisis, enterprise, management

A part of the communication process are also several crisis and problematical circumstances, as well as expressions of disagreement. They need to be anticipated and procedures to eliminate them should be prepared. It is important to recognize such phenomena on time and to systematically look for answers to them and for possibilities regarding their corrections. An important role in the creation of a communication plan is therefore played by the analysis and the prediction of the development of existing and potential sources of crisis and disputable questions (the so called issues), as well as by the determination of possibilities, which counteract them. The aim of this paper is to clarify the essence of issue management as a strategic tool in the management of companies and its connection to crisis communication.

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On the essence of issues and issue management

A critical attitude and a decrease in the trust of the general public in the management of companies in the USA during the half of the 1970’s can be considered to be the main reason, why issue management has been created. The beginnings of issue management are linked to criticism, which was focused mainly on the efforts of companies to manipulate with the conditions and events of the external environment and on the effects resulting from its use only within a long-term time period.

Several approaches (conceptions) have formed during the development of issue management, which dealt with questions regarding its institutionalization into corporate organizational structures; with processes and procedures used by the managers of disputable questions; with approaches to the decisions regarding the importance of issue management and also with its communicational and strategic aspects.

Despite much criticism, issue management has been successfully and permanently established at first in the activities of big American companies, and after initial expressions of an opposition, also in European companies. Issue management is currently a permanent part and one of the key terms of public relations.

The term „issue” denotes topics of political, social and societal nature, which are monitored, controversially perceived and discussed by the public and which significantly influence the behavior of organizations. The disputability of these questions (topics) is based on various perspectives regarding the possibility of their solution as well as on different value systems of the involved parties.

According to Pfannenberg, a disputable question is distinguished by the following characteristics (Pfannenberg 2001):

- it can positively or negatively influence the reputation of a company,
- it is a subject of interest of the public, or of the external environment of the company,
- it represents an opportunity for the medial public,
- it is influenced by the public behavior of the involved parties.

A disputable question (issue) can be therefore anything:

- what is a subject of two or more different opinions,
- which involves the emotional interests of many people,
- what could have a direct impact on the lives of people or on the functioning of the society.

Issues can occur in the external, as well as in the internal environment of a company. Public topics, characterized by a different intensity, are the case of external issues. Issues that arise in the internal environment are usually the result of corporate strategic decisions.

The process of the emergence and the maturing of disputable questions has its regular development, which undergoes several phases. Issues from the external environment, which include public topics, occur at first in the form of weak signals, which gradually grow into formal requirements of interest groups. The development of issues, which emerged from the internal environment of companies, is determined by the public interest and by the possibilities and the room of a company to take action.

The individual phases of the life cycle of such issues, their number, length and intensity depend on the nature of the issue, its dynamics and duration in time. An issue is characterized by latency in the first phase of its life cycle. This means that an issue (topic) exists, but it is hidden. Signals of the existence of such an issue are information, which occur sporadically in the media, comments from activists and so on. It is advisable to clearly recognize and identify an issue, before it is going to break out. The decisive factor in this phase is therefore the application of an interactive approach by the management of a company, which is going to lead to a diminishment of the differences between the interests of a company and the interests of the public, as well as between the interests of specific target groups among each other.

A proactive (preventive) approach is considered in this context also to be significant, because it leads to an early identification of issues as a potential source of crisis and to a proposal of recommendations regarding their removal. The application of both approaches — the interactive and the proactive, enables then to assert the interests of the company management in the public in such a manner, that they become mutually acceptable. The company is able to keep its position and the risk of an involvement of a broad public into an issue is reduced.

In the next phases of the life cycle, the issue is subject to a further development along with an increase of its dynamics. Whereas the first phase of the issue life cycle involves only the top management from the internal environment, a close circle of the public and experts from the external
environment, the second phase includes also the interests of a wider circle of people. Due to the increasing public interest and the involvement of lobbyists, the company’s room to take further actions decreases and an objective discussion becomes tendentious. Companies apply in this case usually the strategy of ignoring or the refusal of the problem.

The issue reaches subsequently the phase of maturity, when, due to the pressure put on by the side of the media and the public opinion, the company has left just a minimal room for a reaction. There is no further room for a proactive approach in this phase. Companies may apply only defensive strategies. Reactive strategies are applied as well and they are characterized by the fact that the company, in its effort to adjust to the external environment, responds to the change ex post, or it reacts to the „movements” of the environment.

The company’s room for reactive strategies is minimal in the last phase of the life cycle. It is typical for this phase, that the company makes concessions and attempts to reach an arrangement with the relevant groups of the external public.

The impacts of an issue on the company can be direct or indirect, depending on the fact, whether they concern the company as a whole or just some of its functional areas. The already mentioned issue management enables the company management to avoid unpleasant situations, fulfilling the task of an early warning system and of a means to prevent the emergence of a crisis.

„Modern approaches to crisis communication highlight the prevention (for instance early warning systems) and the pre-crisis communication, which have the goal to avert an imminent crisis communication before it breaks out” (Vymětal, 2008, p. 285).

„Issue management can be defined as a systematical process which is, thanks to the coordinated cooperation of the strategic planning and communication functions, able to on-time identify, analyze, prioritize and actively influence and assess such external situations from the perspective of efficiency, which may limit the room for strategic actions or which may represent a danger of damaging a good reputation” (Meckel, Schmidt, 2008, p. 327).

„Issue management enables the company management to avoid unpleasant situations. It works as a prevention, because phenomena, which could have a negative impact on the image and the reputation of a company, are recognized on time” (Lesáková et al, 2014, p. 271).

The benefits of issue management can be stated on two levels; in relation to the external environment and in relation to the internal environment. On the level of the external environment, the obvious benefit of issue management is represented by the possibility to improve on basis of a dialogue the mutual relations between the company and the factors of this environment. Due to the continuous monitoring of the external environment, room for companies is created that allows them to react faster to impulses from this environment. The early identification and mainly a fast reaction to an issue enable also the reduction of communication buzz and rumors, which could have not only a negative impact on the reputation, but also on the competitiveness of companies. The implementation of issue management into company processes allows companies to become responsible and to execute their activities and basis of the principles of social responsibility.

The contributions of issue management to the area of relations within the internal environment of a company are obvious as well. By the implementation of issue management, a company creates conditions for the provision of on time, complete and true internal information across the whole company.

The process of issue management and the prerequisites for its implementation in a company

Issue management represents a continuous process, which is based on the following five steps:

- monitoring of the entrepreneurial environment,
- analysis of an issue (s),
- assessment of an issue (s),
- planning of activities to prevent the emergence of a crisis,
- implementation of activities to prevent the emergence of a crisis.

Monitoring of the entrepreneurial environment

This phase is focused on the monitoring of the entrepreneurial environment with the aim to expose discontinuities, which potentially indicate issues. It is important to define correctly the monitored area of the entrepreneurial environment as well as its scope, in order to avoid on one hand a decrease in the possibilities to detect issues or potential issues due to a too narrowly defined room and on the other hand, to avoid a diffusion of capacities (personnel, finances, time and so on) due to a too widely defined radius of the monitored environment. The early identification of people and their anticipated reactions to possible issues enables to prevent a crisis.
Analysis of issues

In this phase, the relevant issues are selected and analyzed. It is not required and often also not possible to identify and subsequently analyze all (existing and potential) issues. For this reason, it is necessary that the company management selects such criteria, which lead to a systematic assessment of issues, their prioritization and presentation to the top management.

After the identification and selection of the relevant issues, the company management can proceed with their detailed analysis. With regards to the fact that an issue may concern any area, it is suitable to focus within an analysis mainly on the origin of the issue, its content, life cycle, the factors of its influence, its consequences and importance from the perspective of the influence on the company.

Assessment of issues

The assessment of an issue depends on the phase of its life cycle. As already mentioned, the several life cycle phases of such issues, their number, length and intensity depend on the character of the issue, its dynamics and duration in time.

Planning of activities to prevent the emergence of a crisis

In the phase of planning, the company management focuses on the definition of activities, which are going to lead to the prevention or the elimination of a crisis. It would not be suitable, if the company management would focus on all possible alternatives of the issue suppression or the crisis elimination process, but it should rather concentrate only on those alternatives, which offer the highest potential from the perspective of successfulness and efficiency. The selection of an adequate alternative enables to obtain the knowledge, whether it is possible to solve an issue “only” by the utilization of communication tools, or whether it is necessary to make some significant changes, such as a modification of the production program. From the perspective of the decision regarding the selection of a suitable alternative to prevent the emergence of a crisis is also important the knowledge, whether it is possible to transform an issue from an external risk or an internal weakness of the company into an internal strength or an external opportunity. However, it is necessary to point out, that an inseparable part of this phase is also the consideration and assessment of all possible alternatives, on basis of the determination of the probability of their success and efficiency in conjunction with the utilization of defensive or offensive strategies. The selected measures have to be then assessed from the perspective of costs, the probability of their success and the scenario of the issue occurrence (pessimistic, optimistic).

Implementation of activities to prevent the emergence of a crisis

In the last phase of the issue management process, the selected measures are put into practice. A part of this step is also the approval of the time schedule and the determination of milestones, which create the prerequisites for the execution of a control that is focused on the fulfillment of the selected alternatives and procedures. The continuous monitoring of the issue development and the tracking of discrepancies between the facts and the plan is necessary, due to the prevention from possible consequences for the company resulting from the changes in the dynamics and the character of the issue itself. These activities should be done in cooperation with the public relations department and individual experts in those respective areas, which are relevant from the perspective of the issue and its consequences for the company.

It is obvious that the public relations department plays an important role within the issue management process, mainly in the area of the communication with the media, alternatively in the area of internal communication. However, in the organizational structures of modern companies, issue management is established within a separate division with its own manager, who is responsible for its process. The fact, whether a company creates a separate issue management department, depends on various factors. One of them is the existing company culture and the integration of issue management into it. The creation of an issue management department depends also on the situation and the skills of the company staff, on the existing motivational systems for the employees and nonetheless also on the support of the top management.

The mentioned company culture represents on one hand an important requirement for the implementation of issue management and its incorporation into the organizational structure of a company and on the other hand, it represents simultaneously one of its most significant barriers and restrictions. The reason lies mainly in the fact that the possibility to change and influence the company culture from a short-term perspective is difficult and almost impossible.
Issue management and crisis communication

Every issue is a source of crisis, because when it is not solved or eliminated, it grows into a crisis. From this perspective, issue management is sometimes referred to as a pre-crisis communication (see above). According to Meckel et al., we understand under the term crisis „unplanned and unwanted processes with a limited time of duration and suggestibility as well as with an ambivalent result” (Meckel, Schmidt, 2008, p. 357).

As a crisis can be considered anything that threatens, threatens and/or is going to threaten the most important values of a company and its acceptance, the enforcement and execution of its activities, products, brands,

provides a limited time for an adequate reaction from the side of the company,

is unexpected or unpredictable for the management of a company.

In the case of a crisis, we can therefore speak about processes, which originate in the internal environment of a company as a result of wrong decisions made by its management; or which are based on external events from the environment of the company and which threaten or may threaten the very existence of the company.

There are several types of crises. For instance, Hamburger differentiates between a sudden crisis, an emerging crisis and a permanent crisis depending on its outbreak, which determines the interest and pressure put on from the side of the public and the time factor (Hamburger, 2006). Chalupána on the other hand distinguishes types of crises depending on their significance — image crises, crises caused by malevolent attacks, crises created by natural disasters and company crises of physical and personal character (Chalupa, 2012).

One of the most important directions of public relations for companies, irrespective of their sphere of influence, is crisis communication. Crisis communication represents a specialized and inseparable part of the company communication (internal and external) in an exceptional situation, when there is a threat to disrupt the stability or the reputation, under the influence of a serious situation and/or negative publicity” (Stanová, 2012). Its goal is to provide the right information, at the right time and in the right place. Crisis communication contributes to the readiness of the management and the respective members of the crisis management; to the decrease of the uncertainty in the public and to the reduction of the negative impact of a crisis.

The prerequisite for a successful crisis communication is to follow the three basic elements (steps) of the crisis conception. There are cases known in the practice, when companies with an established goodwill and a hardly gained trust of the public, lose very fast their status due to the absence of a conception that solves crisis situations. Following facts can be a part of such a crisis conception:

- The identification of a problem and an immediate corrective action, i.e. the collection of information; the geographical determination of the affected area; the subsequent denial and the correction of false information; completed by the immediate withdrawal of the product from the market.
- The active cooperation with authorities in the investigation of an event; the offer of a reward for the provision of information; the guarantee of a full cost refund and alternatively also a payment of compensations.
- The effort to re-establish as soon as possible the trust of the public in the products and in the company itself and excluded are also not those products, which have been the subject of the cause, when a previous investigation proved a detachment of corporate subjects. Otherwise, a production stop follows. A part of this crisis communication step should be also a proposal of measures, which would prevent repeated collapses that contribute towards the damage of the overall image of a company.

The result of the crisis communication planning is a crisis manual, which is also used to be called a crisis communication plan. It represents a document, which serves as a manual for the solution of a crisis situation. Its preparation demands not only teamwork, but it requires also briefness, clarity and comprehensibility and the facticity of its implementation.

Many companies currently realize the necessity to create crisis communication plans, because the way how a company deals with information in times of a crisis, determines in the end the scope and intensity of its impact on the public. The basic characteristics of an ideally solved dialogue with the public are the maintenance of an open, clear, consistent and mainly a legal and trustful communication, free from any signs of doubt, political intere-
tion, free from any signs of doubt, political interests and a defensive standpoint. The reluctance to provide information or evasive answers multiply the unpleasant situation of mutual relations, which are disturbed by a crisis.

Conclusion

Issue management enables the companies to identify new trends and phenomena in their environment and to react appropriately to them. Issue management works as an early warning system due to the early recognition of phenomena, which could have a negative impact on the image and the reputation of a company. It secures a continuous and goal-oriented communication of the company management with groups, organizations and institutions, which co-create the public opinion. It allows an active approach to the main trends through the provision of relevant information, the research and prognosis of these trends and also through the monitoring of the whole development of the company's sphere of influence. It supports the decision process of the company management and it leads to the planning and execution of active countermeasures and parallel measures in accordance to the actual question of dispute. It prevents the emer-

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