QUALITY IN ONLINE COMMUNICATION: 
AN ANALYSIS OF AUSTRIAN ATX COMPANIES

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Abstract

This study shows the current status quo in the digital corporate communication of Austria’s largest listed companies (ATX companies). Based on in-depth literature research, quality clusters such as usability, information and service quality are identified and divided into further subcategories. These are used to examine the websites (homepages) of listed companies. In addition, social media features will be included in the study. In total, each company is evaluated according to 19 criteria. The dimension usability was measured by accessibility, navigation, attractiveness/design. The dimension service quality was measured by interaction, contact persons, languages, newsletters. And the dimension information quality was measured by press releases, company data, financial data, current projects.

The analysis of the 20 homepages examined shows a generally high communication quality. It is striking that the companies, especially the front ranks, are only separated by small distances. Of the three sub-areas examined, the highest level of professionalism can be attributed to information quality and usability. Here the general standard is already very high. The greatest potential for ATX companies to catch up lies in homepage service quality. The analysis also shows that there is still a large gap in social media activities - which is ultimately also strongly reflected in the final ranking. While the top group of companies reached over 93 percent in the social media sector, 13 companies are 37 percent and lower. Summarizing all 19 criteria, the following picture emerges: Voest Alpine AG offers the highest quality in online communication (homepage and social media) with a rating of 93.34 percent, followed by Verbund AG with 85 percent.

Keywords: Quality of corporate Communication, ATX companies, digital communication

1 INTRODUCTION

A How do Austria’s largest listed companies (ATX companies) communicate with the external public? This analysis of online communication activities shows the current status quo in digital corporate communication and is based on the following research questions:

- Which characteristics determine the quality of a company’s online communication?
Which ATX company fulfills most of these quality criteria and thus offers the highest quality online communication?

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The development of corporate communication is closely linked to economic, technical and social changes. In particular, the specifics of Web 2.0 forced traditional corporate communicators to act disruptively in some cases. One-way communication became a two-way communication that had hardly ever been practiced before and the passive consumer/recipient increasingly became an active prosumer. The role of the most important stakeholder group in corporate communications - journalists - has also changed dramatically in recent years. Most of them had to give up their power and influence to a new generation of digital communication professionals, namely bloggers, influencers, youtubers and the like.

Corporate communication is now online-centric. Thus, this scientific paper focuses exclusively on this area - and in particular on the social media and homepage quality of the 20 largest listed companies in Austria, the ATX companies.

It is clear that the area of external corporate communications covers a larger area than this study shows. This analysis thus highlights one important but by no means all-encompassing area of external corporate communications.

2.1 The quality criterion Usability

Websites with good usability enable the fast access to information, quick learnings, low error rates and high productivity. Good usability supports user creativity and improves productivity. Useful commands, menus and icons, well thought-out navigation and clear messages help to reduce the cognitive and physical effort required to bridge these gaps (Preece, 2001 a). High usability can therefore be measured according to the following criteria:

- Dialogue and interaction: prompts and feedback options
- Information design: Information should be easy to read and understand and meet aesthetic requirements.
- Navigation: Navigation should be easy to find, self-explanatory and easy to use.
- Access: download options should be clearly identifiable and accessible

(Preece, 2001 b).

2.2 The quality criterion Information

The quality of information that a system produces and delivers is seen as a key factor for IS success (Information System) (Lee, Kozar, 2006). The quality of website information indicates that it provides relevant, updated and easy-to-understand information to significantly influence the attitude, satisfaction and purchases of online customers (Feindt, Jeffcoate, Chappell, 2002). Information quality can be measured in terms of information relevance, timeliness and comprehensibility. Information relevance includes relevant depth and scope of content as well as completeness of the information. Actuality includes the updating of the information. Comprehensibility involves the simple understanding and clarity of the information (Lee, Kozar, 2006). Mathias Ballod (2011) mentions clarity and transparency as one of the most important quality criteria for information quality. Clear, comprehensible and objective information should convey confidence and give the user the feeling of being in the know about the related topic in its entirety.

2.3 The quality criterion Service

SERVQUAL is a well-known instrument for measuring customer expectations and the perception of service quality. SERVQUAL consists of the elements reliability, responsiveness, empathy, security and tactility. Reliability refers to the ability to perform the promised service reliably and accurately. Responsiveness refers to the willingness to help users and provide fast service. Empathy refers to the care and attention an online portal offers its customers (Lee, Kozar, 2006).

A large part of service quality is system quality. System quality can be measured by navigation capability, response time, personalization, and security. Navigability refers to the website's ability to provide alternative interaction and navigation techniques (De Marsico, Leviaidl, 2004). It gives online users more control over navigation and helps to reach the content with less disorientation and clicks (Shneiderman, Plaisant, Cohen, Jacobs, Elmqvist, Diakopoulos, 2016).
A fast response time is important to improve system quality, as online users are not willing to wait more than a few seconds for an answer (Rose, Straub, 2001). Personalization systems could offer online customers an individual interface, effective one-to-one information and a tailor-made service (Murthi, Sarkar, 2003).

System quality measures the functionality of a website, specifically usability, availability and response time (DeLone, McLean, 2003). In particular, the system quality of a website can be judged by its search function, responsiveness and multimedia capability.

Navigation tools include: Menus, directories, frames, buttons, location maps, a search engine, image maps and colors (Clyde, 2000). Responsiveness is defined as the willingness to help online customers. It can be measured by the time it takes before the customer receives an answer (Watson, Akselsen, Pitt, 1998). The loading times of web pages also play an important role. Too long loading times lead to an interruption of the website use (Weinberg, 2000). The multimedia capability of a website such as graphics, video and audio clips and animations for demonstrating products or services are also quality features. These functions can meet individual information needs, build trust and provide a better learning experience (Chen, 2001).

Providing information is the basic goal of a website (Bhatti et al., 2000). The focus here is on information accuracy. The most basic capability of a website is the presentation of information about products, services, people, events or ideas and plans. The content should be correct, informative and up-to-date. Being up-to-date means both updating existing content and adding new content to the website (Cao, Zhang, Seydel, 2005).

Websites should also be trustworthy. Trust refers to the extent to which customers believe that the website is legal, ethical, credible and capable of protecting their privacy (Wan, 2000). Empathy is the presence of response mechanisms to improve the communication quality of websites. The nature of this dimension dictates that two-way communication must exist. (Chen, 2001).

A website should therefore not only protect users ethically and legally, but it must also provide caring (empathy) and individualized information and attentions to customers/ recipients (Cao, Zhang, Seydel, 2005).

Attractiveness determines whether the website is readable and subjectively pleasing (Watson et al., 1998). Playfulness includes the devices or means with which the attention of users can be generated. Online games, software downloads and Q&As are examples for this (Chen, 2001).

Accessibility in terms of website design means reducing the number of elements on a page competing for attention (Freeman, Clare, Savitch, Royan, Litherland, Lindsay, 2005). In general, three main problems can be identified with the visual design: (a) overloaded and complex page layouts and designs, (b) poor contrast between background and content, (c) text size too small (Petrie, Hamilton, King, 2004).

2.4 The quality criterion Social Media

Whether Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, hardly any company today renounces these fast and direct communication channels. Social media means a variety of media in which users exchange their opinions and experience. Social media includes various channels such as forums, blogs, social networks, photo or video platforms and information portals. Each of these channels addresses specific target groups. The advantages of social media communication have a large reach and, in comparison, rather low costs. In addition, a company’s reputation and image can be promoted and strengthened. Social media is particularly effective in industries where there is a high demand for information. In the present analysis, these are in particular companies from the energy and services sectors (Bruhn, 2011).

The respective channel should correlate with the company and its product/service. Nowadays it is no longer mandatory to develop elaborate advertising videos or staged pictures to become viral online. Users prefer simplicity and credibility. A direct exchange between companies and users is also to take place and dialogue elements are to be strengthened. This study focuses on the social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.

2.5 Summary of the defined criterions

The following characteristics were included in this analysis:

Dimension Usability:

- Accessibility: The number of elements on the site competing for attention must be reduced (Freeman, Clare, Savitch, Royan, Litherland, Lindsay, 2005). Avoid (a) overloaded and complex page layouts, (b) poor contrast between background and content, (c) too small text size (Petrie, Hamilton, King,
Navigation: The website's ability to provide alternative interaction and navigation techniques (Lee, Kozar, 2006). Navigability gives online users more control over navigation and helps to reach the target website with less disorientation and clicks (Shneiderman, Plaisant, Cohen, Jacobs, Elmqvist, Diakopoulos, 2016).

Attractiveness/design: Attractiveness means whether the website is graphically readable and subjectively appealing (Watson et al., 1998). An attractive website starts with good content. The information provided on the website must be correct, informative, updated and relevant to the needs of customers (Cao, Zhang, Seydel, 2005).

Dimension Information:

- Press releases: Press releases are published regularly. These should only be created if meaningful content can be guaranteed. Thus, there is no guideline for an optimal number of press releases (Thielsch, M. T., 2008b). Previous press releases are presented in an archive. This is coupled with a search function - the content is also visually implemented (Bryg, 2004; Wedler, 2012).
- Company data: There is objective, clear company information on company structure, staff, etc. (Bryg, 2004; Wedler, 2012).
- Financial data: It provides objective, clear information on company turnover, share values, etc. (Bryg, 2004; Wedler, 2012).
- Current projects: There is objective, clear information on current projects (Bryg, 2004; Wedler, 2012). Regular updating of information (Barnes, Vidgen, 2003).

Dimension Service:

- Interaction: Dialogue and social interaction: prompts and feedback are the building blocks for social interaction (Preece, 2001 b).
- Contact persons: There is a list of at least one contact person. These are subdivided according to responsibility/categories. There is either a chat function, contact forms, email contact or telephone contact. Ideally, several of these contact options are offered in German. You can contact us via a hyperlink. All information is current, contacts are not outdated (Bryg, 2004; Wedler, 2012).
- Languages: Several languages of the homepage are available (Bryg, 2004; Wedler, 2012).
- Newsletter: It is possible to subscribe to a newsletter (Bryg, 2004; Wedler, 2012).

Dimension Social-Media:

- Regularity & Rhythm: A temporal regularity of posts etc. should be recognizable. Companies that post inconsistently usually appear dubious and outdated (Ceyp/Scupin, 2012).
- Follower increase: You should be able to increase the number of followers within a certain period of time. A feed that does not gain followers is usually due to monotonous and tensionless content (Ceyp/Scupin, 2012).

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The survey is based on the twenty largest companies listed on the Vienna Stock Exchange (ATX companies). The analysis focuses exclusively on the main listed companies. Starting with an intensive literature search, criteria were developed that define and determine the quality of online communication. Based on this, a catalogue of criteria was drawn up which was used for the subsequent analysis. Altogether there were two separate catalogs, each for homepage and social media. The catalogue of criteria for the homepages included quality criteria for the measurement categories usability, service quality and information quality. The social media channels include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram.

- Measured at usability: accessibility, navigation, attractiveness/design
- Measured at service quality: interaction, contact persons, languages, newsletters.
- Measured at information quality: press releases, company data, financial data, current projects.

Each of the twenty companies was assessed separately in its own criteria catalog and using a points system.
Similar to the analysis of the homepages, a catalogue of criteria was also created for the social media channels, which contains the previously defined measurement variables. In contrast to the homepages, the data were recorded quantitatively and the changes evaluated.

Social media channels were measured according the total number of fans at the beginning and end of the observation period, content contributions/updates per month, response rate of comments and number of mentions.

To check and test whether the criteria catalog is expedient, a pre-test was carried out in the period from 27.12.2017 to 03.01.2018 at two selected companies Österreichische Post AG and VERBUND, after which the list of criteria was further optimized.

The study period took place from February 1 to 28, 2018, ranking lists were created from the results. First, within the individual categories: Usability, sociability, information quality and social media. Here, in a clear form, the points achieved and the resulting rank were recorded again. The overall ranking is based on the total sum of all the categories examined.

4 RELIABILITY

To check the measurement accuracy, a reliability test was carried out and the match coefficient within the encoders was determined. The number of matching codes was compared with the total number of all encodings. The rating of ATX companies are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Evaluations per company</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of usability</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of information</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of service</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media quality</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This results in a total of 380 evaluations within the entire analysis (19 evaluations x 20 companies). The following formula can be used for the reliability analysis: (Matching results/done evaluations) x 100 = r

The two coders that conducted the analysis of the ATX companies achieved 312 matching results of a total of 380 reviews. The match coefficient is thus: (312/380) x 100 = 82.1. This corresponds to a reliability value (r) of 82.1%. According to Neuendorf (2002, p.143), this result can be interpreted as "good" and representative.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Homepage Quality

The quality of the examined homepages is generally high. The best websites differ only by slight deviations. Of the three sub-areas examined, the highest level of professionalism can be attributed to information quality and usability. Here the general standard is already very high. The greatest potential for ATX companies to catch up lies in service quality.

In relation to the individual companies, the websites of CA Immobilien Anlagen and Voestalpine offer the highest quality of information for ATX companies. The service quality is rated highest by Sparkassen Immobilien, Voestalpine, FACC and Austrian Post. In the area of usability, CA Immobilien Anlagen, Sparkassen Immobilien and BUWOG are at the forefront.

The three ATX companies CA Immobilien, Sparkassen Immobilien and Voestalpine share first place in the homepage quality ranking. They reached 93.18% of the total score.
5.2 Social Media

The following chart shows that the use of social media platforms varies. First place went to OMV, Uniq Versicherungen and Voestalpine. It is striking that only one-third of all ATX companies achieved more than 50 percent of the maximum possible points. Contrary to the close-knit results of the homepage survey, it can be seen that, despite the increasing importance of social media in recent years, there is still some catching up to do.
5.3 Summary

Voestalpine achieves the best overall score of 93.34%, making it the undisputed leader. The high-tech steel manufactory professionally uses the most important digital communication channels and offers its recipients the best communication service. Verbund ranks second, followed by CA Immobilien, Austrian Post and Uniqa. The quality density is striking, i.e. the quality level is generally already high. A decisive factor in this study was the inclusion of social media channels. There are still major differences here, which ultimately also have a massive impact on the final ranking.

The overall ranking of the ATX companies examined is thus as follows:
Fig. 3 Overall ranking of all ATX companies with the highest online corporate communication quality.
Observation period: February 2018

Fig. 4 Analysis separated in all 4 dimensions: social media, homepage usability, homepage information quality and homepage service quality.
6 LIMITATIONS

The present study is subject to some limitations which should be addressed: The first factor that partially influenced the study is the time and period of observation during which the analysis was carried out. It is obvious that a longer observation period would have brought more valid results. A recommendation would be a year. A longer observation period would also have the advantage of reliably avoiding certain peaks, such as press conferences on annual results, financial statements, acquisitions or similar.

Furthermore, it must be noted that the inclusion of social media activities does not necessarily let a statement on the quality of communication. Since only the Group pages were included in this study, the real picture of the Bawag Group, for example, is as follows: While the group’s communication does not offer any social media channels, the subsidiary easybank or the BAWAG P.S.K. division do. In our rating, the Bawag Group nevertheless received zero points in the social media category.

In addition, it should be noted here that the use of social media channels is not equally important for every company. A telephone service provider or an insurance company has a different access to social media channels per se than a b2b service provider in the oil business.

The catalogue of criteria on the basis of which the analyses were carried out could also have been extended. The scientific literature has numerous relevant features by means of which digital communication quality can be measured. We have limited ourselves to 19 characteristics, a higher rate might have been able to refine the ranking.

REFERENCE LIST


