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Research Report

From reality to virtuality. Moving stakeholder dialogues from face-to-face to online formats

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COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS

FROM REALITY TO VIRTUALITY

Moving stakeholder dialogues from
face-to-face to online formats



ACADEMIC SOCIETY
FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation

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EDITORIAL



» Moving stakeholder dialogues from reality to virtuality is more than a technological challenge. It's a new opportunity for companies to engage with stakeholders. «

Is it possible to conduct stakeholder dialogues virtually? This was a question often asked when discussing the results of the Communications Trend Radar 2021, a research project recently completed by the Academic Society for Management & Communication. The study describes five key trends from society, management and technology that will influence corporate communications in the near future. The virtualization of communications was one of them.

Virtual assistants such as chatbots and virtual formats such as video conferences, digital events and online shareholder meetings play an increasingly important role in business and have become even more commonplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, communication departments often canceled or postponed in-person meetings with NGOs, politicians and opinion-makers in the hope that the pandemic would soon be over and everything would return to normal. The question therefore arises as to how stakeholder dialogues – which thrive on personal exchange and confidentiality – can successfully be moved from face-to-face to online formats.

This is where our study on virtual stakeholder dialogues comes into play. Daniel Ziegele, Hannah Kurtze and myself have been investigating this exciting topic at Leipzig University. This publication explains how in-person communication formats can be transferred from reality to virtuality. We

discuss the advantages and disadvantages of virtual dialogues and provide an overview of critical success factors. Furthermore, we present insights from thirty-five renowned corporations and consultancies who have gathered extensive experience with stakeholder dialogues. The findings discussed here are based on a profound literature analysis as well as on interviews with experienced communication professionals from thirty-five corporations and consultancies. We would like to thank all our interview partners who took their valuable time to provide insights into the reality of their organizations.

We would also like to thank the Academic Society for Management & Communication for making this project possible. Special thanks go to Karen Berger from the Academic Society who provided us with valuable guidance and advice.

We hope you find inspiration and food for thought so that you can lift your stakeholder dialogues to the next level.

A handwritten signature in orange ink, which appears to be 'A. Zerfass'.

Dr. Ansgar Zerfass

Professor and Chair of Strategic Communication
Leipzig University, Germany



FROM REALITY TO VIRTUALITY: KEY FINDINGS

Virtualization is currently one of the big buzzwords in communications. When formats are moved from real-world settings to online environments a variety of challenges emerge – especially when it comes to confidential interactions and personal relationships with key stakeholders. Yet the possibility of virtualizing stakeholder dialogues has not been addressed in research so far. For this reason, a study by Leipzig University investigated the extent to which in-person formats can be virtualized. Here is an overview of our study and key findings:

- ▶ Our **objective** was to determine whether and how stakeholder dialogues can be virtualized, what experience has already been gained in organizations, and what factors need to be taken into account if virtual stakeholder dialogues are to be successful.
- ▶ For this purpose, we conducted **interviews** with thirty-nine high-level communicators from companies and consultancies with extensive experience in stakeholder dialogues. They were asked about their experiences, the challenges of implementing virtual stakeholder dialogues, and their predictions for the future (p. 5).
- ▶ Our **definition** of virtual stakeholder dialogues describes them as a communication format that is symmetrically designed and dialogue-oriented and which serves personal, confidential, and topic-centered exchange. Virtual interactions are characterized as being geographically separated, technology-mediated, structurally dynamic as well as diverse (pp. 6-7).
- ▶ Stakeholder dialogues can be **virtualized** in three ways: 1) as a virtual look-alike (the virtual stakeholder dialogue equals a one-to-one replica or clone of an existing in-person format); 2) as a virtual extension (the existing format takes place in an online setting and is extended by opportunities of virtualization, e.g. a roundtable with national experts becomes a format with international stakeholders); or 3) as a virtual stand-alone (the virtual dialogue is a communication format for exchanging ideas with stakeholders that has never been used before, e.g. the use of virtual plant tours).

- ▶ Virtual solutions offer various **advantages and disadvantages**. Advantages include scalability, independence of place and time, and the low entry barriers for participants. On the other hand, we found that virtual communication can lack the personal nuances that in-person formats often provide. There is no ‘protected space’ and less dialogue takes place (pp. 8-9).
- ▶ In order to fully exploit the advantages, a total of **eight success factors** were identified. These include the alignment with strategy and goals, the purposeful use of technology and optimal timing, knowledge about needs and demands of participants, rigorous preparation of the moderation, the activation of all stakeholders, the demonstration of appreciation and respect as a host, as well as paying attention to privacy and confidentiality (pp. 10-11).
- ▶ According to the experts, virtual formats will continue to be a **practical alternative** for in-person dialogues in the future. The key to this is that stakeholder dialogues always follow a goal and purpose. Only when these two have been clarified can a decision be made as to whether it makes sense to use a stakeholder dialogue, and if so, which format should be used (pp. 12-15).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study “Virtual Stakeholder Dialogues” was directed and conducted by Daniel Ziegele, Hannah Kurtze and Ansgar Zerfass at the Institute of Communication and Media Studies at Leipzig University. As part of the project, an extensive literature review and numerous interviews were conducted:

1 Literature review

The project kicked-off with a literature review of both academic literature and practitioner manuals on the topics of stakeholder dialogues and virtualization. The review provided an overview of existing findings and models (pp. 6-7). It also served as a basis for developing the interview protocol for our interviews with communication practitioners.

2 Expert interviews

A qualitative empirical study was designed to identify communicators’ experiences with virtual stakeholder dialogues, the challenges, and what requirements result from them. In order to gain a comprehensive insight, we interviewed experts from 1) companies and organizations who conduct stakeholder dialogues and 2) consultancies who support companies in this field.

Companies and organizations that participated in this study



Thirty-nine communication experts from thirty-four organizations were interviewed. All interview partners had broad experience with stakeholder dialogues.

VIRTUALIZING STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES

SEARCHING FOR INSPIRATION IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Virtualization and stakeholder dialogues are two concepts with many facets. In the jungle of disciplines and definitions, a literature review was undertaken to systematize both concepts and connect them. In this chapter, we provide a first definition of virtual stakeholder dialogues.



WHAT IS VIRTUALIZATION?

Management and communication researchers alike are talking about virtual reality, virtual leadership, virtual chatbots, and virtual communication formats (e.g. Horila & Siitonen, 2020; Syvänen & Valentini, 2020; Walwema, 2021). Do we live in an age where everything has to be virtualized? With regard to corporate communications, the answer is a resounding yes. Virtualization is fueled by megatrends such as globalization and digitization. As a result, virtual formats have become a firm trend in communication management over the last several years (Zerfass et al., 2021). But what is virtualization?

The **concept ‘virtualization’** originated in computer science back in the 1960s (Overby, 2012). Since then, the success of virtualization has reached other disciplines, including management and organizational research. ‘Virtual’ has become a buzzword which is used in various contexts – often without definition or explanation. Mostly the term is used to refer to one or more of the following conditions (Herzfeldt & Sackmann, 2021):

1 geographically disconnected – when actors are distributed over two or more locations,

2 technology-mediated – when communication takes place using electronic tools,

3 structurally dynamic – when actors frequently change roles and relationships, e.g. in agile structures, and

4 nationally diverse – when actors from more than one national background meet.

Early definitions see a dichotomy of virtual as physically separated from each other and mediated by technology. Over time, this understanding has changed to a multidimensional view with all of the four perspectives included (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006).

WHAT ARE STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES?

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a boost for virtualization in Corporate Communications. Most communication formats already found their virtual counterpart: In-person annual meetings have been replaced

through video live streaming and team meetings in the office now take place via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Comparatively new in the context of bringing established communication formats to online settings is the idea about virtualizing stakeholder dialogues.

But what are stakeholder dialogues? Stakeholder dialogues have long been an instrument of corpo-

rate communications (Rademacher & Stürmer, 2021). Nevertheless, they are conceptualized differently in the literature. The multitude of definitions can be categorized according to four perspectives with each one focusing on a different dimension. (see graphic below “A Comprehensive Understanding of Stakeholder Dialogues”).

A comprehensive understanding of stakeholder dialogues

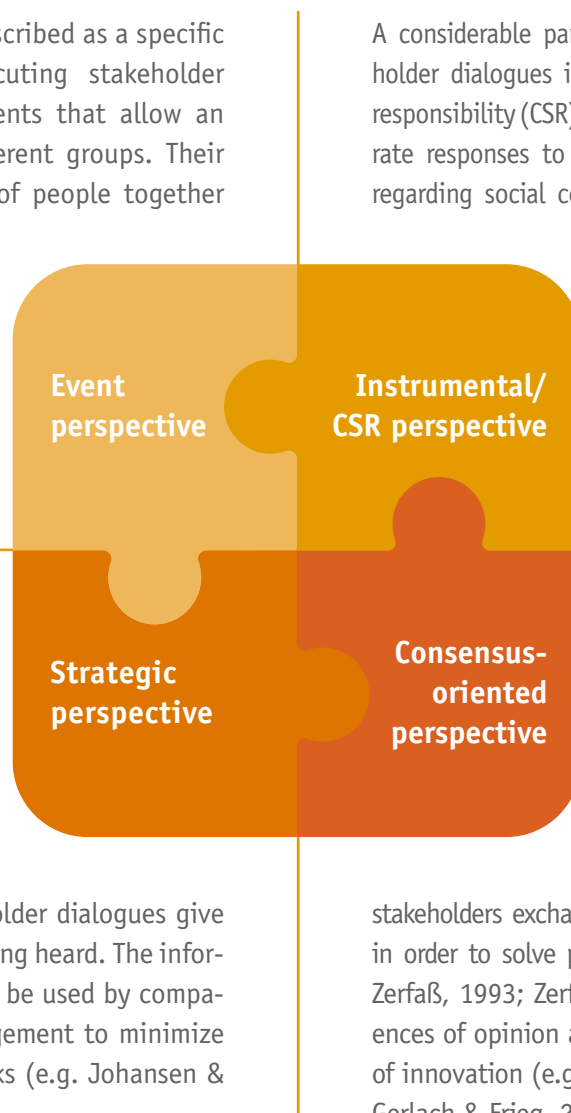
Stakeholder dialogues are described as a specific way of planning and executing stakeholder events. They are unique events that allow an open dialogue between different groups. Their purpose is to bring groups of people together who would not normally meet. The success of an event is assessed by the degree of engagement in the discussion (e.g. Aakhus & Bzdak, 2015; Schreyögg, 2013).

This perspective focuses on the achievement of strategic objectives of corporations. The main purpose of stakeholder dialogues is to secure the licence to operate. For example, stakeholder dialogues give stakeholders the feeling of being heard. The information from the dialogue can be used by companies to conduct issues management to minimize financial and reputational risks (e.g. Johansen & Nielsen, 2011; WBCSD, 2001).

A considerable part of the literature locates stakeholder dialogues in the domain of corporate social responsibility (CSR). They are conceptualized as corporate responses to specific stakeholder expectations regarding social concerns and sustainability issues.

In this context, stakeholder dialogues are described as an instrument that contributes to the implementation of a specific CSR strategy (e.g. O’Riordan & Fairbrass, 2008; Pedersen, 2006).

At the heart of this perspective is the ethical requirement for stakeholder dialogues. They are conceptualized as symmetrical communication formats in which the organization and stakeholders exchange views on a level playing field in order to solve problems together (Steinmann & Zerfaß, 1993; Zerfaß, 2010, pp. 367–373). Differences of opinion are regarded as potential sources of innovation (e.g. Burchell & Cook, 2006; Künkel, Gerlach & Frieg, 2016).



Scientific literature about stakeholder dialogues covers four different dimensions. If a definition of virtual stakeholder dialogues is to be comprehensive, it should take all four dimensions into account.

DEFINITION: VIRTUAL STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES

A virtual stakeholder dialogue is a symmetrically designed communication format for personal, confidential and issue-centered exchange between an organization and (critical) stakeholders on problems of various origins supported by digital technologies in which all or some participants are not in the same place. They usually take place synchronously, although asynchronous elements are conceivable.

Typical objectives are to achieve a mutual understanding of perspectives, interests, positions, and facts. Based on this, virtual stakeholder dialogues can also be used to achieve more advanced goals such as collaborative problem solving or participation. Nevertheless, all participants are usually capable actors who can use the platform to persuade, build coalitions and pursue individual goals.

VIRTUALIZING THE UNVIRTUALIZABLE?

Stakeholder dialogues are defined as personal, confidential, and topic-centered communication formats which take place in a protected space. This means that personal exchange, confidentiality, relationship building, authenticity, and informal aspects such as shaking hands and small talk play a key role. This raises the question of whether a format based on intimacy and personal interaction can be virtualized at all or whether this is impossible. So what requirements do virtual stakeholder dialogues have?

First, virtual stakeholder dialogues must ensure the basic qualities of in-person dialogues. They have to preserve a basic symmetrical, dialogic character and they also have to allow for personal, confidential, and topic-centered exchange between various actors. Second, virtual stakeholder dialogues must overcome physical distance and allow broad access. Video conferencing technology can be used to master this challenge. The use of technology has also

enabled dialogues to take place both synchronously (involving all participants at the same time) and asynchronously (involving participants at different times). For stakeholder dialogues, this means that they are conducted using appropriate technologies to guarantee participation for different groups such as citizens, politicians, or NGOs and that some or all participants are not in the same place. Due to this dialogic character, a synchronous communication format is clearly the better option, even if asynchronous solutions are conceivable.

Based on these insights from the literature review, it is possible to propose a definition of virtual stakeholder dialogues (see “Definition: Virtual Stakeholder Dialogues” in infobox above). They should be understood as a new format with their own advantages, disadvantages and challenges. To find out more about them, we addressed the specific characteristics of virtual stakeholder dialogues in our empirical study.

BETTER THAN THE ORIGINAL?

BALANCING THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES

The limitations of virtual formats have raised skepticism among communication professionals. Many companies have completely stopped stakeholder dialogues during the pandemic. However, the expert interviews revealed many benefits of virtual formats. This section looks at the strengths and weaknesses and demonstrates that virtual dialogues can even be the better option in some cases.



AGAINST ALL ODDS

The interviews showed that there is generally a great deal of skepticism regarding virtual stakeholder dialogues. A major shortcoming is the lack of personal atmosphere: participants cannot rely on non-verbal cues to the same extent as in real-life meetings. The lack of conversation on the sidelines of an event, for example during coffee breaks or lunch, also means that it is quite difficult to build up mutual trust. The principle of a 'protected space', which is a typical feature of in-person stakeholder dialogues, is also missing. Some interviewees pointed out that it is

impossible to know whether someone is listening, on mute, or even recording the proceedings records in virtual meetings.

However, many communicators who have already staged virtual stakeholder dialogues have been pleasantly surprised. In particular, the commitment and willingness of stakeholders to participate online has been surprising. This is certainly due to the advantages and strengths offered by virtual formats (see figure "The virtual stakeholder dialogue SWOT", p. 10).

» One positive aspect for me is that more people are getting involved because the barriers are very low - just to listen, to turn on the camera and then to speak up. And I don't see that there's any less commitment. Because we all communicate virtually - that's the reality now. «

Jacqueline Casini, Senior Director Communications, Marketing & Corporate Responsibility, Lufthansa Cargo

Scalability

The number of participants is flexible since the format is not tied to factors such as venue size, catering, etc.

Independence of time and place

Boundaries of countries and time zone are less relevant. Participants from all over the world can be connected.

Low entry barriers for participants

Travel time and costs are saved. New ways of interaction allow different people and personality types to participate.

Not an holistic experience

Interactions are only based on audiovisual signals. Non-verbal information is missing, e.g. nuances in participants' reactions, etc.

Not a protected space

It is not possible to control whether someone is really listening, focusing on a different activity, or recording a session. Mutual trust among participants is generally lower.

Less interaction

It is difficult to stimulate engagement and critical voices. Emotions and conflict potential get lost.



Strengths



Opportunities



Weaknesses



Threats



The variety of new digital tools open up many possibilities for making dialogues more attractive, efficient and effective.

Technology

Potential frustration of participants due to technical problems, compatibility and usability issues, or internet problems.

Results can be reached faster as virtual formats are usually characterized by a high degree of factuality.

Efficiency and effectiveness

Relationship building is rather difficult due to the lack of informal aspects and small talk.

Integrating new stakeholder groups is easier due to savings of travel expense and time, the possibility to switch on and off quickly, etc.

Non-binding nature

It is difficult to predict the number of participants due to no-shows. It is quite easy for participants to register and cancel at short notice.

Virtual appointments are usually shorter, but can be arranged more frequently over the year.

Duration and frequency

The general oversupply of virtual formats leads to exhaustion effects and reluctance among some stakeholders.

Online polls and similar digital tools offer simple feedback options and evaluation in real time.

Feedback

Participants leave the virtual room immediately after sessions are ended. Little chance to get informal feedback after or throughout the meeting.

Potential savings, e.g. on renting venues for offsites and catering costs.

Costs and efforts

Professional formats require expensive high-end technology and services.

Q&A sessions can be planned and structured in advance, e.g. by collecting questions from participants.

Ability to plan and control

Authenticity and spontaneity can be lost since the organizers have more control. It is difficult for participants to change the course of events.

TURNING THE TIDE

In addition to the strengths and weaknesses that virtual stakeholder dialogues have, there are also numerous factors that can be described as opportunities and challenges. These insights derived from the interviews have been compiled in the SWOT matrix (p. 10). Interestingly, many characteristics of virtual stakeholder dialogues such as the ability to calculate the number of attendees, their non-binding nature, or the duration and frequency of virtual formats can be seen as being both opportunities and threats. Whether a certain characteristic is positive or negative depends on:

- the implementation of the format,
- the objectives of the dialogue,
- the stakeholders involved, and
- the company or the project behind the format.

The interviews showed that for most experts neither the pros nor cons dominated. For example, efficiency of virtual formats can be a plus if you need to be efficient, but it also can be a negative feature (e.g. topics with high levels of involvement and emotion).

THE RIGHT FORMAT AT THE RIGHT TIME

The interviews conducted in our empirical study underline that communication professionals should carefully consider in which situations virtual stakeholder dialogues are the better option. Based on our interview data we propose three situations where this is the case:

1 When regular exchange takes place

Many companies regularly interact with their key stakeholders. They have often established personal relationships, know the interests of each other, and may already be working towards shared goals. Here, virtual formats are a good option since they can be integrated easily into the daily life and work of stakeholders and company representatives. The efficiency and effectiveness of

these dialogues can be raised by making meetings shorter but having them more frequently. Shorter meetings can also serve to emphasize the importance of dialogues to everybody involved.

2 When stakeholders cannot be reached

Stakeholders are not always located on-site, as is the case for dialogues with local residents or interest groups. And even if they are, they are not always able or willing to participate in person. Farmers are important partners in many infrastructure projects, but their daily work leaves little time for meetings in the evening or on weekends. Other stakeholders may simply feel more comfortable online than at events and can only be reached that way. And NGO representatives and politicians are sometimes in such high demand that they can ultimately only attend one event out of five invitations. This is where a virtual stakeholder dialogue can help – especially when dialogues are strategically important for companies, but not top priority for participants.

3 When it comes to niche topics

It is not uncommon for stakeholder dialogues to be held on future-relevant topics such as hydrogen-powered vehicles or on niche topics such as medical packaging for third world countries. In some areas, the topics are so specific that there is no need to engage with citizen representatives or politicians, but rather with researchers and activists. These stakeholders are often busy, in demand and globally dispersed. Bringing these people together is close to impossible. Virtual formats have shown that experts from all over the world can easily be connected this way.

In many other situations, too, virtual stakeholder dialogues can be promising depending on the objectives of the company and stakeholder interests. On the other hand, the virtual will not be able to fully replace conversations over coffee at a meeting or personal notes at a get-to-know-you workshop. In the situations mentioned above and similar ones, however, there still will be good arguments for initiating a virtual dialogue in the future.

HOW TO SUCCEED VIRTUALLY

EIGHT SUCCESS FACTORS FOR PLANNING AND CONDUCTING VIRTUAL STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES



Virtual dialogues should not be seen as a temporary replacement like a spare tire – they should be viewed as a new format. New formats bring new opportunities, but also their own rules of the game. So what do communicators need to pay attention to when planning and implementing a virtual dialogue? From our qualitative data we identified eight success factors, which are illustrated below with exemplary quotes from the interviews.



STRATEGY AND GOALS

Start with the communication strategy and its objectives and ask yourself whether a dialogue format serves to achieve your goals! If the answer is yes, choose between a virtual or an in-person dialogue. Note that a stakeholder dialogue can be a multi-stakeholder format, but it can also be a bilateral conversation. Keep in mind that stakeholder dialogues always have a purpose and are not merely an end in themselves.

» Whether it makes sense to use virtual stakeholder dialogues depends on the project. It can be fruitful if your stakeholders know each other and can exchange ideas. Or maybe it's not in my interest that they exchange ideas about their problems with each other. It has to be considered on a project-by-project basis which formats are suitable and how they are used. We're interested in the goal of moving the project forward and we apply what is useful to the project. «



TECHNOLOGY

Technology is key! First, ensure that the online technology used is stable and easy to use, even for participants who are less tech-savvy. Technical deficiencies will lead to frustration. Eliminate the weaknesses of your technological infrastructure before new digital tools are integrated. Second, invest in quality. Although virtual dialogues offer potential for saving resources, efforts should be made to create high-quality formats. This can be accompanied by investments in equipment, training and service providers.

» *In the past, I would have said that the key of a successful stakeholder dialogue event is that you meet on a level where you can actually exchange arguments. That's certainly still important, but in fact it only works if the technology is working. There's nothing more frustrating and damaging for a process if you're stuck with poorly functioning technology.* «



TIMING

Get the timing right! First, keep online meetings comparatively short and focused. More frequent appointments are possible – but only consider this if the goals require it. Since people do not keep their schedules free as they do for full-day or multi-day congresses, the virtual format must be integrated into the daily work routine. Whether in the morning, during lunchtime, or in the early evening depends on the stakeholders involved and their routines.

» *The design of the formats in terms of which weekday, time and duration is even more decisive today. How much information can you really expect to be heard? How long does a meaningful discussion last and at what point do you lose the attention of your stakeholders? Is it better to offer two formats than to squeeze too much into one?* «



PARTICIPANTS

Know your stakeholders! First, due to the difficulty of building relationships, virtual dialogues should preferably be conducted with stakeholders with whom initial points of contact already exist. It works better when you have already met in person. Second, consider aspects such as digital competence. A prime objective is to not overwhelm the invitees and not to put them in uncomfortable situations. In addition, small group sizes should be preferred for a fruitful exchange.

» *One challenge is actually the digital competence of our stakeholders, which is very varied in some cases. Although we have virtual formats, we sometimes have to write letters because there are hardly any digital skills available and that's the only way it works. You can't deal with every stakeholder in the same way.* «



MODERATION

No stakeholder dialogue without moderation! First, evaluate if you have internal moderators available or if the format can benefit from an external expert such as a consultant with a background in mediation and group dynamics. External moderators can also be beneficial when you want to focus on controversial topics. Also keep in mind that it is much more challenging to moderate a stakeholder dialogue virtually. This is because the formats are shorter and the attention span, engage-

ment and mood of participants are difficult to perceive through video. Several aspects such as chats, whiteboards, and live voting tools need to be managed simultaneously. Second, the moderator has to make sure that the schedule is followed and that all participants have a chance to be heard. Ideally, several people can share the role or support the moderator to ensure that no question or participant is overlooked. More time should be allocated for preparation and briefing of the moderator.

» Moderation is less intuitive and more planning work must be done. The tasks are so manifold that it's hard to keep everything in view simultaneously while still responding and reacting empathetically. You have to pay very close attention to whether someone is frowning or how someone phrases a response. That's why we always have an assistant with us who monitors and sorts the chat and has an extra moderation document. «



ACTIVATION

Engage your participants for fruitful discussions! Remember that there is not the same dynamic in the virtual space as in offline formats. For example, the moderator or presenters have to give more input to get a discussion going. To ensure that everyone has their voice heard, activate the discussion with stimulating questions, address participants directly, or use the integrated quick polls. Establishing rules in advance, such as when to turn on the camera, can also be beneficial. It is important that the stakeholders feel comfortable otherwise they will leave the video room quickly.

» What we've often done is to get participants to submit their questions or desired topics in advance and thus try to achieve more involvement. Participants are then less shy about asking their questions during the event. With smaller numbers of participants, it's beneficial to ask that everyone has their cameras on and to make sure that everyone has their share of speaking time. «



APPRECIATION AND RESPECT

Respect the time and intentions of your participants! Remember that participation in stakeholder dialogues is voluntary. In the virtual space, there are no additional incentives such as personal gatherings, the social program, or catering. This makes it even more important to value the participation (and thus the support) of the stakeholders. An exciting program, participant-friendly scheduling, and professional organization should therefore be standard. A small gesture, such as the sending an attendee kit in advance, can also help to express your appreciation to participants.

» *Apart from the contents, we also try to show appreciation for the fact that our stakeholders are giving us their valuable time. We've sometimes sent out packed lunches and staged them as part of the meeting. For example, we invite everyone to get out their lunch and to eat together. We always do this at community dialogues, where the goodie bags work really well.* «



PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Create situations to feel trusted! While the virtual does not provide a protected space, care should still be taken to ensure that participants feel as safe as possible. First, check if privacy and data protection of your technology is in line with the demands of all participants. If possible, ask in your invitation what platform they prefer. Second, work on confidentiality within in the group. Participants should agree that no information will be made public. Third, increase familiarity by asking all participants to turn on their camera. If all participants are visible, it will help to create mutual trust.

» *I'm usually a bit more cautious in a virtual conference. You don't know exactly who else is listening and watching. When I'm sitting in a real room, I have a feeling if what I'm saying stays private or not. That's why we need rules like 'No one records' or 'You can't listen in unless you've been introduced to the whole group'. Of course, there should always be rules regardless of the setting. But these rules, which may apply unspoken in an in-person meeting, really need to be spelled out in virtual settings.* «

CAMERA? CAMERA!

Practical advice on whether participants should turn their camera on or off

Video conferencing is an important component of virtual stakeholder dialogues. If the participants can be seen via camera, commitment may increase, and a sense of interpersonal feeling might emerge. Likewise, greater attention can be expected as potentially fewer things are done in parallel when the camera is on. The moderator should therefore encourage participants to turn on their camera. This works particularly well if the appointment is designed to be interactive with few participants and if there is a basis of trust.

Tip: Set a good example and ensure visual equality. Professional backgrounds or studio recordings can be intimidating for other participants.

On the other hand, participants without cameras should also be respected. Plus, there are also advantages. No camera means a smaller burden for participants. Some people may be more relaxed because of the anonymity and there is less distraction from the multitude of video clips. Even without a camera, virtual stakeholder dialogues can be successful. For example, if the focus is on conveying information or if there is a large group of participants.

» CULTIVATING RELATIONSHIPS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING «

SUSANNE STRAETMANS & JULIAN ROSENKRANZ FROM PFIZER ON THE SUCCESS AND PITFALLS OF VIRTUAL STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES

Being part of the highly regulated healthcare system, stakeholder relations are crucial for Pfizer. In recent years, Pfizer Germany's Corporate Affairs department has intensified the development and maintenance of relationships through network analysis, targeted outreach and stakeholder events. But then the COVID-19 outbreak ensued, and with it the public focus on the vaccine business. This required new ways of networking with stakeholders.

There was a great public interest in Pfizer during the pandemic. Maintaining stakeholder relations from the home office was certainly a big challenge – especially because in-person dialogue formats were no longer possible. How did you cope with this at Pfizer?

Susanne Straetmans: We have always said: we want to have a seat at the table, we want to have a voice, and for this we've established formats and platforms over the years. For us, it was clear that we would continue doing this because cultivating relationships is the most important thing – especially during a pandemic.

Julian Rosenkranz: At Pfizer, we also conduct many stakeholder dialogues with an eye toward the future, on topics such as innovative healthcare and prevention. We want to work together with stakeholders, achieve progress together, and collectively generate improvements in our system. Interrupting the dialogue would therefore have been wrong.

How did you then continue your existing stakeholder dialogues virtually?

Straetmans: From the beginning, we looked at what was possible online and what made sense. One of



Susanne Straetmans

is Director of Communications at Pfizer in Germany.



Julian Rosenkranz

is Senior Project Manager for Pfizer's vaccines unit and conducts stakeholder projects on the topic of disease prevention.

the biggest adjustments is time management. For us, a virtual meeting lasts exactly 60 minutes. This is very important to me because I personally think that respect for time is a crucial aspect in our current situation. We all have many, many more appointments than before. And if we want people to come, then we simply have to take that into account. And that's why we basically fill up this hour so much that afterwards people say: I've got a lot of great takeaways, these 60 minutes have been worthwhile for me.

To what extent was this change a challenge?

Rosenkranz: We'd already used digital tools in face-to-face meetings before the lockdowns because we've experienced that they can help bring stakeholders together and achieve a joint result. And because we'd done this before, it was relatively easy for us to adapt such a format to the virtual world. On the other hand, it very much depends on the digital literacy of the target group and to what extent interaction can be created in virtual workshops or multi-stakeholder formats.

Straetmans: A big advantage is our online platform landdergesundheit.de, which we've already established as part of our stakeholder management. There we are in asynchronous conversation with our stakeholders and they share their positions. During the pandemic,

we added audio formats, used them for our social media channels and definitely generated an outreach with that. That has helped, but it's also a very complex issue and you have to be sensitive. It's one challenge in terms of content. But to bring people together and to build a relationship is even more challenging.

Looking back, how satisfied are you with the results of these virtual formats?

Rosenkranz: One point that I found to be the big advantage is our outreach. We've often experienced a better availability of expert participants and sometimes accomplished a massively higher reach than if we'd done a traditionally-attended event. And of course, it's also nice to have bigger audiences. But a crucial part of stakeholder relations is an informality that is very, very difficult to replace virtually.

Straetmans: I'm positively surprised by the willingness of participants to interact virtually. But it's nowhere near as personal, and stakeholder relationships are personal, and you won't be able to replace that. I'm convinced that some formats will definitely remain online. But there will be other formats that cannot be replaced.

Thank you very much for sharing your experience!

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

OUTLOOK AND INSIGHTS FROM OUR EXPERTS

Looking back, developments in the field of virtual formats were strongly driven by the pandemic. However, the results from this research project show that virtual formats serve more than just as a temporary substitute – they are an advantageous tool for stakeholder communication.

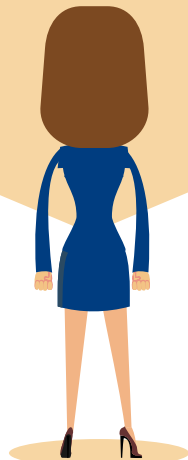
The study also shows that each type of stakeholder dialogue (in-person, virtual, hybrid) is a unique format and communication instrument – with their own advantages and disadvantages. These should be considered during preparation. For virtual stakeholder dialogues, the insights from the interviews provide an overview of strengths and weaknesses, highlight certain pitfalls and provide a checklist of success factors.

The exciting question is what will happen next. The experts interviewed agree that virtual stakeholder dialogues will continue to be conducted in the future, even in a post-pandemic environment. It can be expected that virtual formats will supplement traditional on-site formats or that hybrid events will increasingly dominate in the future.

Ultimately, as mentioned by almost all of the interviewed experts, it depends on the specific constellation of corporate goals, stakeholder settings and situation whether to choose an on-site, virtual or hybrid format. In the end, this is a decision to be taken by communication and public affairs leaders based on their reasoned assessment.

» I believe we will not completely return to the old paradigm. In many areas, there is a need for personal interaction again. So, we will certainly maintain a hybrid world. In the long run, many things will also be digital or hybrid. «

André Wetzig, Head of Communication, VNG



FOOD FOR THOUGHT: THREE EXPERT, THREE IMPULSES



» Virtual stakeholder dialogues are a great opportunity for us. How we'll find the balance between virtual formats and the classics, such as Breakfast with the Board, will depend on how we want to achieve our goal from a communications point of view. With the virtual format, we have new instruments in our toolbox. Now it's a matter of orchestrating them optimally in the overall concept of the communications work, just as we did in the past. This is an exciting challenge, and overall an opportunity. «

Christian Engel,
Head of Newsroom and spokesperson for infrastructure topics at Fraport

» The use of virtual dialogues can be helpful for companies and their stakeholders – especially when it comes to asking opinions or managing expectations. However, when it comes to trust, relationship management or emotionally sensitive topics, virtual dialogue should only be used when it is appropriate. With all the possibilities offered by technology, empathy is still crucial for communicators. And I think that's a very important aspect that we must never forget. «

Anne Katrin Wehrmann-Scherle,
Vice President Public Relations at B. Braun Melsungen



» Stakeholders are a scarce resource. They must decide from a large number of events where to participate while the majority of topics within an industry are often identical. It would be a positive development if companies could throw their own vanity aside and work together as a team. Joint stakeholder dialogues - whether virtual or in-person - can be presented at a higher level because resources are pooled accordingly. Company-specific points may still be discussed in separate breakout sessions. «

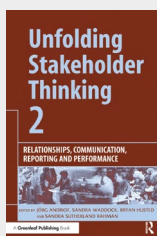
Nils Tiemann,
Senior Consultant for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) at imug, Hannover



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The Academic Society for Management & Communication is a non-profit think tank for corporate communications. Through collaborative research and knowledge sharing, it aims to actively shape the future of corporate communications. The initiative was founded in 2010, and is currently supported by six professors, four universities, and more than 40 corporate partners.

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Since 2020, the Communications Trend Radar, an annual research project, has identified trends that

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