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**Article**

## A Contemporary Approach to Holistic Brand Communication

Marketing Review St.Gallen

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Universität St. Gallen, Institut für Marketing und Customer Insight

*Suggested Citation:* Leimert, Hannah; Scharfenberger, Philipp; Tomczak, Torsten (2021) : A Contemporary Approach to Holistic Brand Communication, Marketing Review St.Gallen, ISSN 1865-7516, Thexis Verlag, St.Gallen, Vol. 38, Iss. 2, pp. 10-18

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/276131>

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# Marketing Review St. Gallen



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# A Contemporary Approach to Holistic Brand Communication

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Brand–consumer interactions have changed radically over the past two decades. In this article, we outline a holistic approach to brand communication, taking into account the current communication landscape. We discuss the present importance of brand identities and specify four core fields of modern brand communication and their joint relevance for brand–consumer relationships. Finally, we identify specific management qualities relevant to navigating brands through an all-new world of brand communication.

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**T**he way brands and consumers interact with each other has changed radically in the past two decades. A primary driver of these changes is digitalization (Pitt, Bert-hon, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002; Winer, 2009; Kitchen & Proctor, 2015). Digitalization has not only substantially altered the media landscape, bringing forth a wide array of innumerable communication channels, applications, and tools. It has consequently also increased the versatility and vividness of brand–consumer interactions and has strengthened the influence of consumers in shaping brand experiences (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).

This article illustrates these developments and condenses them into a holistic concept of contemporary brand communication. The development of the concept builds on two pillars: (a) a comprehensive analysis of the pertinent branding and marketing literature of the last 70 years<sup>1</sup>; and (b) an iterative concept development process in regular discussions and interviews with managers of various renowned brands, particularly in the context of the Brand Excellence Circle of the University of St. Gallen between 2015 and 2020<sup>2</sup>. Based on this literature- and expert-related approach, we developed a model that addresses essential components, qualities, and managerial aspects of contemporary brand communication.

### **Brand Identity as the Basis of Brand Communication**

Although brand–consumer interactions have changed radically, one principle has basically stayed unchanged. Scholars (e.g., Aaker, 2012; Kapferer, 2012) and the clear majority of practitioners that we interviewed perceive a company’s brand identity as an essen-

tial reference point for successful brand communication. The prevalent reasoning behind this notion is that a company can only communicate a brand as a coherent entity if it has a clear idea of what the brand stands for and how it looks and feels. Accordingly, the definition of brand identities (via values and purposes, brand models, corporate design manuals, etc.) remains an important principle and prerequisite of modern brand communication. At the same time, brand identities are increasingly negotiated between brands and consumers. With an ever-rising communicative influence, especially on social media, consumers have gained substantial power over the perception of brands (Dietrich, 2018). This poses a profound challenge to companies to co-create their intended brand identities in tight cooperation with external stakeholders. Particularly in this dynamic environment, it is crucial that the company and its increasingly specialized employees involved in various fields of brand communication have a coherent and instrumental notion of “their” brand identity (Jahn, Treiber-Ruckenbrod, Scharfenberger, & Tomczak, 2017; Dietrich, 2018).

### **Four Core Fields of Contemporary Brand Communication**

On the one hand, brand identities may constitute an important, guiding reference for coherent brand communication. On the other hand, the development of a successful brand identity is the result of a carefully orchestrated interplay of consumers’ brand experiences across all available communication channels (Ghodeswar, 2008). Based on our literature review and correspondence with brand managers, we have developed a map of four essential

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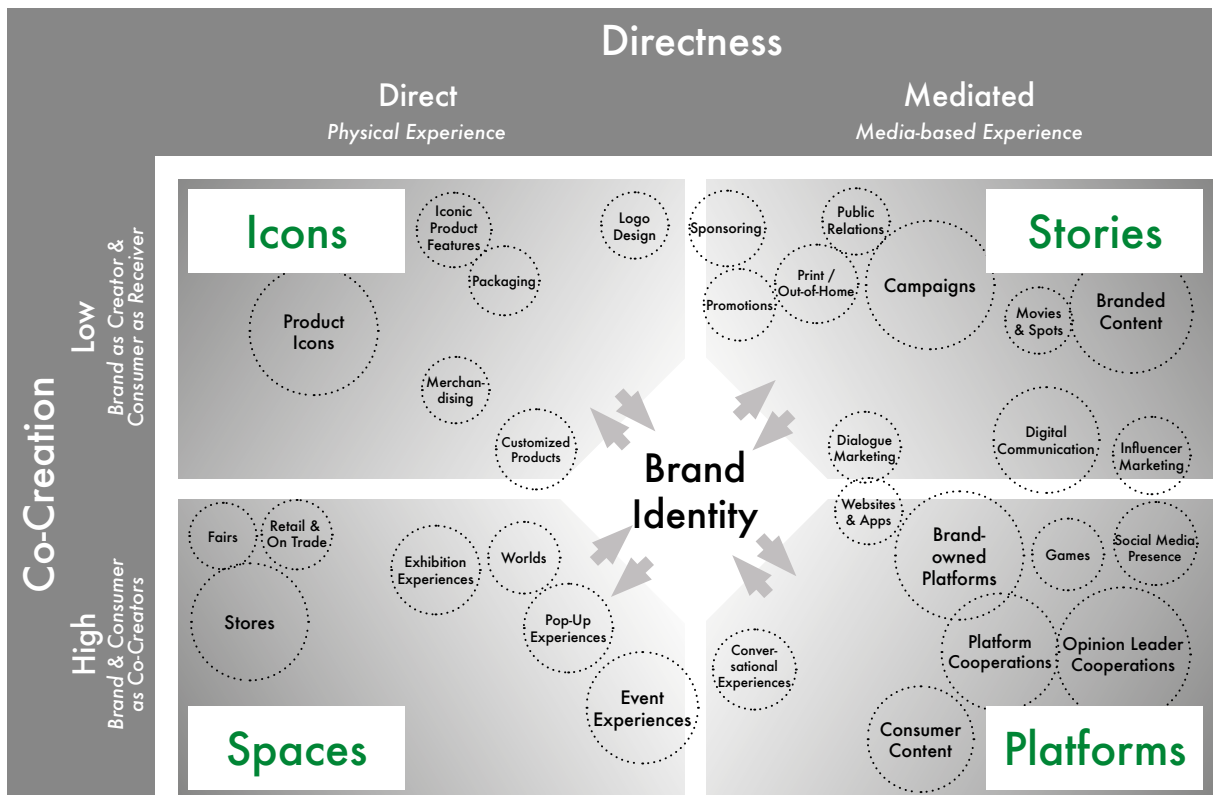
<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the most pertinent publications, please see the online appendix at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.13295894.v7>. The publications were retrieved from the relevant and highly ranked journals in the fields of marketing, brand communication, and branding; and selected on the basis of publication year, keywords, and citations.

<sup>2</sup> The Brand Excellence Circle is a management program of the University of St. Gallen that enables managers of renowned brands to regularly discuss current developments in the field of branding and marketing. Currently, the Brand Excellence Circle encompasses the following brands: adidas, airbnb, BMW Group, Credit Suisse, FREITAG, GoPro, Hermès, Hilti, IKEA, Lange & Söhne, Leica, Lindt & Sprüngli, LinkedIn, Lufthansa, Mammüt, NIVEA, Philip Morris International, Red Bull, RB Leipzig, Telekom, Tempo, 25 hours hotels, Uber, Vitra, Wikimedia, and Zalando.

### **Note**

This article builds on an earlier German version: Tomczak, T., Scharfenberger, P., Morhart, F., & Treiber-Ruckenbrod, J. (2018): Die neue Welt der Markenkommunikation, Gfm-Forschungsreihe, 6.

**Fig. 1: Four Core Fields of Contemporary Brand Communication**



Source: Own illustration.

communication fields (see figure 1) that unfolds between two crucial qualities of modern brand communication: *directness* and *co-creation*.

**Directness of brand communication:** Digitalization has leveraged marketing communication to a whole new level with a wide array of interactive media and communication forms (Constantinides, 2006; Kitchen & Proctor, 2015; Batra & Keller, 2016). As a consequence, consumers increasingly experience brands in a manifold media space, encompassing websites, social media, online stores, etc. It is noticeable, however, that the overall virtuali-

zation of brand experiences is accompanied by the need of consumers to re-engage with brands in a more physical and proximal manner (Magaudda, 2011; Atasoy & Morewedge 2018; Scharfenberger, Wentzel, & Warlop, 2020). The rise of experiential marketing and consumers’ return to local and approachable producers/products or vintage products are just a few examples of this countertrend (Sarial-Abi, Vohs, Hamilton, & Ulqinaku, 2017). Accordingly, contemporary brand experiences span a wide spectrum between two dialectic poles, namely between high-tech and high-touch; or, in other words, between digitalized / me-

diated and physically approachable / direct encounters.

**Co-creation of brand communication:** A further important conceptual dimension of contemporary brand communication is its degree of co-creation. Through the omnipresence of digital and interactive media forms as well as technical advances in the individualization of services and products, consumers are more than ever accustomed to being involved in creation processes and brand discourses (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). This “democratization” of the brand–consumer relationship has empowered consumers and plays an increasingly impor-



tant role for brand experiences (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Tomczak, Gorny, & Gross, 2020). However, this increase in consumers' "co-creation" of brand experiences goes hand in hand with an unchanged demand for more passive forms of consumption, in which the consumer is mainly the receiver of goods, services, or messages. Examples that emphasize the latter include the continued interest in iconic products that are typically consumed in a rather standardized, non-individualized form (e.g., Stan Smith shoes by adidas, the Eames Lounge Chair by Vitra); or the continuing success of rather classic communication formats, such as brand spots and movies. Consumers accordingly move between two dialectical poles of (a) active co-creation on the one hand and (b) more plain and passive consumption on the other hand.

The interplay of the dimensions *directness* and *co-creation* leads to the present communication landscape that can be divided into four core fields of brand communication: brand icons, spaces, stories, and platforms (see figure 1).

### Icons

Direct physical experiences play an important role in brand–consumer relationships. There are indications that the need to relate to brands physically originates in humans' social nature and need for proximity (Nägele, Von Walter, Scharfenberger, & Wentzel, 2020; Scharfenberger et al., 2020). Particularly intense physical experiences of brands are provided by brand *icons*, which are exceptionally stringent and uncompromising embodiments of brands. Accordingly, icons typically reveal a relatively low degree of consumers' co-creation. In their most essential form, icons are tangible products

(e.g., the Leica M Camera; the Swiss Army Knife by Victorinox). However, certain design elements and features (e.g., BMW's kidney-shaped radiator grille or the CloudTech sole of On shoes), as well as merchandising objects (e.g., the NIVEA water ball or the BVG Sneaker) can also have iconic qualities that transfer a brand's identity into the physically experienceable world (see figure 1). Increasingly, renowned service providers, such as Google or Amazon, also put effort into developing brand icons that spatially extend their brands into the lives and

surroundings of consumers (e.g., Google Pixel or Amazon Alexa); and even seemingly simple objects such as the iconic Starbucks cup or Lufthansa's popular frequent flyer luggage tag can effectively create emotional closeness between consumers and service brands (Nägele et al., 2020).

### Spaces

Brand *spaces* are physical spaces in which the brand experience is created jointly by the company and the consumer. As in the case of icons, direct and real-life contact is an essential quality of spaces. At the same time, spaces are characterized by a higher degree of co-creation. The consumer physically merges with the brand by diving into the brand space—thereby experiencing the brand multisensorially and in close cooperation with the company (Bitner, 1992; Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, & Schlesinger, 2009; Spina, Caridà, Colurcio, & Melia, 2012). An especially illustrative example of brand spaces are (flagship) stores that embody and convey a particularly intense brand experience (e.g., the IKEA shopping experience or city-specific Hermès stores). Further examples include events initiated and co-created by consumers (e.g., the Red Bull Flugtag), shared brand experiences at brand locations (e.g., Today at Apple), brand worlds (e.g., Vitra Campus, Leica Galleries), or on-trade experiences (e.g., Jägermeister brand experiences at festivals; see figure 1 for these and further examples).

### Stories

In contrast to icons and spaces, *stories* communicate the brand not directly but via media. As in the case of icons, the brand acts rather autonomously—the

## Management Summary

As a primary driver, digitalization has substantially changed the way brands and consumers interact with each other. Most of the developments triggered by digitalization bring forth counter-developments: The increasing virtualization of brand experiences is accompanied by consumers' need to re-engage with brands physically, and consumers' active involvement in co-creation processes goes hand in hand with their desire to simply consume. We outline a holistic approach to brand communication, taking these changes into account by discussing the importance of brand identities, defining four core fields of contemporary brand communication, their joint relevance for brand–consumer relationships, and the management qualities needed to successfully manage brand communication.

proportion of co-creation by consumers is therefore relatively low. This gives the company a comparatively strong control over the realization of the communication measure and the specific conveyance of the brand identity (Meenaghan, 1995). The most prototypical implementations of stories are advertising formats (e.g., IKEA's TV ads or die Mobilier's cartoon ads) and brand campaigns (e.g., Nike's 'Just do it' or Google's 'Year in Search' campaign), as well as branded content (e.g., the LEGO movies). Furthermore, formats such as sponsoring activities, public relations, or paid influencer co-operations offer companies the opportunity to create rather controlled media content (see figure 1). Digitalization has also radically advanced the possibilities of story targeting. Micro- and behavioral targeting as well as programmatic advertisement ensure that not only the right message is conveyed but that the right message meets the right au-

dience—and hence is interpreted in a brand-adequate and intended way (Yan, Liu, Wang, Zhang, Jiang, & Chen, 2009; Busch, 2016; Boerman, Kruike-meier, & Zuiderveen Borgesius, 2017).

### Platforms

Similar to spaces, the co-creation of brand experiences by the consumer is a central quality of *platforms*—however, in contrast to spaces, platform experiences do not take place physically but virtually. Typical of platform communication is the sharing of brand-related content or social media discourses, frequently led by opinion leaders. As previously outlined, these communication forms involve the risk that brands may be presented in an unintended manner (McWilliam, 2000; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Dietrich, 2018). Therefore, a key challenge for companies communicating via platforms is to stay in control of the development of “their”

brand experiences. One way of doing this is by co-operating with opinion leaders. Winning over opinion leaders for one's cause, without merely paying them, enables companies to influence communication about their brand(s), at least to a certain extent. A further, more comprehensive measure is to control the platform itself—whether through cooperation with the platform host (e.g., cooperation between Sony Music and TikTok) or platform ownership (e.g., Google's ownership of YouTube). The latter offers the advantage of being able to subtly influence the platform-specific structures, and thus, the information diffusion within these networks. See figure 1 for further examples.

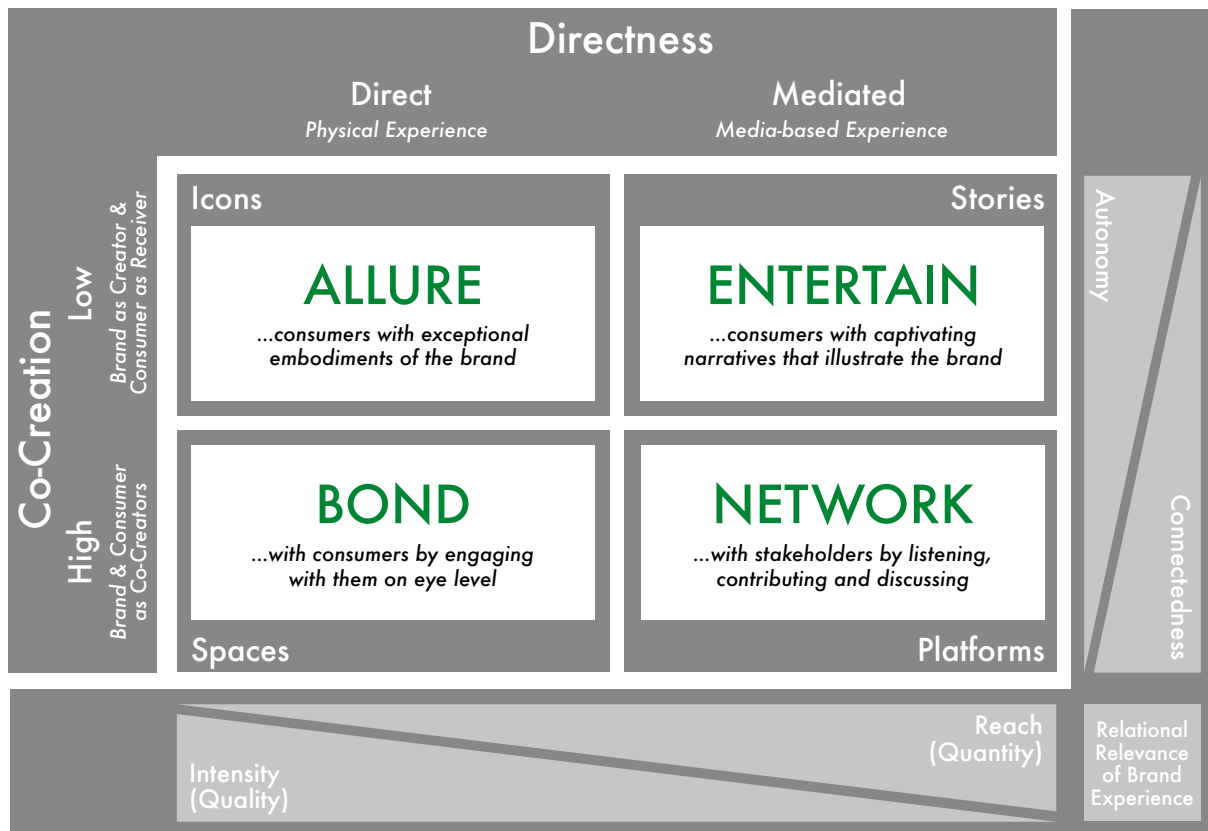
### The Complementary Relevance of the Four Communication Fields for Brand–Consumer Relationships

At least since Jennifer Aaker's and Susanne Fournier's influential contributions to the branding literature in the 1990s, brand–consumer relationships are widely considered a crucial asset for businesses (Aaker & Fournier, 1995; Fournier, 1998). Literature suggests that such brand relationships are conceptually similar to interpersonal relationships (Aggarwal, 2004; Aggarwal & McGill, 2012; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). The growing variety of communication possibilities outlined above offers companies an increasingly differentiated set of instruments to specifically cultivate such brand relationships (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Jung & Soo, 2012). The distinction between icons, spaces, stories, and platforms is hence not only helpful for structuring common forms of modern brand communication; with their inherent communicative qualities, these four communication fields also com-

## Main Propositions

1. Digitalization has not only changed the media landscape; it has also altered brand–consumer interactions.
2. The development of brand identities stays an essential guiding reference for successful brand communication; vice versa, developing a strong brand identity results from a well-orchestrated interplay of communication forms.
3. Communication forms differ in their degree of directness (from physical, direct to media-based experiences) and co-creation (from active co-creation by consumers to passive consumption). They can be structured into four core fields of contemporary brand communication: brand icons, spaces, stories, and platforms.
4. The four core fields of communication fulfill complementary functions in building relationships: While physical brand experiences intensify relationships, medial experiences reach a broader audience, and while highly co-created communication can build connectedness to consumers, forms with a lower degree of co-creation offer companies the opportunity to act autonomously.
5. Given the versatility of contemporary brand communication, managers need a comprehensive set of skills (ranging from sensory, design-oriented to media-oriented skills) and leadership styles (from the “command & control” to the “inspire & transform” approach).

**Fig. 2: Complementary Functions of the Four Communication Fields for Brand–Consumer Relationship**



Source: Own illustration.

prise essential, complementary functions in the relationship building between brands and consumers.

Among the outlined communication fields, brand icons and spaces provide a particularly direct and approachable encounter between brands and consumers. As outlined, there is evidence that these contacts are vital for developing and maintaining emotional brand relationships. At the same time, it is this directness that makes the reach of such brand experiences limited. In contrast, it is an essential quality of mediated communication forms—

that is, stories and platforms—to spread and exchange information in a resource-efficient way. Direct and medial communication forms accordingly fulfill important complementary functions in brand–consumer relationships: Similar to interpersonal relationships, direct experiences particularly intensify the relationships to selected individuals, while medial communication forms are an efficient way to maintain relationships with a broader audience.

Research on interpersonal relationships highlights a further important relationship dimension. The notion of

relational dialectics emphasizes that relationships are particularly stable and healthy if the involved parties enjoy a certain degree of *autonomy* on the one hand and a sense of *connectedness* on the other hand (Baxter, 1990). The underlying argument behind this claim is that the tension between (a) feeling a connection to and knowing what to expect from a counterpart, and (b) realizing that the counterpart is an independent entity that may act unexpectedly and surprisingly, positively affects the relationship (Baxter, 1990). It can be observed that this principle also ap-



plies to brand relationships: On the one hand, consumers want to feel a connection to and have the impression of being able to assess and predict “their” brands; on the other hand, they also want to experience brands as independent and attractive beings that act in a self-determined and surprising way. While spaces and platforms particularly relate to the former desire (by including consumers in the development of brand experiences), icons and stories especially correspond to the latter need (by offering companies the opportunity to act autonomously as protagonists).

Combining these dialectical dimensions of communication, that is “intensity vs. reach” and “autonomy vs. connectedness”, thus emphasizes the specific relational qualities of each of the four communication fields:

- 1) Icons—as physically approachable and particularly captivating embodi-

ments of the brand—have the potential to *allure* consumers into the brand world.

- 2) Spaces—as intentionally designed, physical environments in which brand experiences are co-created—have the potential to intensify the *bond* between consumers and brands.
- 3) Stories—with their subtly arranged storylines and their scalable and targeted reach—have the potential to *entertain* large audiences.
- 4) Platforms—as virtual environments that enable an exchange across a large variety of brand stakeholders—provide companies with the opportunity to cultivate their brand *network*.

Figure 2 visualizes these complementary functions of the four communication fields for brand–consumer relationships.

## The Holistic Management of Contemporary Brand Communication

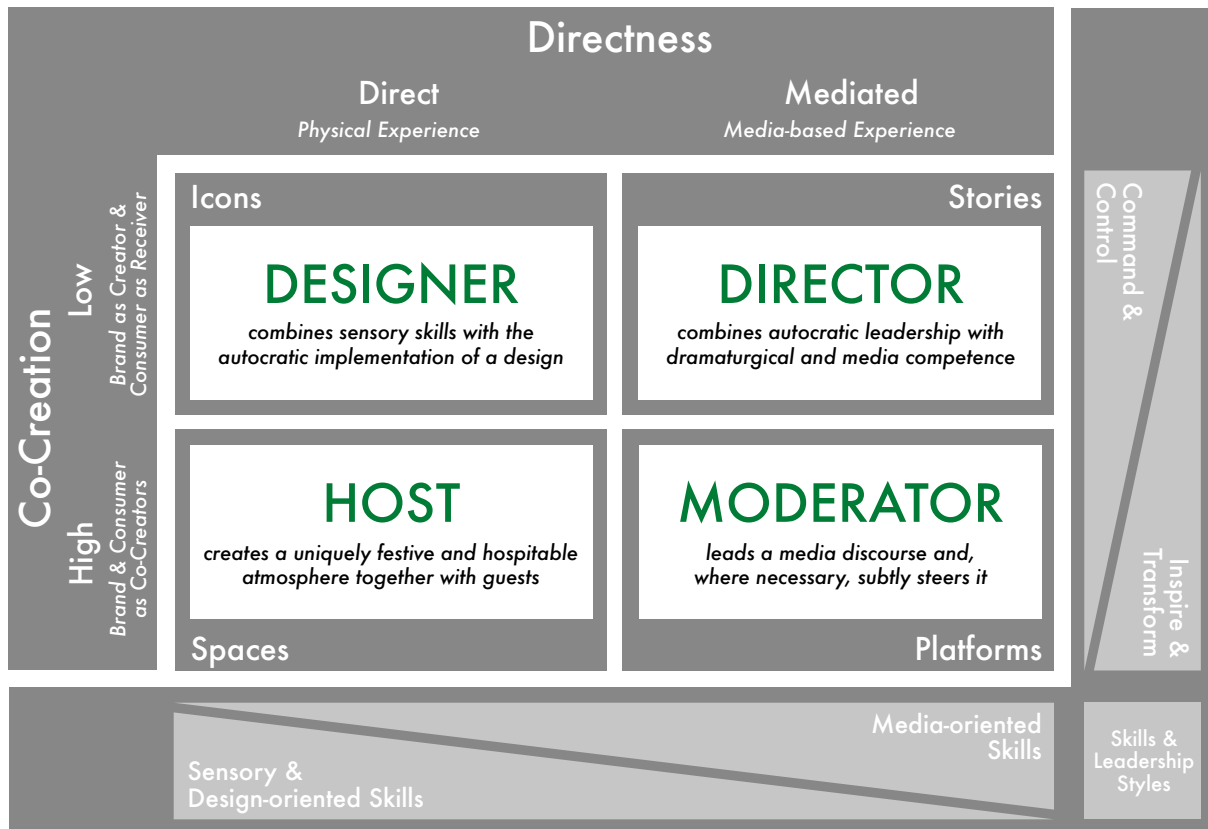
Due to its versatility, the above-outlined communication landscape demands an increasingly comprehensive set of *domain-specific skills* and *leadership styles* to successfully manage brand communication. The relevance of these managerial qualities is mainly derived from the specific characteristics of the different communication fields as well as from their extensive interplay.

In order to successfully develop and manage brand icons and spaces, brand managers require a distinct set of *sensory, design-oriented, and social skills*. This includes a thorough understanding of how to present their brand and enthuse consumers about it in direct, physical interaction. In contrast, the development of stories and platforms particularly requires *media-oriented skills*, ranging from a thorough understanding of story-telling and campaign dramaturgy to the utilization of influencers or the management of platform appearances.

In addition to these skills, the four communication fields also differ in their corresponding leadership styles. In the development process of icons and stories, the company particularly acts as the creative mastermind and protagonist. The company reveals leadership strength and claims decision-making authority in order to precisely implement the brand identity in its communication measures. This autocratic leadership approach corresponds to a “*command & control*” ideal. In contrast, the company develops brand experiences in spaces and platforms in collaboration with consumers and opinion leaders. Here, the aim is to subtly engage with external stakeholders and carefully win them over for the company’s cause. This

### Lessons Learned

1. Define a clear brand identity as the basis for brand communication and ensure that all employees act with a coherent notion of this identity.
2. Shape the four core fields of communication: brand icons as embodiments of your brand, spaces as physical environments in which the experience is co-created by consumers, stories as narratives that illustrate your brand, and platforms as virtual environments that enable exchange across a variety of stakeholders.
3. Utilize the complementary functions of the communication fields to build brand–consumer relationships: allure your customers with icons, bond with consumers by engaging them in the context of spaces, entertain large audiences with stories, and cultivate your brand network with platforms.
4. Compose your team by considering different archetypal management roles corresponding to the core fields of communication: designers to implement iconic designs, directors to produce captivating stories, hosts to create unique atmospheres, and moderators to lead media discourses.

**Fig. 3: Domain-Specific Management Personas for Each Communication Field**

Source: Own illustration.

participative leadership style corresponds to an “*inspire & transform*” ideal.

A consolidation of these domain-specific skills and leadership styles reveals four personas that illustrate the management approaches for each communication field. The archetypal management role in the field of icons may be compared with that of a *designer* who combines sensory skills with the autocratic implementation of a design. The archetypal role in the context of stories resembles that of a (movie) *director* (or conductor) who combines autocratic leadership with dramaturgical and media competence. The arche-

typal role for spaces corresponds to that of a *host* who creates a uniquely festive and hospitable atmosphere together with his guests. Finally, the archetypal role in the field of platforms is reminiscent of that of a *moderator* who leads a media discourse and, where necessary, subtly steers it (see figure 3).

Accordingly, contemporary brand communication presupposes that brand managers master a wide range of different skills and leadership styles. However, above all, a holistic understanding of these various communication fields and their interplay is more relevant than ever. The latter is an essential

prerequisite to specifically orchestrate the various communication fields in order to cultivate a strong and enduring brand–consumer relationship.

## Conclusion

The way brands and consumers interact with each other has radically changed in the last two decades. These developments have caused substantial insecurity among many brand managers on how to communicate their brands optimally. Our holistic approach to brand communication shows that many of the current developments triggered by digitalizati-

on are by no means one-sided; most of these changes bring forth counter-developments. We have observed that the increasing relevance of brand experiences via media is accompanied by consumers' need to re-engage with brands in

a more proximal and physical manner. At the same time, consumers' involvement in co-creation processes goes hand in hand with their desire to simply consume. These dialectical dimensions open up a more versatile and multi-

faceted design space for brand communication than ever before. This article aims at structuring these developments and highlighting the creative potential they comprise for designing contemporary brand communication. 

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