

COORDINATION OF INTERESTS 2.0 — NEW FORMS OF DIALOGUE IN PRACTICE¹

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. NEW CHALLENGES

The ways of dialogue in the representation of interests changed. The coordination of interests 2.0 will be significantly shaped by social media. Within a few years they redefined the current meaning of publicity. Web 2.0 influences communication and the behaviour of markets, politics, media, people, and, last but not least, corporations. A variety of opinion leaders, multipliers and their images got more and more visible in the public. The exchange of interests became more direct and it gets easier to participate in the political and societal discourse. The classical mode of sender and recipient seems to be out of date: Web 2.0 blurs the borders between author and audience in the communication process. Opinions can be exchanged and spread presto. Especially for the stakeholder dialogue this means a change in the framework conditions as well as in its instruments. The perception of the public increased significantly. At the same time there are other aspects changing: The mode of conversations, the tonality, and the demand of information quality of what is said as a characteristic of the reality, freshness, respectively the privileged role of the information. At the same time the public is characterized by an increased mobility and irritability.

The digitalisation of society forges ahead. As it can be seen in the Arab Spring and the last US-presidential campaigns, digital dialogue already reaches many parts of our societies and changes them deeply. Information reaches hubs faster, cheaper and more frequently, where they are confirmed, refuted, and distributed by other information. When in the past there was usually only one official position by a company or a public authority, there are now additional uncountable non-official, but reliable, information or sources that, if necessary, can disprove an incorrect description. Also, the way consumers and stakeholders gather information changed respectively: In times of information overflow support is found in collective action, when overstrained, we act ‘socially’ and emotionally through voting, likes, and sometimes through ‘shitstorms’. With social media, proximity and involvement is so vast that everyone can feel responsible for everything—and mostly does not have to fear consequences. For

¹ Article taken from: Friedrichsen, Mike & Kohn, Roland (Hrsg.) (2013): Digitale Politikvermittlung – Chancen und Risiken interaktiver Medien, Springer VS, Wiesbaden. ISBN 978-3-658-01125-3. Original version published in German.

participation this is a chance. However, social control is being superelevated as it was not imaginable even by the most radical Calvinists. It is obvious that the practices of public affairs and public policy are changed by these circumstances and there is a need for new ways of dialogue in order to achieve coordination of interests. This would already be an immense challenge that, however, would be solved by adapting instruments, competences and working methods. But a substantial change of the political representation of interests adds on that becomes visible in the evolving relation of company and society as well as of politics and economy: Companies are becoming more transparent—voluntarily or involuntarily. The political representation of interests must coevally cover new and global topics and forge new alliances in order to change something. This also means an active approach to topics and not only the simple reaction to the societal discourse (cf. Gretka, 2012, p.1). The future political representation of interests aims at the further development of the regulatory framework and is actively involved in it. Therefore companies and their representatives have to reinvent themselves. This also influences the mode of dialogue in a future coordination of interests: It will not be sufficient to transfer the current practice of lobbying to new means of communication. And actually this is not possible: At the moment, a good lobbyist is depending on exclusive information which is certainly not available freely on the internet and, like any journalist, on the trust of his source. Therefore the representation of interests has to be rethought fundamentally.

1.2. CLASSICAL LOBBYING AND RESPONSIBLE LOBBYING

‘Representation of interests’ and ‘Lobbyism’ are terms for a “glittering phenomenon” (Kolbe et al., 2011, p.9) and not selective. Let us begin with a clarification of some concepts which are germane to the answer on the question of the ways of dialogue and the representation of interests.

Ever since the advocacy for one’s own interests has been an important part of our political culture. Politics is made of interests and creates the foundation of democratic processes and structures in a corporative coordination of interests that involves all societal actors (cf. OECD, 2012) which also needs expertise. Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament, argues the same way:

“Hardly any thoroughly legislative initiator could claim to have considered all consequences for the different areas of societal life for his draft. For a complete and balanced sustainable legislation we also need the political advice of lobbyists” (Schulz, 2007, p.23).

“The real core that defines lobbyism is particularly information brokerage which is based on significant factual competence and has increasingly professionalised over the last years.” (Lösche, 2006, p.334). Lobbying or public affairs management, as it is called nowadays more often, conduces to the “influencing of a (commonly political) system through the interaction

with decision-makers and decision-making processes. [...]” (Gabler Wirtschaftslexikon, 2013). This ‘interaction’ is often discredited. Many people think of lobbying as backroom deals lacking transparency, decision-making at the expense of third parties, respectively the common good or competitors. Lobbying is conceptualised as the counterpart to transparency or to the assumption of responsibility². Even though this picture might be oversubscribed it is embedded in people’s minds. In this sense, a basic and important part of democratic opinion-forming is perceived as a threat to the common good. The ‘business of representation of interests’ has to react to this and this reaction should not be a simple beauty treatment or the rejection of black sheep. No, there will be new requirements for representatives as regards to content, methods and personal qualifications. At first however, we face a dilemma. The good lobbyist has ‘privileged knowledge’ and privileged contacts, respectively a strong personal network. The foundation of the coordination of interests, that outreaches one-sided lobbying, is transparency. That dilemma is not negotiable. Quite the contrary: The one who can solve it will have the chance to earn more acceptance and credibility. There are actors that already had to solve that very problem: American elite universities found a way how to provide knowledge and to demonstrate competence with it. Today many lectures are available on the internet for free³. What is possible for an elite university should also be possible for lobbyists or at least not foreclosed: Transparency.

Instead of pursuing short-dated own economic interests, companies can utilize their influence also in moderate self-interest for the benefit of the society: In the framework of an ethical and responsible representation of interest, the so called ‘Responsible Lobbying’.

1.3. INCORPORATION IN THE CLASSICAL LOBBYING FORMS

‘Responsible Lobbying’ differs from classical lobbying not only in the content of its work (content) but also the way of cooperation with political stakeholders and decision-makers (process).

² Exemplary for this is the line of argument by the journalist Prof. Dr. Thomas Leif in a hearing before the Council of Elders of the Hessian State Parliament where he supports the hypothesis that lobbying purposefully contradicts democratic principles with its clandestine work practices. In his statement Leif acknowledges the transparency approach of METRO GROUP (cf. Leif, 2013, pp.124).

³ Thus the study fees are only charged for the admission to take examinations at these universities whereby the question remains who is able to afford these fees.

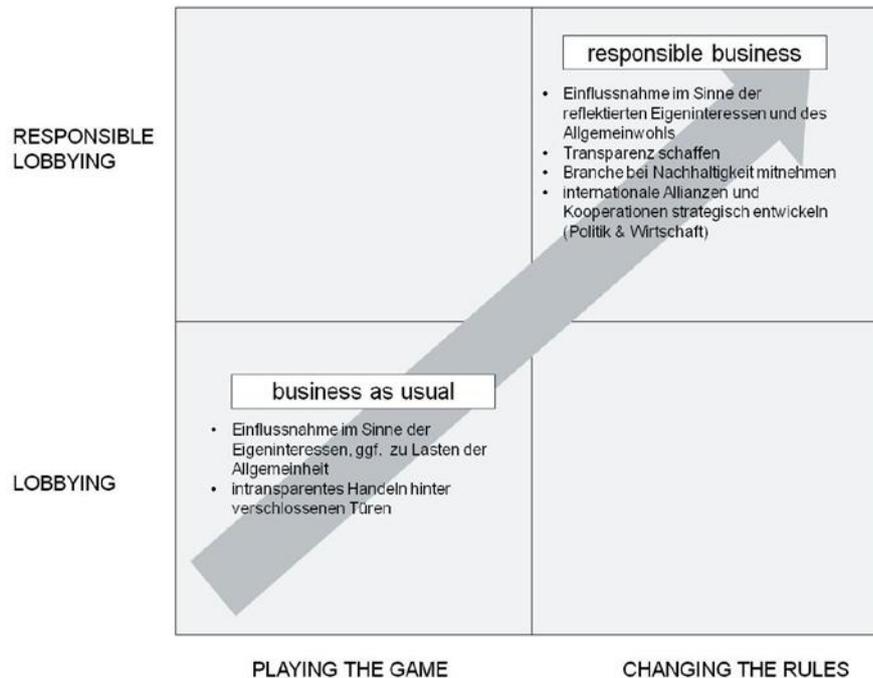
Contents: The aims of lobbying have to be stronger and need to be compatible with the society's aims in the long term. As part of the sustainability strategy they have to be consistent with the corporate strategy of the firm. (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009).

Processes: The political communication of a company needs to be transparent and consistent. The aims of the company's lobbying and the utilized tools need to be identifiable clearly. To all stakeholders a coherent message is communicated.

Besides the one-dimensional dialogue that prevailed in classical lobbying, a new multidimensional dialogue comes up that makes rethinking necessary: With their engagement, companies in favour of sustainable business also contribute to the development of societal framework conditions. However, in our accelerating, globalised and complex world this gets more and more challenging. Yet, business models, solutions and products can be scaled so quickly nowadays that we are in need of these fast feedbacks. This does not only refer to risks but especially to chances for sustainability. If it is called 'sustainable governance', 'responsible lobbying' or 'verantwortungsvolle Interessenvertretung' is not as crucial as the prerequisites a company has to offer here. It has to be able to engage in such a political dialogue quickly and with the necessary openness.

The new competences, which were already addressed above, refer especially to the management of entrepreneurial responsibility and an improved organizational ability for strategy and dialogue. These are the infrastructural dimensions of responsible lobbying. Other important factors are competences that, besides sector- and company-specific issues (which are already many!) also include the orientation towards the societal mission for sustainable development. There, nobody can know everything—and solutions and path dependencies change as well, yet the ability to navigate, to identify chances and risks, the future foundation of a responsible representation of interests. This 'ability' has to be modelled into the organisation and the corporate policy. Inside the organisation this is not to be delegated in one department. If responsibility and entrepreneurial success should go hand in hand these aspects really need to be believed (cf. Gretka, 2012, pp. 8). It is only possible to step up to the coordination of interest 2.0 that way. From often existing confrontation cooperation has to evolve. The most important task for responsible lobbying is the interpretation—in both directions. Common solutions are only achievable if a company is able to understand the

highly dynamic area of politics⁴. This is also illustrated by the following diagram: Classical working methods are overcome, rules have to be changed mutually ('Changing the Rules'). For this new modes of dialogue are needed that can live up to the entrepreneurial environment and guarantee the necessary mutual dynamic. For this reason the claims of 'Responsible Lobbying' shall serve as the basis for further elaboration.



2. DO WE NEED NEW FORMS OF DIALOGUE?

2.1. 360° COMMUNICATION

The political communication of a company has to strike out in a new direction. How is this to be accomplished in a world of such complex means of communication? The influence of web-based communication has an influence on society and people that is not to be underestimated. However, classical means of communication remain important as well. They combine to a 360°-communication which covers all directions and can overlap with instruments of public relations (cf. Gretka, 2012, p. 16).

(1) *Personal Contact Management*: This is probably the most classical form of political communication. An important part is the formal provision of factual information demanded by political decision-makers and administrations. They use the know-how and expertise of the

⁴ This thought is represented by METRO GROUP with its membership in "Leitbild für verantwortliches Handeln in der Wirtschaft". For more information visit: http://www.wcge.org/download/120914_leitbild-de_Unterschriften_o.pdf

company to make decisions (cf. OECD, 2012). A further important point is the alignment of interests with stakeholders, especially the critical ones. Here a direct dialogue needs to be established that reaches all target groups directly on the spot. The continuity of the dialogue is important. Only the ones with strong endurance can convince and be convincing.

(2) *Establishing the Political Dialogue:* Here the most important aim is the coverage of relevant issues in the public and to expand them through own debates and dialogue events in order to position oneself. For METRO GROUP this is for example the Wednesday Social of Trade. With this format awareness and problem understanding for the industry's topic is created for the important stakeholders that are crucial for the cooperation.

(3) *Press & Communications:* Besides classical press work with press conference and press releases, specifically articles in newspapers and magazines shall be mentioned. Also own publications on relevant topics are a suitable and useful medium: On the one hand the standpoint on issues can be clarified, on the other hand it serves as a platform for engaging in discussions on the standpoint with stakeholders with this. It can be seen again: The one who shows that it is not only about sending but discussing issues gains acceptance and credibility. Additionally own publications in the political setting can be a contribution to the public discussion. An example of METRO GROUP is the METRO GROUP TRADELETTER that offers an editorially prepared overview on topics relevant for the trade business. Another example is the workshop METRO_polis with strategists of the political parties, scientists and political advisors that even resulted in articles in the German press⁵.

(4) *Social Media & Online Communication:* Companies can offer rich background information sources on their webpages and at the same time reach their stakeholders quickly via platforms like Facebook, Twitter, etc. The trust of the stakeholders in the corporation legitimises its actions. Therefore it is important to allow stakeholders' feedback. Up-to-date political communication is based on the consequent application of 360°-communication and integrates all important elements of the online and offline are. Now it is important to enable more possibilities for exchange. An exchange that leads to mutual understanding.

2.2. BENEFITS OF NEW MODES OF DIALOGUE FOR THE COORDINATION OF INTERESTS 2.0

Web 2.0 changed the self-conception of corporate communications. Every user has the possibility to engage in discussions at any time from everywhere, to back or to denounce things that have been said, to spread opinions. Geographic boundaries dissolve. The world

⁵ For example in the *Handelsblatt* (cf. Inacker, 2013) and in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (cf. Wonka, 2013) that both referred to statements by workshop participants and related them to METRO GROUP.

engages in a global dialogue. The short ways for information and opinions enable an immense potential for the public image of corporations. Political communication has a tremendous chance with the possibilities of the Web 2.0. One of the most important tasks—maybe the crucial task—of a successful political representation of interests is to explain the own company. If this succeeds, the positive and negative consequences of the regulation or change of framework conditions become obvious. For this an expanded repertoire including the commented feedbacks or short opinion collections of the homogenous user group is a suitable and supportive tool. If this works can be seen by the users' feedback—with the right processing opinions and trends can be easily gathered.

A glance at the practical experience seems to show the exact opposite: Many associations limit their social-media-activities to the sending of one-sided short messages via Twitter. They only use it as a ticker. Information it is—but dialogue? Even comprehensive projects like CO.NX on Facebook (currently 2.5 million likes) mostly provide only one-sided content. A dialogue with the users therefore engages only with huge difficulties. Obviously the political decision-makers often lack the necessary experience in social-media-management. Despite all: The way of using the media means a quantum shift.

With the shortening reaction time a higher flexibility of the employees is needed. In any case, employees need to be trained well. They increasingly have the possibility to publish their opinion of the company openly or at least anonymously. They can rate their company on career portals, write Wikipedia articles etc. They increasingly need to be able to and be allowed to decide how to manage the representation of their company in Social Media and other innovative dialogue formats. The one who succeeds in living a clever 360°-communication in order to promote a higher sustainability performance with the creative participation of his or her employees by an honest dialogue approach, will lead the competition. The one who thinks this approach through to the end must inevitably realise: It affects not only communication but also the representation of interests. With a more visionary formulation one could state: For both socio-political and industrial-political topics companies have to be able to form majorities soon or later. This is however a question of the corporate culture management.

Finally it is specifically the personal communication with the employees of the respective company that creates trust.

3. FORMS AND GOALS OF NEW MODES OF DIALOGUE IN THE REPRESENTATION OF INTERESTS

3.1. FORMING THE DIALOGUE 2.0 FOR THE COORDINATION OF INTERESTS 2.0

“Markets are conversations” the Cluetrain Manifesto stated nearly 15 years ago (Levin et al., 1999). Companies have to get faster and better in understanding and broaching the issues of their stakeholders’ needs. In connected markets it will be more and more crucial to earn the stakeholders’ trust and to maintain a new mode of dialogue on different layers. The decisive success factor for such a dialogue at eye level are particularly credibility, openness, as well as actuality and interesting content (cf. Stolze, 2010).

The first step before entering responsible representation of interest is to develop a dialogue on whose foundation the prior set targets can be pursued. This strategy needs to be a common theme through all the different served communication channels. The one who learned to listen and sets himself free from the obligation to guide all the communication on his own will therefore be successful. A credible and honest dialogue will be rewarding on the long run. The open handling communicates credibility and the willingness to take responsibilities and cooperate (cf. Gretka, 2012, p. 44). Coordination of interest 2.0 is – at least to achieve the goals the term set itself – dependent on a transparent and dynamic instrument through which authenticity is generated and maintained. By opening up to the public, core competences shift. New competences are necessary, especially including the ability for a dialogue at eye level.

3.2. ANCHORING THE TOPICS IN THE PUBLIC DEBATE

How can topics be set for the stakeholders? The foundation for this is the ability for strategy and dialogue that was already elaborated on. These features facilitate the ability to connect with politics or civil society. This is the only way to create space for sustainable development in whose discourse a company can introduce its expertise for mutual advantages.

New forms of cooperative policy-creation have a huge potential to promote these developments. They are faster, more flexible and more target group specific than the usual means of mass communication. Only in a few cases this potential is fully realised to this day. Companies mostly *buy* presence instead of *earning* relevance and take the chance to stay in contact with its stakeholders. In this context the personalisation of communication turns out to be very helpful. Specifically in social media potential customers demand for personal contact:

“Corporations do not speak in the same voice as these new networked conversations. To their intended online audiences, companies sound hollow, flat, literally inhuman. In

just a few more years, the current homogenized "voice" of business—the sound of mission statements and brochures—will seem as contrived and artificial as the language of the 18th century French court. [...] Companies need to come down from their Ivory Towers and talk to the people with whom they hope to create relationships” (Levin et al., 1999).

Social media offerings on platforms like Facebook, Twitter or blogs enable the possibility of a direct and transparent dialogue with the own stakeholders. Firstly, companies should develop a strategy and analyse which mode of communication suits the target groups and the defined goals the best (cf. Gretka, 2012, pp. 49). By choosing the channel for communication also the available and advisable platforms play a role as well as determining role of the prelevant approach of the stakeholders. Also to the availability of feedback must be paid attention. On Twitter people communicate differently than on blogs. An actual and interesting social media profile is decisive for success. Many parallelly existing and uncoordinated company profiles appear to be unreliable. In case of doubt the following applies as well: Less is more.

Also the language used within these formats demands for change. This includes the ability for self-criticism—or at least the willingness to adopt another tonality: “Companies need to lighten up and take themselves less seriously. They need to get a sense of humor” (Levine et al., 1999). Instead of communicating fixed marketing messages and conducting one-sided communication, companies should use these formats to listen to their customers, to follow their (product related) interests, and to create a real dialogue. In social media the person is paramount, not the company. The principle of mutual taking and giving prevails. Only if this is taken into consideration it makes sense to use social media.

The value of new forms in the representation of interests and communication of interests is to be seen as high in the future. Communities grow and software that is not bound to interfaces will be used more often. However, companies are advised not to take the bull by the horns. All activities in the new participative web need to have a well thought out strategy.

4. IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW MODES OF DIALOGUE IN THE PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE OF METRO GROUP

How does METRO GROUP implement the vision of responsible lobbying? How does it use the chances of web 2.0 and how does it master the mentioned challenges? To comprehend the approach of METRO GROUP we need to take a closer look at the specialities of the commerce industry first.

Like hardly any other sector the commerce industry is depending on trust. The stakeholders’ trust is the basic foundation of its raison d’être and therefore the basic capital of a company.

But how does trust between stakeholder and commerce companies emerge? A certain level of trust can only be realised on the long run. Indispensable factors are credibility, honesty, competence, professionalism, and product quality. Building and preserving trust is more than a simple marketing operation. As a future capital the stakeholders' trust determines the long-term success or failure of the company. A confident basic attitude in favour of sustainable, transparent action and willingness to take responsibilities in the societal context therefore are necessary preconditions for that. To do so, commerce as a quickly acting sector, is reliant on a sort of 'navigator' that enables participation and is able to take the dynamics of such circumstances and initiate decision-making—in case of necessity also during the process. The main goal of the usage of these new forms of dialogue is the creation of an open and direct dialogue and by doing so generating trust in METRO GROUP through transparency and integrity⁶. In 2009 METRO GROUP began with its first strategic thoughts on the integration of social media into the communication mix. Based on the understanding that this 'media world' is in strong contrast to the usual formats and to quality assurance-structures, these first steps were taken according to the motto: "Think big, start small". Starting from the related topic "Employer Branding" and the social media-devoted target group of students and graduates these projects started with the recruiting fair *Meeting Metro*. Blogs, Twitter and Facebook were incorporated in the strategy, all of them connected to classical media—a 360°-communication was established with good feedback.

To achieve the goal of a consistent communication METRO GROUP established the Social-Media-Steering-Group in 2010 after a short learning phase. It developed interdisciplinary and company-wide Social Media Guidelines for employees and social media teams. Especially for the sales divisions that communicate independently in social media these guidelines are good orientations. Additionally, a monitoring of all relevant contents of blogs, communities etc. is performed following defined rules by an analysing team that filters the content and tags it with metadata. Through structured reporting these data is made available to the other departments. METRO GROUP tests modern web 2.0 offers especially in its departments Corporate Public Policy, Corporate Communications, Corporate Marketing and Human Resources. Stakeholders are being integrated by these communication channels and therefore have the chance to get in personal contact with the company. An example of METRO GROUP for the utilisation of web 2.0 for better stakeholder integration is the *METRO Genussblog* by METRO Cash & Carry Germany that came into existence shortly

⁶ The PR-expert Prof. Dr. Marco Althaus dedicates an article in his well-known blog "Public Affairs Manager" to the approach of Responsible Lobbying using METRO GROUP as the example and comments on it (cf. Althaus, 2010). Also Matthias Schrade, former member of the federal board of the German Pirate Party applauds the transparent approach of METRO GROUP, e.g. after the Wednesday Social of Trade (cf. Chapter 4.1), on Twitter (cf. Schrade, 2012a)

after 'Das Gute essen' (cf. Chapter 4.2). Here, employees provide insights in their personal view of trade. They describe the manufacturing of pasta, the quality features of meat, and the preparation of seasonal meals. Comprehensive insights in the world of trade are also provided by the commerce portal www.madetotrade.de.

METRO GROUP backs an open, credible exchange with all relevant stakeholders. Therefore, in January 2010 a Corporate Office in Berlin was opened to intensify the communication with politics and respective stakeholders. From the Berlin Office, which is in charge of the Corporate Public Policy for Germany and the European Union, a dialogue with stakeholders, especially with politics and economy, is possible to work actively towards sustainable framework conditions. The Office's target group are political decision-makers, associations and representatives of other companies that can be involved in the goal for sustainable framework conditions. With this in mind the annual report of METRO GROUP states that "[a] company can generate profitable growth only if it acts responsibly towards society and the environment" (METRO AG, p. 121). With this, METRO GROUP provides a strategic frame that sees itself as hub, platform for discussions and think tank. Representation of interests in dialogue happens there, following the 360°-approach, both offline, e.g. with the Wednesday Social of Trade, and online on the respective intranet platform. This form of hybrid-communication paves the way for the connection of METRO GROUP to all tiers of the discussion and can be understood as the 2.0-update to classical representation of interests.

The Corporate Office acts as advisor and expert during legislative decision-making and therewith brings in responsibility for the societal area. It engages in dialogue with journalists and representatives of parties, ministries, associations and NGOs in the political sphere of Berlin. By doing so, it connects important issues with the company's sustainability measures. A current example is the discussion on food labelling that touches a basic question which was, however, so far not part of the core business: How much maturity and capacity can be expected from the average customer? How much information does he want and will that finally lead to more healthy nutrition? Further relevant issues are opening hours, sales tax reforms, minimum wage and many more. In the light of responsible lobbying these issues have to be rethought completely and redeveloped jointly. The declared goal of the Corporate Office is to follow all actual and relevant issues continuously by ongoing contact- and communication-management. Interaction with the participants of the public discourse is the key part of it. Issues are brought up to discussion transparently and ideas are being developed cooperatively. Not only does the company benefit from that mutual exchange in terms of connection and reflection but also politics and society in the form of the company's sector-specific expertise in retailing.

In a stakeholder survey the influence of the Corporate Office on the perception of METRO GROUP was examined by the research institute *forsa*. Here, 200 opinion leaders from politics, economy and media were consulted. It turned out that the ones who stood in contact with the Berlin Office had a more positive overall image of the company's activities and attributed significantly more overall importance to the company than the ones who were not yet aware of the Corporate Office's existence. Particularly they saw METRO GROUP as an important point of contact concerning questions on retailing and commerce, they appreciated the approach and openness to dialogue of the company and they perceived it to be more future-oriented overall. It was acknowledged that the Corporate Office was always willing to engage in dialogue even on conflicting issues. The different events (which will be presented in the following chapters) have a good reputation. The evaluation shows that the task of lobbying is not only important for the representation of interests itself but also for the company's operational business: "Not only the mere representation of interests is relevant; corporate offices, unlike associations, increase reputation amongst multipliers and decision-makers and therefore constitute an added value for the operational business" (Aufrecht, 2012).

4.1. WEDNESDY SOCIAL OF TRADE

Following Berlin's salon tradition METRO GROUP initiated the Wednesday Social of Trade in spring 2010 in cooperation with the German Retail Federation (HDE) (www.berlinermittwochsgesellschaft.de). By now also the Federation of German Wholesale, Foreign Trade and Services (BGA) joined the event as cooperation partner. Within an open dialogue the event wants to demonstrate how diverse, innovative and high-performing the retail and wholsale sector is and how relevant retail topics are for the policy sector, economy and society.

Decisive for the format is that the agenda of the event is available online prior to the event and can be accessed through a password secured and moderated area where the topics can also be discussed after the event. In such conditions it is possible for METRO GROUP and the participant from politics and society to explore topics that exceed their normal areas responsibility but will influence future business and society. This discussion round is being intensified through the usage of web 2.0. Also, the quality is being increased and a fast and productive exchange of knowledge is being realised which supports transparency and credibility of responsible lobbying.

Mittwochsgesellschaft des Handels
METRO GROUP ZUM HANDELN GESCHAFFEN.
HDE Deutscher Handel
BGA Bundesverband Großhandel, Außenhandel, Dienstleistungen

Benutzername: r m
 Profil bearbeiten LOGOUT

STARTSEITE THEMENARCHIV ÜBER UNS POLICY KONTAKT

WILLKOMMEN IM MITGLIEDER-BEREICH!

Der Handelsverband Deutschland (HDE), der Bundesverband Großhandel, Außenhandel, Dienstleistungen (BGA) und die METRO GROUP wollen den Handel im politischen und gesellschaftlichen Leben noch sichtbarer machen. Deshalb haben wir nach dem Vorbild der Berliner Salon-Kultur die "Berliner Mittwochsgesellschaft des Handels" ins Leben gerufen und laden Sie ein, mit uns den Austausch zu pflegen. Was uns dabei besonders interessiert, ist Ihre Meinung. Daher freuen wir uns, wenn Sie mit uns auf diesen Seiten die jeweiligen Themen der Mittwochsgesellschaft in unserem Mitgliederbereich diskutieren. Wir glauben, dass unsere Gäste mit Ihren unterschiedlichen Erfahrungen einen entscheidenden Beitrag zur Diskussion leisten können.

AKTUELLES THEMA vom 16.01.2013
Was hilft Verbrauchern? Eine Bilanz von Lebensmittelklarheit.de und der Verbraucherpolitik

Laden Sie hier die **10 Thesen** von Gerd Billen herunter.

REFERENT

 Gerd Billen
 Gerd Billen, Jahrgang 1965, ist seit August 2007 Vorstand des Verbraucherzentrale Bundesverbandes. Billen studierte ... [Zum Profil >>](#)

Datum: 16.01.2013
 Uhrzeit: 20:00
 Ort: Atrium des Verbandsheuses von HDE und BGA
 Moderator: Volker Wieprecht

28 Diskussionsbeiträge
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NEUESTE FOTOS

ZUM HANDELN GESCHAFFEN. DAS MAGAZIN FÜR HANDELSWISSEN

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NEUESTE VIDEOS

16.01.2013 - Intro: Was hilft Verbrauchern? Eine Bilanz von Lebensmittelklarheit.de und der Verbraucherpolitik
 12.12.2012 - Intro: Nachhaltig Wirtschaften - Energiewende gestalten!

NEUESTE KOMMENTARE

Figure 1: User Interface of the member area of the site www.berlinermittwochgesellschaft.de

The respective speaker prepares some theses for the event and makes them available on the website of the Wednesday Social. There, the theses are discussed and commented. In the ideal case, these comments or questions are then being picked up, elaborated and answered by the speaker during the real-life event. The speaker has the guideline not to speak longer than 15 minutes in order to enable a true dialogue with the guests. At the event an increased usage of Twitter can be observed: More and more guests tweet during the event and thus are in connection also online.

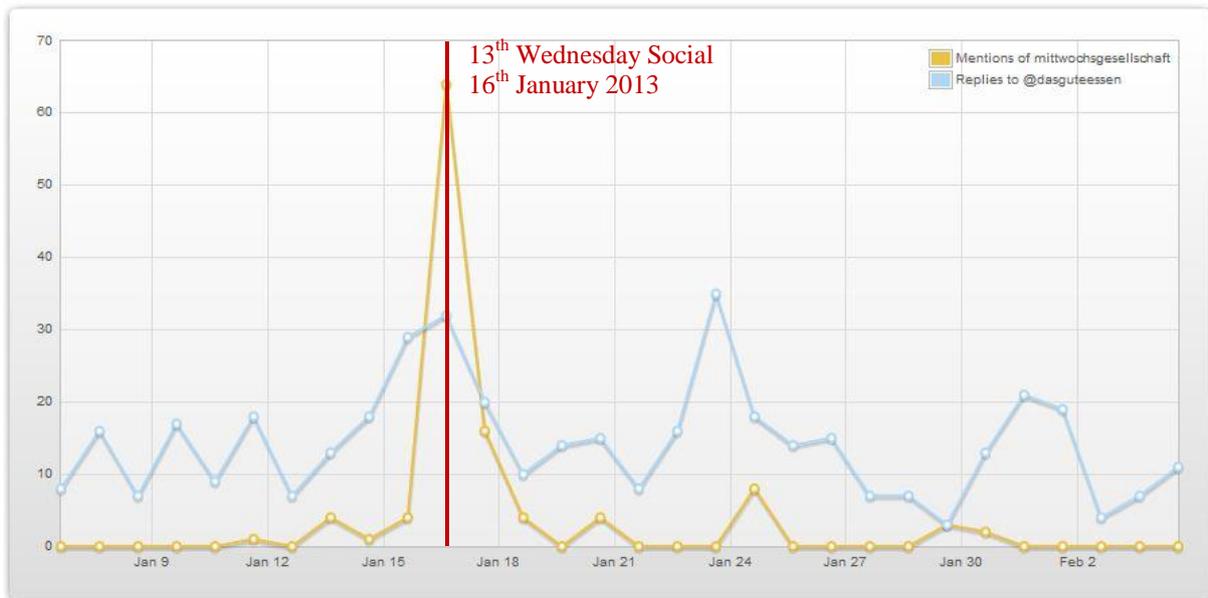


Figure 2: Mentions of #mittwochsgesellschaft and @dasGuteessen on Twitter during a Wednesday Social (Source: Graphic: topsy.com, data: twitter.com)

The internet platform is used by many participants as forum for discussion and supports the offline-discussion in an ideal way by enabling a collective knowledge exchange. Additionally, the platform also presents the speaker with common web 2.0 formats such as Youtube.

“An edited summary of the event form METRO is available on www.berlinermittwochsgesellschaft.de [...]. If someone is interested in the event he can sign up there, gets an invitation and can discuss the theses of the speaker online” (Schrade, 2012b).

This quote is from a former member of the federal board of the German Pirate Party and taken from an article about the event. It demonstrates that transparency and openness are being acknowledged.

4.2. ‘EATING GOOD FOOD’

The name ‘eating good food’ (‘Das Gute essen’) is taken from the cookbook that was published by METRO GROUP in 2010. The cookbook wants to attract readers to the quality of food and inform about sustainability activities of METRO GROUP and its sales divisions in another manner. The first edition successfully sold 30.000 copies in bookstores and markets of METRO GROUP and is out of print now.

Additionally a recipe-app for iPhone and iPad was developed. It contains the recipes from the cookbook. From every sold book and every sold app a donation of 1 Euro was given to the board of the German Food Banks whose main sponsor is METRO GROUP. Besides this app there is also a free app that contains 50 recipes. With their 860.000 downloads they show that topics from politics and sustainability can be communicated on an innovative way. For that

reason the twitter account was created at the 8th June 2010. The Corporate Office in Berlin tweets everything concerning food, beverage, consumer protection and other political issues. METRO AG is mentioned directly in the name of the account; therefore users know that it is an official account of METRO GROUP.

The Twitter-account is run by the employers of the Corporate Office. There is no agency in the background that does supportive work. With more than 800 followers, among them many members of parliament, state ministers, civil servants, and journalists, and more than 4.500 tweets the social media presence is very successful. At the same time the approach shows a clear difference to usual corporate accounts: It is not there for customer service but for the discussion on political and societal questions and the documentation of events. Concretely, this means that there are no message templates that get published only after multiple revisions but an ad hoc posting of current events that refer to trade. Social-media professionals like Tobias Kaufmann (@tobetop) or André Krüger (@bosch) assess this approach as follows: “METRO is the only German wholesale trade company that is actively engaged in digital public affairs.”

The main goal of using Twitter is a location- and time-independent contact with stakeholders. METRO GROUP wants to be perceived as a reliable partner with expertise in food, nutrition and political customer information. At the same time messages shall not be considered as advertisement. It is not unusual that administration, federations and other stakeholders, after contacting METRO GROUP via Twitter, also contact the Company in real life. From such relations both parties profit.

Especially in Berlin’s political sphere a fast growing usage of Twitter can be seen. Therefore it is foresighted and proactive to count on such a communication channel that will be used by a great majority of stakeholders in near future. The usage of Twitter is no end in itself but a good possibility to convey expertise, detect opinions, and deduce trends. It is part of the dialogic get-together that continues in real life. Twitter is a very successful possibility for realising a coordination of interests that integrates and considers overall societal views.

By this the Corporate Office in Berlin came into contact with a (then) member of the federal board of the German Pirate Party⁷ but also with food bloggers and (critical) stakeholders. Also business contacts for operative business evolved via Twitter. It is important that the short dialogue on Twitter should not replace the real dialogue but make it possible.

⁷ A report of the former board member of the Pirate Party can be found on the internet (Schrade, 2012b).

4.3. METRO GROUP TRADE LETTER AND PUBLIC POLICY LETTER

The issues of trade are under discussion whether positively like in the German magazine *brand eins* “Die Zukunft des Handels” (“The Future of Trade”) (April 2013) or critically like in food scandals or that what is perceived as such. Trade is an indispensable part of everyday life and, like hardly any other sector, stands for dialogue and exchange of ideas. However, this dialogue needs to be intensified in order to broaden the knowledge about trade of all customers⁸. For this reason, the section Corporate Public Policy Germany & EU of METRO GROUP started two initiatives that shall bring more transparency to the inside and outside. On the one side there is a regular PUBLIC POLICY NEWSLETTER that informs the executives of the company about the current topics of the political representation of interests and who works on which issues. To deepen the dialogue with politics, federations, NGOs, and other stakeholders in Germany and by the European Parliament the METRO GROUP TRADE LETTER was initiated. Four times a year this publication addresses topics that touch METRO GROUP and have a high political and societal relevance. In the first issue of April 2013 there are articles on the waste of food and efficient countermeasures, on the scandal over horsemeat, an exclusive interview with the Federal minister of Consumer Protection Ilse Aigner, and a discussion on the implications of the turnaround in energy policy on the trade sector. It is decisive that not the position of METRO GROUP is explained but the opinion of the company is shown dialogically. In the case of the energy turnaround this happened through an interview with Rainer Baake from “Agora Energiewende”. According to responsible lobbying persuasion should happen through discussion and show that the company is able to perform a long-lasting dialogue. The main goal is to be reachable and approachable for all (political) stakeholders. Additionally, the content of the METRO GROUP TRADE LETTER is available transparently and independently in German on www.handelsbrief.eu and English on www.tradeletter.eu. The published info graphics can be downloaded and be shared.

5. OUTLOOK & CONCLUSION

A number of new trends can be identified that shake the foundations of political communication and changes it. We are still at the beginning of this development, as it can be seen at the number of users in internet and social media there is still a huge unused potential. Companies must adapt to this new environment. The coordination of interests is not to be realised offline anymore. The demands of citizens and media developed. A coherent,

⁸ Cf. an report in PR-Report (cf. PR Report, 2013).

comprehensive, and reliable political communication must take this development into account and guide it.

For the organisation of a big company this is doubtless a huge challenge. The social media-induced personalisation of corporate communications visualises the communicator in the company. In this way the company defines itself through the employees that are in charge of social media and web 2.0 relations. This new 'employee-generated communication' sets potentials free that cannot be created by a top-down approach (cf. Levin et al., 1999). Hereby knowledge flows into the organisation. Companies should resist their need to control the discourse and should have the courage to let them go freely: "A company that is ruled from top to bottom and where employees do not dare to state their opinion cannot operate in social media convincingly. Because the values of an open corporate culture and the values of the networking culture are virtually congruent" (Pleil, 2010). Companies that manage the evolution of a real dialogue and can gain customers as followers have the chance to integrate these people into responsible lobbying and to let them take part in the coordination of interests 2.0. Also customers that are convinced of a product can be integrated as stakeholders because of their credible word of mouth.

The examples show the success of a new, more diversified, and more open communication with stakeholders that connects the chances of web 2.0 with traditional methods of lobbying. It can be seen clearly that coordination of interests lies within these channels of communication. Discussions increasingly switch to the digital world, where they are made available to a great number of persons. Openness and transparency score especially on the internet. It is important to use these channels of communication early and to establish oneself with them. At the same time, the offline world should not be neglected and must be maintained equally. The symbiosis of these two worlds is the goal of responsible lobbying and pathfinder for the coordination of interests 2.0 to reach competition and sustainability.

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