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Exploring Communication Strategies in SMEs: Preliminary results

Abstract

Communication strategy is increasingly recognized as a critical factor for competitiveness and long-term success across companies of all sectors and sizes. In a rapidly evolving market with shifting consumer expectations, strategic alignment between communication practices and market demands is essential. This study presents preliminary results of an ongoing study on the communication activities of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). The literature highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how to manage effective communication, and calls for more empirical research, particularly on SMEs. Focusing on the Italian B2C manufacturing sector, the study proposes a questionnaire structure to explore the key components of communication strategy within SMEs. This paper discusses the gaps and challenges highlighted in the marketing literature on communication and presents preliminary results from the ongoing survey. It also offers initial theoretical and practical implications for managing communication within a broader stakeholder ecosystem.

Keywords: Communication strategies, communication effectiveness, communication performance.

Introduction

Communication plays a crucial role in supporting top management and core business functions by ensuring that messaging is aligned with overarching strategic objectives, thereby strengthening its contribution to organisational success (Falkheimer et al., 2024). Invernizzi and Romenti (2021) emphasize the shift from corporate communication models to strategic communication, in which communication becomes a core component of organizational strategy, particularly in innovative and large firms. Because communication is central to achieving mission and business objectives, it must be fully integrated into strategic management processes (Falkheimer et al., 2024). In smaller firms, however, conditions differ significantly from large firms due to a weaker managerial and marketing culture (Pencarelli & Cioppi, 2009; Tucillo, 2014; Ceccotti, 2018) which often leads to inefficiencies in resource allocation and brand positioning.

Marketing communication requires deeper investigation, particularly within SMEs (Caliskan et al., 2021; Rosario & Dias, 2022) and especially in the Italian context (Bettioli et al., 2017; Ceccotti, 2018; Gregori & Pascucci, 2025). This paper presents preliminary results of an ongoing survey on communication practices of SMEs. The study identifies some gaps in the marketing communication literature, particularly the lack of an in-depth understanding of effective communication practices within firms

and the lack of empirical evidence in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). The objective of this paper is to understand how Italian manufacturing SMEs approach communication, from the adoption of a communication strategy to the use of digital data collection and reporting system to evaluate the effectiveness of communication efforts.

Theoretical background

While marketing communication literature has expanded significantly, especially with the adoption of digital technologies and tools such as social media and influencer marketing (Kotler et al., 2016), several scholars underline the lack of a strategic and proactive approach to communication in digital environments, particularly on social media (Petersen et al., 2023; Laukötter and Stahl, 2017; Ajibade & Mutula, 2020). More generally theoretical frameworks on effective communication based on a communication strategy are still scarce and lack empirical evidence (Sahem, 2023; Haris et al., 2023; Falkheimer et al., 2024).

A communication strategy typically requires firms to be aware of their strategic brand positioning (Kotler & Keller, 2003) and involves the definition of target audiences, objectives, and the channel mix (Haris et al., 2023; Gregori & Pascucci, 2025), as well as content development (Kotler et al., 2016). It also entails budgeting and the establishment of performance measurement metrics (Krizanova et al., 2019), together with the implementation of communication-oriented information systems (Ates, 2019).

There is little consensus in the literature regarding the definition of a communication strategy and its core components. For example, some authors argue that the process begins with identifying the target audience, selecting appropriate channels, and crafting an effective message (Gordon, 2013), while others emphasise the importance of objectives, the communication mix, and integrated communication approaches (Sahem, 2023). Additional studies focus more specifically on the composition and management of the channel mix (Shrivastava & Dawle, 2020). Although communication objectives are widely acknowledged, the literature varies in their definition and scope, including awareness, lead generation, engagement, purchase, and loyalty along the customer journey (Kotler et al., 2016).

Furthermore, recent research has predominantly used qualitative approaches examining either the adoption of specific digital tools in SMEs, such as websites and social media (Palazzo et al., 2017; Gavinelli, 2016), or focusing on specific sectors, such as agrifood or fashion. Very few studies explore the integration of digital and traditional communication channels across different sectors (Fraccastoro et al., 2021). Hence, comprehensive analyses of SMEs' overall communication strategies remain scarce.

A substantial body of literature has examined the effectiveness of marketing communication and the importance of its evaluation, particularly within online environments (among others Buhalis et al., 2015; Tarsakoo & Charoensukmongkol, 2020; Phokwane & Makhitha 2020; Sharabati et al., 2024). Market share is an important performance metric; however, financial performance - particularly return on investment (ROI) - appears to be most important metric, especially in certain sectors (Krizanova et al., 2019).

Digital transformation has created new communication opportunities but also made increased the complexity of managing integrated communication. Over the past decade, digital technologies have profoundly reshaped business operations, particularly marketing and communication activities (Kotler et al., 2021; Bartoloni, 2024). The literature predominantly focuses on large enterprises, which typically have the resources and managerial capacity to integrate digital tools effectively (Moeuf et al., 2018; Raimo et al., 2021; Conte & Siano, 2023). In contrast, SMEs face greater challenges in adopting effective communication strategies, due to limited understanding and structural constrains, including limited marketing resources and competencies (Kergroach, 2020; Cham et al., 2022).

Social media have transformed the relationship between companies and consumers, influencing word-of-mouth, brand engagement, and overall marketing processes (Bartoloni, 2024; Li et al., 2021; Tuten & Solomon, 2020). Influencer marketing has experienced rapid growth in recent years, and it is expected to continue expanding due to its capacity to generate authentic connections with audience, reach, engagement, and ROI (Costello & Yesiloglu, 2020; Bansal et al., 2024). Therefore, strategic and integrated approach to social media - and, more broadly, to marketing communication - is essential. However, empirical evidence, particularly quantitative research, on how SMEs manage marketing communication remains limited. This study addresses the above gaps by analysing current communication practices in SMEs, guided by the following research question: *RQ1: What are the characteristics of communication strategies within manufacturing SMEs?* The scope of the exploratory study is to identify strengths and weaknesses in order to improve competitiveness,

Methodology

To address RQ1 an online survey targeted to entrepreneurs or collaborators in B2C manufacturing sectors in SMEs (with 50 to 250 employees) was carried out. The exploratory quantitative research was conducted in November through an online structured questionnaire (Molteni & Troilo, 2022), yielding 150 responses. Data collection is still ongoing. The questionnaire includes three sections. Section 1 outlines the company profile, including geographical location (North, Central, or

South Italy), size (small or medium enterprise), sector of activity, and turnover range. Section 2 investigates the company's perception of its strategic brand positioning, and examines the extent to which a communication strategy is adopted. Strategic brand positioning is defined as *"a clear company's offering and image that occupy a distinctive place in the mind of the target market"* (based on Kotler & Keller, 2003). The awareness of firm's brand positioning was measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. A communication strategy was defined as *"a structured process that involves the definition of communication objectives and target audiences, content planning, the selection and integration of communication channels, and the measurement of outcomes in order to assess communication effectiveness"* (based on Kotler & Keller, 2003; Kotler et al., 2016; Krizanova et al., 2019; Ates, 2019; Haris et al., 2023). The adoption of the communication strategy was assessed using a three-point categorical scale: yes, fully; yes, partially; no. This section also explores the following communication objectives pursued by the company: awareness, lead generation, engagement, purchase and loyalty (Kotler & Keller, 2016). The clarity of communication objectives was assessed using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = *not at all* and 5 = *to a very great extent*.

Section 3 aims to determine the most frequently used digital communication tools (Bortoloni, 2024), and whether SMEs adopt a digital system for digital data collection and reporting, to evaluate results of digital communication efforts (Ates, 2019).

Preliminary results

The firms of the sample are heterogeneous in terms of size, industry sector, and geographic location, providing a quite representative overview of the SMEs relevant to this study (Table 1, Appendix). Less than half of the small sample examined (41%) perceive that their brand has a clear market positioning (Figure 1, Appendix). Most of respondents declare their brand positioning in the mind of their target audience is a moderate (39%). It is interesting to note that less than half of the sample (45%) affirm to adopt a comprehensive communication strategy, including defined objectives, content, communication mix, and result measurement. Meanwhile, 23% do not have any strategy, and 32% have only a partial one. In particular, the main communication objectives (Table 2, Appendix) are improving awareness (3.05) and increasing purchase (3.04), followed by engagement (2.95) and loyalty (2.91). Regarding communication mix, as shown in Figure 3, the most frequently adopted digital communication channels are the website, social media ads, instant messaging and email marketing. In contrast, influencer marketing, affiliate marketing and the company app are much less commonly used. Finally, slightly more than half of the

respondents (54%) reported the existence of a system for collecting and reporting digital activity data, such as web traffic analysis and online campaign performance.

Conclusions

SMEs of our sample still face substantial challenges in developing effective communication activities confirming the need to adopt an integrated a strategic approach to marketing communication. Awareness of strategic brand positioning remains limited, despite its central role as a foundation for coherent communication activities (Kotler & Keller, 2003). Moreover, the adoption of formal communication strategies is often only partial, confirming that SMEs encounter persistent constraints related to limited resources and managerial competencies when compared with larger firms (Pencarelli e Cioppi, 2009; Moeuf et al., 2018; Raimo et al., 2021; Conte & Siano, 2023; Ceccotti, 2018). Moreover, a clear identification of communication objectives does not emerge, as values average around 3 on a 1-5 Likert scale. Regarding communication tools, the SMEs in the sample predominantly rely on basic digital channels - such as corporate websites, social media platforms, and instant messaging - while the use of more advanced and sophisticated instruments, including influencer marketing and proprietary mobile applications (Bortoloni, 2024), remains limited. Our results confirm the limited use of performance measurement, with approximately half of SMEs not collecting or analysing data to assess the effectiveness of their communication efforts (Shrivastava & Dawle, 2020; Ateş, 2019). While aligning with gaps identified in the literature, these findings help address the scarcity of empirical - particularly quantitative - research on SMEs' communication practices (Sahem, 2023; Haris et al., 2023; Falkheimer et al., 2024). As preliminary evidence, the results require validation through a larger sample and inferential analyses, followed by qualitative investigations. Overall, the findings highlight a strong need for training and consultancy to support the development and implementation of communication strategies in SMEs. A more comprehensive understanding of SMEs' communication practices would enable the identification of both strengths and limitations, ultimately enhancing the competitiveness of manufacturing SMEs. Future research will further extend these insights through qualitative studies, particularly case studies, to explore best and worst practices in SME communication.

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Appendix

Table 1 – Characteristics of the firms' sample

Variable		N.	%
Size	10 - 19 employees	39	26.0%
	20 - 50 employees	31	20.7%
	51 - 100 employees	36	24.0%
	100 - 249 employees	44	29.3%
	Total	150	100%
Sector	Wood & Furniture	17	11.3%
	Food & Beverage	47	31.3%
	Paper	8	5.3%
	Textile	14	9.3%
	Electrical Equipment	16	10.7%
	Chemicals & Pharmaceuticals	17	11.3%

	Automotive & Transportation	11	7.3%
	Other	20	13.3%
	Total	150	100%
Provenance	Central Italy	36	24.0%
	Northern Italy	73	48.7%
	Southern Italy & Islands	41	27.3%
	Total	150	100%

Figure 1 – Strategic brand positioning perception

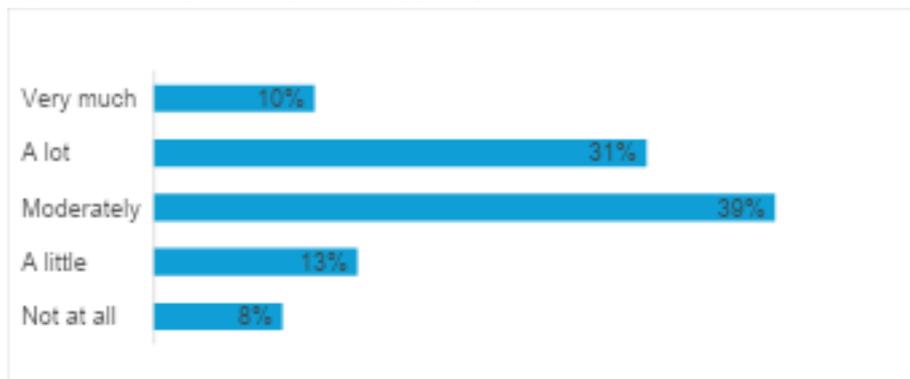


Table 2- Communication objectives

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Average value</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
Awareness	3.05	0.97
Lead Generation	2.80	1.02
Engagement	2.95	0.98
Purchase	3.04	1.00
Loyalty	2.91	1.03

Figure 3 – The most frequently used digital communication channels

