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Do Medium-Sized Companies Listen? The Importance of Corporate Listening in the Communication and Strategy Development of Medium-Sized Companies in Germany: A Qualitative Study

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Do Medium-Sized Companies Listen?

The Importance of Corporate Listening in the Communication and Strategy Development of Medium-Sized Companies in Germany: A Qualitative Study

Valentin Hausmann, Amelie Heinz, Mirjam Hörl, Antonia Rüth, Meike Schröder

Abstract

Medium-sized companies make up a large part of the German corporate landscape and have often been the subject of empirical research. However, the corporate communication of medium-sized companies has hardly been studied to this day. This paper, therefore, deals with the corporate communication of medium-sized companies in Germany. The concept of Corporate Listening is at the center of the study. The research interest lies in creating an overview of the use of Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies, including organizational prerequisites, measures, reasons, and effects. For this purpose, communication managers from eleven medium-sized companies were interviewed. Macnamara's Architecture of Listening and the Communication Value Circle serve as the primary theoretical basis for this study. The results show that mid-sized companies possess a general awareness of the necessity of Corporate Listening and achieve listening to stakeholders and the public to at least some extent. Various reasons for this awareness could be identified. However, the existing prerequisites in the companies to carry out Corporate Listening measures still reveal potentials for optimization. The study shows that companies include insights gained through Corporate Listening in the planning of future actions; however, these insights are rarely considered for strategic measures.

Keywords: Corporate Listening, medium-sized companies, Architecture of Listening, Communication Value Circle, Corporate Communication

Introduction

More than 99 % of companies in Germany belong to the SME [small and medium-sized enterprises] sector. They are the backbone of the German economy in terms of value creation, employment, and training (Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft, n.d.). This assessment is confirmed by the Institute for SME research [Institut für Mittelstandsforschung Bonn/ IfM Bonn]. In 2020, 99.3 % of German companies were SMEs, they generated 33.7 % of the total turnover in Germany and 54.4 % of all dependent employees worked in SMEs (Institut für Mittelstandsforschung Bonn, 2023b). Since small and medium-sized enterprises have such a special position in the German economy, they frequently attract the attention of academics (Moog & Witt, 2014, p. 1). Therefore, it is surprising that corporate communication in SMEs has received very little academic attention so far, especially since there is agreement on its relevance. The increase in the importance of corporate communication is undisputed, numerous empirical studies show that communication is considered a strategic success factor in business (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 70). Small and medium-sized enterprises are not unaffected by this development. Above all, the growing pressure of competition, the striving for competitiveness and the will to survive on the market are forcing medium-sized enterprises to devote more attention to the topic of corporate communication (Winkler, 2020, p. 3). Nevertheless, the communication of medium-sized companies has been neglected in research thus far (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 36).

According to the understanding of Borner and Zerfass (2018), corporate communication is divided into the strategic modes of Corporate Messaging and Corporate Listening. While Corporate Messaging describes the communication of corporate messages, Corporate Listening involves the conscious and selective reception, interpretation and evaluation of articulated stakeholder impulses and environmental factors with the intent to support corporate decisions. Up until now, the academic focus has undoubtedly been on the mode of corporate messaging (p. 13).

The concept of Corporate Listening receives comparatively little attention: "Research shows that listening by organizations, including corporations, is under-studied and under-developed" (Macnamara, 2020, p. 389). In addition to the small attention Corporate Listening has received theoretically, even less empirical research has been done in this field. The few available empirical studies often focus on large companies (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 13; Burnside-Lawry, 2012, p. 107). The analysis of Corporate Listening in German medium-sized enterprises therefore represents a research gap, from which the epistemological interest of this work arises. Thus, the following research question can be derived:

RQ: What role does the use of Corporate Listening play in the communication work and corporate strategy of medium-sized companies?

To answer the research question, the concept of Corporate Listening will first be described in more detail. The Communication Value Circle (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017) subsequently serves as a basis to show how communication and especially Corporate Listening can create added value for companies. The study continues by explaining Macnamara's Architecture of Listening, which describes the necessary prerequisites for target-oriented Corporate Listening (Macnamara, 2015). This is followed by the definition of medium-sized companies and an investigation of the current state of medium-sized companies with regard to strategy formation and corporate communication. The overall research question and the subordinate research questions are based on these theoretical descriptions. The methodological part provides an overview of the sample, the method in use as well as its implementation. The study closes by presenting the results and a discussion answering the research questions, followed by limitations of the study and a conclusion.

Theoretical Foundation

From Organizational Listening to Corporate Listening

Macnamara describes listening as a cognitive engagement with another person's statements that requires attention, recognition, and interpretation

to identify meaning and generate understanding, as well as a possible response. Thus, listening is an active effort (Macnamara, 2013, p. 163). According to Macnamara, the importance of listening stems from the fact that it is the logical consequence of speaking. Only through listening can organizations achieve desired goals such as two-way communication, stakeholder dialogue, engagement, and the maintenance of stakeholder relationships (Macnamara, 2015, p. 12). However, Organizational Listening has a limited theoretical foundation. According to Borner and Zerfass (2018), this concept implies that communication aims at mutually consensual relationships between organizations and stakeholders (p. 6). However, this normative understanding is too narrow and one-sided; it goes beyond the mere cultivation of relationships (Ingenhoff et al., 2022, p. 580). Additionally, the further value creation of Organizational Listening needs to be considered (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 6). Based on this criticism, Borner and Zerfass adjust the idea of Organizational Listening and develop the theoretical concept of Corporate Listening, which is used in this research project (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 8).

As a basic principle, companies should learn about the interests, opinions, and values of their environment. Borner and Zerfass (2018) describe this process as the *inbound perspective* of companies. The inbound component of corporate communication is represented by the strategic mode of Corporate Listening. To support corporate decision-making, articulated impulses from stakeholders as well as pertinent context variables are consciously and selectively perceived, analyzed, and evaluated (p. 9-13). The authors contrast this concept with corporate messaging, which is associated with the *outbound perspective* of organizations due to the distribution of corporate messages. They also explain that Corporate Listening is often an essential part of dialogues in the communicative sense and can occur together with corporate messaging (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 15). Depending on the industry and corporate strategy, some companies focus more on Corporate Listening than others, and the various Corporate Listening activities of different companies vary accordingly (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, p. 17).

Communication Value Circle and Architecture of Listening

The Communication Value Circle (Borner & Zerfass, 2017) and Macnamara's Architecture of Listening (Macnamara, 2015) are the primary theoretical basis for this study. Following Borner and Zerfass' definition, Corporate Listening can impact the planning and execution of corporate messaging and influence corporate decisions and strategies (Ingenhoff et al., 2022, p. 579). Considering the aforementioned critique, the question arises as to what additional value Corporate Listening can contribute to companies. This is where Zerfass and Viertmann's Communication Value Circle comes into play (2017). Based on this multidimensional concept, Borner and Zerfass define various areas where Corporate Listening can benefit companies. Transferring Corporate Listening into the individual dimensions of the circle reveals various ways in which it contributes to the value-creation process of a company. Regarding tangible assets, Corporate Listening can support the integration of customer and employee interests into the company's decision-making process. Corporate Listening can also help identify intangible assets, such as the company's reputation. In addition, internal Corporate Listening can strengthen corporate culture. Macnamara's understanding that listening improves the relationship between companies and their stakeholders relates to the dimension of room for maneuver. Thus, Corporate Listening can contribute to the public acceptance and legitimacy of the company. Finally, it can help companies to be resilient in crises and to identify new trends at an early stage. Thus, Corporate Listening can strengthen the company's innovation potential and seizing opportunities for development (Borner & Zerfass, 2018, pp. 18-19).

As there is little research on Corporate Listening and its characteristics, aspects of Organizational Listening are used as a further basis for this study. Macnamara has developed an Architecture of Listening containing eight elements that aim to support companies in conducting listening at an organizational level (Macnamara, 2015, p. 47). Although Organizational or Corporate Listening is based on interpersonal listening and requires

cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills from the responsible employees, it also requires appropriate structures, technologies, and processes on an organizational level (Macnamara, 2015, p. 47).

According to Macnamara, this Architecture of Listening starts with a *culture of listening* in an organization. Such a culture is significant since Organizational Listening only truly occurs when the organization recognizes that its stakeholders have the right to express their opinions and the organization is open to listening to them (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 247). How effectively and distinctively an organization listens is also highly dependent on this culture (Macnamara, 2015, p. 47). Based on an organizational culture that is open to listening, *policies for listening* need to be established to define a listening framework within the organization. These policies should be embedded throughout the organization and demonstrated externally through listening activities (Macnamara, 2016a, pp. 252-254). Next, Macnamara adds the recognition of the *politics of listening* to the Architecture of Listening. Only when companies acknowledge their stakeholders' right to be heard, genuine and ethical Organizational Listening can take place (Macnamara, 2015, p. 48). Organizations can learn to be aware of the *politics of listening* by employing the before-mentioned policies and specific *structures and processes for listening*. The latter are particularly important in organizations where several people or departments are involved in listening. The aim is to record important aspects of listening activities, analyze them and pass them on to decision-makers (Macnamara, 2015, pp. 49-50). Overall, if there are no specific *structures and processes for listening* in departments and work processes, it is unlikely that listening will take place (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 264).

Following the structures and processes, Macnamara includes *technologies for listening* in the Architecture of Listening. They can be helpful for implementing listening activities in companies as well as for collecting information (Macnamara, 2015, pp. 50-51). Such *technologies for listening* include, among others, (social) media monitoring programs and

analysis software. A particular focus in terms of listening technologies lies on social media. Although it is a very accessible technology that enables organizational listening, many companies do not exploit this potential. They only use their channels to disseminate their own messages (Macnamara, 2016a, pp. 265-266). All in all, it is central to note that technologies for listening cannot take over the concrete assessments and evaluations for which empathy is required (Macnamara, 2015, pp. 50-51).

These first elements of the Architecture of Listening raise the question about *resources for listening*. According to Macnamara, Organizational Listening requires human and financial resources as well as a changed time allocation (Macnamara, 2015, p. 51). For example, media monitoring or other listening activities and dealing with specific technologies require hiring appropriate staff. The elements *culture of listening*, *policies for listening*, *structures for listening* and *resources for listening* form the core of the architecture of listening (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 254). A new focus on Organizational or Corporate Listening also provokes a change in intellectual resources or the skill profile of employees in positions with strong stakeholder engagement (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 269). In addition to basic interpersonal abilities, these *skills for listening* include aspects specific to Organizational Listening. For example, knowledge about quantitative and qualitative research methods and analytical tools is essential. However, simply listening to opinions and interests does not mean that an organization is practicing Corporate Listening. Without the last element of the architecture, precisely *articulation of listening to decision-making*, listening cannot be considered Corporate Listening. This can only be the case if what is heard is adequately communicated and incorporated into the decision-making and strategy-development process of an organization (Macnamara, 2015, p. 52). However, it is important to emphasize that passing on stakeholder views to decision-makers does not mean unreflective endorsement (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 269).

A Lack of Corporate Listening in Theory and Practice?

The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management urged communication and PR managers to foster a culture of listening and involvement as early as 2012 (Global Alliance, 2012). Nevertheless, several empirical studies have demonstrated that organizations, businesses, and governments employ little, if any, listening methods (Burnside-Lawry, 2012; Macnamara, 2016b). Organizational and Corporate Listening is understudied. The concepts have gotten very little attention in empirical studies, which have mostly focused on Corporate Messaging (Macnamara, 2020, p. 389). Additionally, research on Corporate Listening frequently concentrates on a particular area, such as large companies in the English-speaking world (Macnamara, 2016a, p. 13; Burnside-Lawry, 2012, p. 107). As a result, there is still very little research in the field of Organizational or Corporate Listening in small and medium-sized businesses.

In a review of the literature, Macnamara was able to find only a small number of publications and articles discussing the idea of listening. This is despite a general understanding of the importance of listening in dialogues or communication processes (Macnamara, 2016b, p. 135). The call for more empirical research runs through all existing studies.

The German "Mittelstand": Definition, Strategies and Corporate Communication

So far there is no generally applicable definition of the German term "Mittelstand". In numerical data, it is usually grouped with so-called small and medium-sized enterprises [SMEs]. Micro-enterprises and small enterprises, which are part of the SMEs alongside the "Mittelstand", are deliberately not included in this work. However, much of the available literature does not refer explicitly to medium-sized companies, but to SMEs as a whole.

The definition of medium-sized companies that will be used for this study comes from the IfM Bonn. The following qualitative criteria must be met

to qualify as a medium-sized company according to the IfM Bonn: In the respective companies, up to two natural persons or their family members hold (directly or indirectly) at least 50 % of the company shares. In addition, these persons must be part of the management (IfM Bonn, 2023c). The unity of ownership and management is therefore particularly important. Quantitatively, medium-sized enterprises distinguish themselves from other types of enterprises by the number of employees of 50 to 499 and an annual turnover of up to 50 million euros (IfM Bonn, 2023a).

In order to consider the role of strategy development in SMEs, the next step is to define the term "strategy". In the field of corporate communication, the term strategy in the business context means the long-term planned behavior of a company to achieve its goals (Crespo et al., 2009, p. 125). Earlier empirical studies in the 1980s showed a clear picture regarding strategy formation in SMEs: Only 11 % of German SMEs were conducting strategic planning at that time (Crespo et al., 2009, p. 126). More recent research results from a nationwide company survey in 2007 have started to show an upward trend. About 42 % of the companies surveyed have a corporate strategy that is at least partially written down (Held, 2007, p. 26). Almost half of the companies surveyed also see strategic planning as an essential success factor in SMEs (Held, 2007, p. 22). A tendency towards increased strategic action in SMEs is thus visible, even if the development is only progressing slowly. Obstacles are, for example, insufficient knowledge as well as scarce personnel and time resources, which prevent SMEs from developing systematized strategies (Crespo et al., 2009, p. 126). In SMEs, actions and decisions are often not comprehensively planned and prepared in advance (Welter, 2003, pp. 51-52), but it is frequently the case that a sum of operational and ad hoc decisions or actions can only show strategic relevance when viewed retrospectively (Welter, 2003, p. 52). As a result, the strategy development process in SMEs usually looks different from the ideal proceeding outlined in theory. SMEs are therefore often accused of lacking a basic strategic orientation and a lack of medium- and long-term planning

(Winkler, 2020, p. 32). More often there seems to be a tendency to make pragmatic or spontaneous decisions that usually have only a short-term orientation (Crespo et al., 2009, p. 126).

A lack of strategic planning is also found in the communication work of SMEs. Before presenting characteristics of corporate communication practices in SMEs as described in the literature, it is important to mention that SME communication has so far received comparatively little attention in research (Winkler, 2020, p. 61). The main interest of PR and organizational communication focuses on large companies and corporations (Winkler, 2020, pp. 79-80). Medium-sized businesses are usually left out, not seldom due to their heterogeneous nature (Zerfass & Winkler, 2016, p. 267).

The lack of appropriate communication structures is often identified as one of the overarching characteristics of corporate communication in SMEs (Winkler, 2020, pp. 80-85). Nevertheless, there is an overall agreement that communication is a strategic success factor for SMEs and that professionalizing corporate communication is essential (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, pp. 70-71). In the study *Corporate Communications in medium-sized companies 2016*, in which medium-sized companies in Germany were surveyed online, four-fifths of the respondents stated that communication and the public opinion are indispensable for their company's success (Zerfaß et al., 2016, p. 20). In practice, however, the picture is different. The integration of the PR function can, to a certain extent, provide information about the importance ascribed to communication work in the company (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 70). The size of the company seems to play a significant role in the organization of PR tasks, which is why a negative picture emerges, especially with regard to medium-sized companies. Most companies without their own PR department can be assigned to medium-sized companies according to their turnover size, where PR is usually conducted by the management itself (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 71). At first glance, communication that is located at the management level could be an

indicator that communicative concerns are included in strategic corporate management (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 71). However, this is not the case in reality. Rather, the reasons for locating it at the management level are the unity of ownership and management as well as scarce financial and human resources (Zerfass & Winkler, 2016, p. 283).

Another aggravating factor is that communication tasks in medium-sized companies are often in the hands of single persons (Winkler, 2020, p. 84). The responsibilities of PR officers are usually not limited to these communicative tasks but are carried out in addition to other tasks in the company. The expectations towards communication managers in medium-sized companies are correspondingly high: They are expected to master not only strategic communication planning but also the operational activities based on it (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 73). However, those in charge not seldom have a low level of PR training and their core competencies do not lie in the area of public relations (Fischbach & Mack, 2008, p. 74). Despite such deficits, only a fraction of SMEs resorts to the expertise of external service providers (Zerfaß et al., 2016, p. 28).

Zerfass and Winkler draw a clear conclusion about corporate communication in SMEs: "Concepts employed often depend on the situation and occasion, and individual communication dominates the use of overall strategies and professionalized communication departments" (Zerfass & Winkler, 2016, p. 283). In 2016, the lack of an overarching communication strategy remains the biggest hurdle to the professionalization of corporate communication in medium-sized companies, right after the scarcity of financial resources (Zerfaß et al., 2016, p. 34). Three-quarters of respondents in 2016 do not have a formulated overarching communication strategy (Zerfaß et al., 2016, p. 43). However, a positive development is now visible. Compared to the study in 2015, medium-sized companies already see fewer obstacles to the further development of their corporate communication (Zerfaß et al., 2016, pp. 35-40).

Derivation of the Research Questions

To provide an answer to the main research question "*What role does the use of Corporate Listening play in the communication work and corporate strategy of medium-sized companies?"*, this study draws on the research and theory already available for large companies on the topic of corporate listening (see chapter *Communication Value Circle and Architecture of Listening*). This is combined with previous findings on communication and strategy formation of medium-sized companies (see chapter *The German "Mittelstand": Definition, Strategies and Corporate Communication*). Macnamara's Architecture of Listening, Zerfass and Viertmann's Communication Value Circle, as well as the question of strategic planning in medium-sized companies are taken into account. The research questions pursue three different goals, thereby breaking down the three topics of corporate listening presented above.

The first question focuses on the current state of Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies and is thus primarily descriptive. Based on the Architecture of Listening (Macnamara, 2015), which is important for the success of Corporate Listening, the question considers the existing framework conditions in the company and the measures implemented.

Borner and Zerfass (2018) describe four possible dimensions in which Corporate Listening can contribute to a company's value creation process: tangible assets, intangible assets, room for maneuver and opportunities for development. Based on these dimensions of the Communication Value Circle, the second research question deals with why medium-sized companies implement Corporate Listening measures. This question thus fulfils an explanatory function and explores the reasons behind the use of Corporate Listening.

In the third research question, the unique situation of communication work and strategy development in medium-sized companies and the impact Corporate Listening has on them is being analyzed. On the one hand, SMEs are accused of lacking strategic planning and instead implementing

ad-hoc decisions, both for their overall corporate strategy and their communicative activities. On the other hand, however, there is a clear trend of more and more SMEs having a corporate strategy that is at least partially laid down in writing and that professional communication is seen as essential for corporate success (see chapter *The German "Mittelstand": Definition, Strategies and Corporate Communication*). Accordingly, the research interest of the third question is to determine to what extent the insights gained through corporate listening are considered in strategic decisions of medium-sized companies.

This leads to the following research questions that deal with the prerequisites and measures (RQ1), the reasons (RQ2) and the influence of Corporate Listening on strategy development (RQ3):

RQ1: What are the prerequisites for conducting Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies and what measures do they implement within the framework of Corporate Listening?

RQ2: Why do medium-sized companies use Corporate Listening?

RQ3: How do the insights gained from Corporate Listening influence the strategy development and communicative activities of the companies?

Methodological Approach

In order to find an answer to the aforementioned research questions, a qualitative approach was chosen for this study. Data was collected through expert interviews with a partially standardized procedure. This choice is based on the early state of research on Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies. Therefore, an exploration of the research field was necessary first.

The guideline for the expert interviews was developed based on the previously presented research questions and their underlying theoretical constructs. In total, the guideline consisted of 19 questions and was

divided into four topics: measures, reasons, strategy/handling of the findings from active listening, and forecast. Within the questions, the specific term “Corporate Listening” was not mentioned, instead synonyms such as “active listening” were used to avoid potentially putting off the interviewees.

The total number of all medium-sized companies in Germany represents the basic population for this study. This population was ultimately limited by the previously established definition and the premise that there had to be a person responsible for communication within the company. Furthermore, it was considered reasonable to select companies that operate in the B2C sector for the survey. Taking all the above factors into account, a deliberate selection procedure was finally applied for the sample based on typical cases.

Through online research, the contact details of a total of 131 companies were collected, all of which fulfilled the aforementioned criteria. The aim was to find the person responsible for corporate communication within the company. Contact was established both via telephone and email. In the end, a total of eleven interviews were conducted. The companies of the recruited interview partners were active in the food, tourism, toy manufacturing, healthcare, bathroom equipment and publishing sectors (see Table 1).

The interviews took place between December 2022 and February 2023. The plan was to conduct all interviews via video call. However, due to technical difficulties, two interviews had to be conducted by telephone. There was also one face-to-face interview at the request of one of the interview partners. The interviews were conducted by a total of three people from the research team and lasted between 19 and 47 minutes. On average, the interview length was 34 minutes. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Table 1

Overview of the interview partners and the sectors, their companies are active in

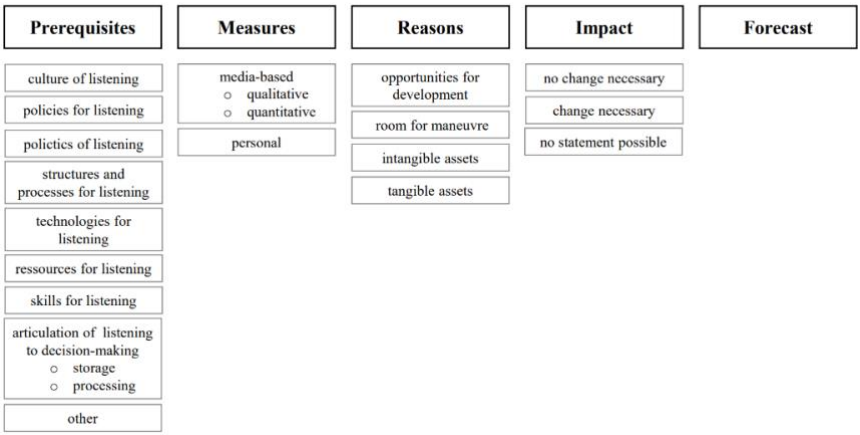
Interview	Position/Department	Sector
I#1	Press & Marketing Manager	Bath equipment
I#2	Marketing & Controlling Manager	Food
I#3	Head of Communication	Food
I#4	Head of Marketing and Product Management	Food
I#5	Senior Manager Public Relations	Tourism
I#6	Management	Publishing
I#7	Head of Public Relations	Tourism
I#8	Marketing Manager	Healthcare
I#9	Marketing & Sales	Tourism
I#10	Co-CEO	Toy manufacturing
I#11	Marketing and Sales Management	Food

In order to analyze these transcripts, the qualitative analysis method according to Kuckartz was chosen. The categories were formed deductively from the underlying theory and were inductively tested and expanded with subcategories throughout the text. This resulted in the system of categories, described in Figure 1, for analyzing the collected material.

In this analysis, Corporate Listening measures include the activities and circumstances that companies create, carry out and use to listen to stakeholders, both internally and externally. It must be said that the concept of Corporate Listening measures has been broadly interpreted here. This was done due to the current situation of measures in medium-sized companies, as described earlier.

Figure 1

Category system of the qualitative content analysis on Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies



Findings

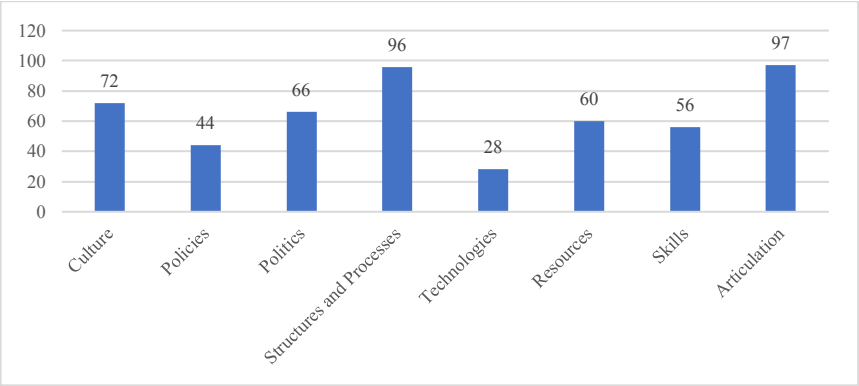
The results for each research question are analyzed separately. However, to gain a better understanding of the situation and importance of Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies, connections between individual codes and aspects are looked at, as well.

Prerequisites and Measures

The first research question to be answered is: *What are the prerequisites for conducting Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies and what measures do they implement within the framework of Corporate Listening?* This question consists of two parts: 1) the prerequisites, i.e., the framework set by the company for Corporate Listening and 2) the concrete measures that are implemented to actively listen to stakeholders and perceive their voices. First, an analysis of the prerequisites was done.

Figure 1

Architecture of Listening



Note. Quantities of the codes regarding the Architecture of Listening.

The companies seem to have an open ear for external stakeholders who want to get in touch. They also encourage employees to listen. Only one interviewee focused on the fact that the awareness and openness for listening are not sufficient within their company. There seem to be connections between the mention of *Culture* and *Politics of listening* (13 overlaps), *Structures and processes* (10 overlaps) as well as *Personal measures* (10 overlaps). As far as guidelines and *Policies for listening* are concerned, the interviewed companies seem to have very different prerequisites. For example, it is said that employees can inform themselves, but they do not have to do so. In other companies, guidelines can be identified, such as a predefined regularity in which Corporate Listening measures are conducted.

Regarding *Politics of listening*, medium-sized companies recognize the need to listen to stakeholders and the public and seem prepared to offer the necessary openness. However, in the execution of the measures, a few companies still show potential to address the issue further and to expand the way they deal with the topic. The awareness of employees for such topics seems to be increasing.

A lot of statements were made about the next prerequisite: *Structures and processes for listening* (see Figure 2). Received information often ends up with the responsible person through a detour rather than directly. It might be obtained by field staff, who in turn pass on what they consider important. In other companies, it is ensured that all feedback and information received ends up in the right places in the company where it is further processed. Overall, however, there seem to be few standard processes. *Structures and processes* correlate with statements regarding the *Culture of listening* (10 overlaps), *Resources* (12 overlaps), the *Articulation of stakeholder voices* (15 overlaps with *Storage* and 16 overlaps with *Processing*) and *Qualitative media-based measures* of Corporate Listening (11 overlaps).

In the next category, *Technology*, there are particularly large differences between the individual companies interviewed. Overall, this category received the least attention (see Figure 2). While three companies in particular show some mention of technical tools for Corporate Listening, three other companies have none, unless websites and emails are included. However, the advantages that technology can offer in this area are more widely known. Technologies used in medium-sized companies in the context of Corporate Listening are social media channels, evaluations via Google, Meta Business Suite, or a quality management system.

There is not only a lack of technology, but also a lack of *Resources* for the interviewed communication departments and thus for the implementation of Corporate Listening measures. This applies to all interviews and is also often stated when asked about the possible development of Corporate Listening; with more resources, more would be possible. But a quick change seems unlikely.

The next prerequisite looked at are *Skills for listening*. The interviewees appear to know who they want to listen to for their company. Certain listening skills can be found in all companies. In some cases, however, external expertise is also called upon as agencies are hired to support the

communication department. *Skills for listening* seem to be relevant when it comes to the *Processing* of obtained information (10 overlaps).

At last, interviewees had a lot to say about their company's storage and processing of information, belonging to the prerequisite *Articulation of listening to decision-making* (see Figure 2). In some companies, the information is keyworded, filed, and regularly evaluated. Another interviewee says, that some information is written down while other information has to be remembered. The overall picture shows that the data storage could become more consistent and is not always recorded in writing and articulated. Further use of the data does not seem to be uniformly designed either but rather consists of individual responses to stakeholder voices. This often means forwarding the data to the respective person in charge, who deals with it independently.

Regarding the second part of the first question, only a few measures could be identified as *Quantitative, media-based*. These measures were overall mentioned 24 times. Online ratings, such as Google Reviews, were mentioned most often. Other quantitative measures include large-scale internal or external surveys and evaluations of media exposure.

Far more frequent are *Qualitative listening measures*, which were mentioned 81 times. Media monitoring and social media monitoring in particular were often mentioned. The most common way for stakeholders to contact a company are through email and telephone. However, companies also listen to their stakeholders via contact forms on their website, webinars, newsletters and monitoring activities of industry associations, WhatsApp or by post. Internally, there are additional qualitative media-based measures, i.e., letterboxes or regular (online) meetings.

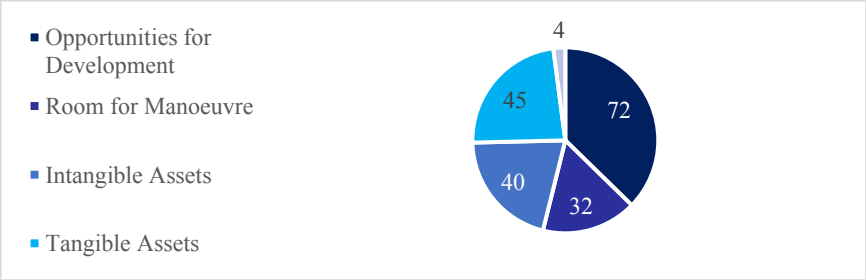
Personal measures are mentioned 62 times in all interviews. Visiting trade fairs stands out as a particularly frequent personal measure, with the interviewed experts citing the personal conversations and easy access to stakeholders as especially valuable. The role of sales representatives or

direct contact in branches are also important. Here, long-term contacts are established, which enable stakeholder voices to be gathered more quickly. The situation is similar for meetings of associations of which the respective companies are members. Another way to listen to stakeholders is to invite external and internal stakeholders to the company. Additionally, companies listen to employees and tend to implement fixed measures for this, such as regular employee appraisals. In addition, the so-called grapevine is important for identifying the employees' moods. Especially for companies located in rural areas, personal contacts and residents of the company location can also be relevant sources of feedback.

Reasons

The second research question to be answered is: *Why do medium-sized companies use Corporate Listening?* As Figure 3 shows, all subcodes of the category *Reasons* were allocated. All sub-categories were coded in ten of the eleven interviews. There was only a single interview where *room for maneuver* was not mentioned as a reason for Corporate Listening. The fallback category *Other* was only coded four times. The reasons for Corporate Listening mentioned in the interviews were often based on examples from the companies and could be derived from them.

Figure 3
Reasons for Corporate Listening



Note. Quantities of the codes regarding the reasons for Corporate Listening, based on the dimensions of the Communication Value Circle.

The most frequently coded sub-category was *Opportunities for development*, which was assigned 72 times. It includes the early identification of trends, innovation potential and crisis resilience. In this context, relatively few companies reported engaging in Corporate Listening to be crisis resilient. One company also noted a focus on innovation potential. Far more companies stated that Corporate Listening enables them to identify trends early on. It is interesting to note that, regarding measures, the code *Opportunities for development* appears relatively often together with *Media-based, qualitative Corporate Listening measures* (6 overlaps). This suggests that when Corporate Listening is conducted to discover opportunities for development, there is an increased use of media-based, qualitative measures.

The least coded sub-category was *Room for maneuver*, which was assigned 32 times. This code is composed of managing stakeholder relationships, trust, and legitimacy. Most segments coded under *Room for maneuver* relate to managing relationships with different stakeholders and maintaining or building trust. Similarly, some companies stated that they engage in Corporate Listening to gather feedback from stakeholders. However, they also try to gauge the current public mood on specific issues and act accordingly. This behavior allows companies to maintain their legitimacy.

The sub-categories of *Tangible assets* and *Intangible assets* were almost equally represented, *Tangible assets* being assigned 45 and *Intangible assets* 40 times respectively. In the case of *Intangible assets*, the coded segments focused heavily on the reputation of companies and their products. In the case of tangible assets, the opinions of customers and the interests of employees are taken into account in the company's decision-making process. Here it is important to note that *Media-based, quantitative measures* are often used to identify customer interests and to include them in corporate decision-making processes. Accordingly, the codes *Tangible assets* and *Media-based, quantitative measures* appeared in the same sections (5 overlaps).

Strategy Development

Overall, the *Impact* category contained the fewest statements compared to the other categories. On the one hand, this indicates a low level of consideration of Corporate Listening findings, but on the other hand it could also be due to a lack of strategy of SMEs. The partial lack of a systematic approach is reflected in the way that opinions of the stakeholders are dealt with. Since not all obtained information is passed on (see chapter *Prerequisites and measures*), not all insights from Corporate Listening can lead to action. Nevertheless, at least five statements could be made in each interview on the extent to which findings from Corporate Listening influenced company actions.

A total of 79 segments could be assigned to the category. The results show that, if influences could be determined, by far the most answers describe a change in behavior. The category *No Change Necessary* was coded eight times, while in comparison 57 statements described a *Change* in behavior and 14 times *No statement was possible*. It can therefore be said that when Corporate Listening findings were used by companies, they usually led to a change in behavior or strategy. Furthermore, it was more often claimed that change existed, but no concrete example could be given, while confirmation of action was rare. Due to the number of categorizations, some interesting correlations emerge, especially in the *Change Necessary* category.

Changes, based on Corporate Listening findings, were numerous and can be fundamentally divided into two categories. First, there are adjustments to the strategic orientation of the company. Here, recognized trends or the demands of customers are used for the development of new offers and products. Second, there is the adjustment of the company's communicative activities. To achieve more effective communication and to prevent possible risks or questions, the company's adaptations and adjustments are made regarding the changed information demand of customers. This is also reflected in the fact that strategic *Changes* were coded particularly often in connection with *Tangible assets* (9 overlaps).

The *Strategy* was frequently *adapted* to consider customer preferences, and *Opportunities for development* (11 overlaps). Above all, the innovation potential in the form of new offers and crisis resilience was promoted through strategic changes.

Statements that the current corporate strategy is confirmed by Corporate Listening responses and that *No change is necessary* are found in six interviews and were coded a total of eight times. All codes regarding the dimensions of the Communication Value Circle were coded equally often, namely two times. Only *Opportunities for Development* falls outside the grid with zero codes, which seems logical given the contradiction between identified opportunities for further development and those not implemented. Overall, however, it must be said that confirmations were mentioned significantly less than changes, probably because the interviewees remember changes much more clearly than a simple continuation of current behavior.

The category *No statement possible* offers a very good representative overview of the significance and influences of Corporate Listening in medium-sized companies. Companies that take the findings seriously and repeatedly claim they are playing an important role in corporate strategy. However, when asked directly they are often unable to name any examples of this or attribute a more important role to other influencing factors. For example, five of the interviewed experts explicitly state that Corporate Listening influences corporate strategy, but at the same time, they repeatedly mention that it is not always easy to implement the findings in practice. The lack of examples also explains why no notable correlations could be identified in the coding. However, the lack of examples could also be based on the ad hoc nature of the interview. Five of the interviewees specifically stated that if they would have had more time, they could have provided an example, but in the limited reflection period within the interview they were unable to do so.

Discussion

How Medium-sized Companies Listen

The companies surveyed show different characteristics regarding the aspects of the Architecture of Listening. The picture that emerges is that all companies have a corporate culture that is open to listening. The situation is similar for skills for listening, where it is also clear that all companies possess certain competencies. All companies also deal with listening. Regarding the corporate culture, listening skills and engagement with the topic of listening, it can be stated that the prerequisites for the implementation of Corporate Listening have been fulfilled.

The situation is different for the remaining prerequisites in the Architecture of Listening. The companies surveyed hardly ever state that they have fixed guidelines or structures and uniform processes regarding Corporate Listening. The articulation of stakeholder voices is not very uniform among the companies surveyed. While a few companies write down and organize the opinions of stakeholders, other companies do not show any clear rules or processes. Looking at the forwarding of stakeholder voices, a similar picture emerges. Only a few companies stated that they pass on Corporate Listening findings internally. If insights are gained but not passed on accordingly, no action can follow. Thus, the prerequisites of Corporate Listening in terms of policies, resources, structures, and processes of listening and articulating stakeholder voices cannot be assessed as sufficiently fulfilled. Although some companies show signs of planned structures and policies, they are poorly developed.

The technologies used for Corporate Listening are a special case; here, the interviewed companies form two poles. On the one hand, the code concerning technology use was recorded relatively frequently in three interviews. On the other hand, three other companies did not indicate that they use technologies, except for their websites and emails, for Corporate Listening. Therefore, it is not possible to make a general statement on the technological requirements for Corporate Listening.

Regarding the second part of the first research question, it becomes visible that media-based, qualitative measures are particularly popular among medium-sized companies, followed by personal measures such as trade fair visits. Media-based, quantitative measures are less prominent. While most measures refer to external stakeholders, employees can also make their feedback heard. While medium-sized companies use different ways to offer stakeholders the opportunity to approach them, measures in which the companies actively ask for feedback, suggestions, or other stakeholder voices to actively listen to, are still few and far between.

Why Medium-sized Companies Listen

The results of the study show that most medium-sized companies conduct Corporate Listening measures to identify opportunities for development. Here, the clear focus lies on possible trend developments for the company's products or services. Less frequently, the companies monitor communication trends. As one interviewee noted: "In general, these things are important in order to know where you need to develop and can identify trends or demands, which sector is developing in what way, and which small segments are developing in others" (I #11). Only a few medium-sized companies use Corporate Listening to be resistant during crises, both in communication and concerning products, services, or processes. It can be stated that if the reasons behind Corporate Listening lie in the dimension of opportunities for development, media-based, qualitative measures are increasingly used.

Furthermore, Corporate Listening is often utilized to incorporate customer voices and preferences into product development or corporate communications. These reasons relate to the dimension of tangible assets. In addition to employees and customers, some companies also emphasize Corporate Listening measures, which are more likely to be devoted to the press. Here, media-based, quantitative measures are often used to identify customer interests and to incorporate these into the decision-making processes of the company.

Reasons regarding the dimensions R*oom for maneuver* and *Intangible assets* were mentioned comparatively little in the study. Concerning the intangible assets, it can be concluded that Corporate Listening is used particularly to maintain the relationship between the companies surveyed, their customers and, in some cases, other stakeholders. At times, Corporate Listening also strengthens the corporate culture by incorporating the opinions of employees. In addition to basic relationship management within the dimension of *Room for maneuver*, medium-sized companies made use of Corporate Listening to establish their reputation with customers. Although legitimacy was also sometimes cited as a reason for Corporate Listening measures, it is not so prominently featured.

All in all, it can be concluded that medium-sized companies mainly use Corporate Listening regarding their products or services and less to improve their reputation and image or to expand their room for maneuver through legitimacy. Apart from products and services, medium-sized companies concentrate their Corporate Listening measures on improving relations with their customers and sometimes with the press, intermediaries or competing companies.

How Listening Influences Strategies

Concerning the last research question, it should be emphasized once again that medium-sized companies often lack a general strategy or a communication strategy. The influences described here, therefore, refer to strategy development in medium-sized companies, which is characterized by ad hoc operational decisions and actions that are assigned strategic relevance in retrospect. This is also evident in the use of Corporate Listening findings, with several interviewees describing that they use customer voices to retrospectively confirm or justify decisions that have already been made.

Interestingly, Corporate Listening is also used by companies to pretend that they are incorporating the opinions of their stakeholders into the decision-making process even though this was not actually the case. For

example: “In principle, we are responding to a customer request, but we are not responding to it now because we say 'Oh, that's a customer request', but because we say it's the more sustainable way to go” (I#3).

Beyond that, however, it results show that Corporate Listening findings are taken seriously, even if they are only a confirmation of the current strategy. This becomes particularly clear in the product policies of the companies interviewed, with several interviewees stating that they include a product more frequently in their product portfolios as a result of customer feedback.

The focus on trends and customer voices is also evident in relation to influencing strategy development and communicative activities. It must be emphasized that the influence of Corporate Listening insights is critically questioned in processes that affect the products or services of the companies. Several times, the companies noted here that the influence of customer feedback and trends is not unlimited and must be compatible with the company’s ideas. An attempt is made to create a combination of the customers’ demands and the company’s ideas, whereby one of the interviewees emphasized: “We stay true to ourselves” (I#9).

Findings from Corporate Listening that concern the company’s communication are more often implemented directly. They are used, for example, to be able to inform proactively when an increased need for information on the part of consumers has been identified for certain topics. The interest of the customers was often described as an important factor for both the content and the external form of communication. In terms of content, for example, the topic focus of communication shifts due to the expectations of the users; externally, adjustments to the wording as well as to the format of the content could be determined.

All in all, it becomes clear that the findings from Corporate Listening influence the strategy development of medium-sized companies according to the way that their strategy development works, namely in retrospect. Here, the influence relates primarily to possible trends and customer

preferences. Medium-sized companies allow for influence, especially in the context of communicative activities. With regard to product-related processes or optimizations, medium-sized companies evaluate all options more thoroughly before making changes. Furthermore, by improving various prerequisites for Corporate Listening, it may also be possible to increase the influence on strategy development and communicative activities.

Limitations

This research project faced several challenges, including the definition of medium-sized companies and the difficulty of contacting them. The search for medium-sized companies that met the predetermined qualitative and quantitative criteria was time-consuming, as there was no unified overview of medium-sized companies as defined by the IfM Bonn. Additionally, the accessibility of medium-sized companies was limited, with only a small number of responses to the interview requests being received. Additionally, a broad understanding of Corporate Listening and the associated measures was applied. Due to the lack of professionalism concerning corporate communication in medium-sized companies, most Corporate Listening measures stated in the interviews did not correspond to the ones ideally described in the literature. Therefore, the understanding of Corporate Listening measures was broadened for this research project. Additionally, the method itself was adapted to the circumstances of medium-sized businesses, and different interview formats were used. The interviews were conducted online, by telephone and in person, which might have affected their content and length.

Conclusion and Indications for Future Research

The aim of this study was to find an answer to the overarching research question: *What role does the use of Corporate Listening play in the communication work and corporate strategy of medium-sized companies?* In order to achieve this, the research team started the project with a literature review of the concept of Corporate Listening mainly considering

the texts by Borner and Zerfass and Viertmann and Zerfass, as well as Macnamara's Architecture of Listening. In a next step, it was necessary to gain a better understanding of the term "medium-sized companies". Therefore, a definition for the use in this study was established. Through a detailed examination of the state of research, an insight into strategy formation and corporate communication in medium-sized companies was gained. Qualitative expert interviews were chosen as a methodological approach and analyzed accordingly. The research process ended with a discussion of the outcome of this analysis.

The results of this study show that medium-sized companies are aware of the importance of Corporate Listening but lack an understanding of the concepts behind it. All medium-sized companies surveyed carry out either media-based or personal Corporate Listening measures and use some of the insights gained in their strategy development or communicative activities. However, some of the companies surveyed lack technologies that support Corporate Listening, which affects the further use of the insights gained and their influence on corporate decisions. Possible reasons for the lack of structures are assumed to be the absence of resources and communication strategies or specific listening strategies. Since the prerequisites mentioned in the Architecture of Listening build on each other, it can be said that there is currently no Corporate Listening, as described in academic literature, in place in medium-sized companies in Germany. However, less strategic versions of Corporate Listening in the interviewed companies were found.

The companies surveyed are increasingly concentrating on recognizing possible product and communication trends, integrating customer opinions into corporate decisions, and maintaining relationships with customers. However, Corporate Listening can also support other value-adding processes, such as maintaining relationships with other stakeholders or building trust. Additionally, it offers potential in the context of legitimacy and reputation, which have not yet been utilized by medium-sized companies.

Thus, it can be concluded that the aim set at the beginning of this research project, which was to find an answer to the overarching research question, has been achieved.

In terms of future research, the question is now, where to go from here. In the present study, the hardly existing use of Corporate Listening measures is often justified by a lack of resources. Based on this finding, a comparison between medium-sized and large companies would be conceivable, as it can be assumed that more resources are available there. A similar study could first be conducted in large German companies to subsequently compare those results to the results in this study. Furthermore, it can be noted that so far research on Corporate Listening has mainly been conducted in English-speaking areas, more precisely on large companies in the English-speaking world. Therefore, a study that primarily refers to medium-sized companies in the English-speaking area could be of interest. In addition, companies from other cultural regions such as South America or Asia could be studied. Additionally, only companies from the B2C sector were included in the basic population of this study, as the probability of using Corporate Listening was considered higher in this area. Whether this is the case could be examined in a further study that also takes the B2B sector into account. Thus, there could be a more detailed comparison between the B2B- and B2C-sector as well as differences between industries within a sector.

In conclusion, this study has made an important contribution to the research in the field of corporate communications of medium-sized companies and thus forms a basis for other strands of research. Through possible follow-up research the “Mittelstand” will hopefully soon receive the amount of academic attention that would be adequate due to its economic relevance in Germany.

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