

Interview with Uta-Micaela Dürig, Senior Vice President Corporate Communications, Brand Management and Sustainability, Robert Bosch GmbH

“Communicators are born futurists”

KM: Ms. Dürig, nine out of ten Germans would like companies to devote more serious attention to social issues. People’s expectations of communication activities have therefore changed as well: they see issues with a social focus as more important than product-based public relations. Is communication still an enjoyable area of work?

Of course it is! The greater the changes and the more that it expected of us, the more enjoyable it is, since it makes our communication work even more challenging. The portfolio of issues we deal with is constantly growing. This is why sustainability is now also part of the corporate communications brief, and why we publish a megatrend report for Bosch executives in collaboration with the corporate strategy department.

KM: Within the Bosch Group, you have been responsible for the sustainability issue since 2010. How important is sustainability in terms of a company’s reputation?

First of all: it has become common practice for ethically minded companies to manage and control their business activities from the point of view of sustainability, and many managers – including those at Bosch – do so in the conviction that responsible company management sets the tone for ethical behavior throughout the company. In some cases, this is a long-established company tradition – as in our case with our founder Robert Bosch. This view is supported by various studies and expert analyses showing that sustainability helps to promote a company’s reputation, increases the sales of its products, and makes it more attractive as an employer. There are plenty of reasons why it makes sense to manage a company according to the principles of sustainability, to make it a firm part of corporate strategy, and to create transparency with respect to procedures, policies, and the achievement of targets.

KM: How is sustainability anchored in an international operating network?

The corporate CSR department collaborates with all Bosch entities and specialized units throughout the world. We’ve also created CSR institutes in some of the countries in which we operate, including Brazil, the United States, and India. And to mark our centennial in China, we set up an institute there as well. These units coordinate societal, ecological, and social projects. I’m convinced that sustainability can only have an effect throughout a company if the topic is addressed out of a sense of conviction that it is necessary and significant for the company’s development. It also has to be seen in the context of all a company’s responsibilities – economic, social, and environmental. Having experienced two world wars, Robert Bosch was convinced that lasting business success is possible only in an intact social and political – and ecological – framework. He took an active and even pioneering stance in this respect and sought dialog with all relevant stakeholders. CSR is not some “green label”; it must spring from the profound conviction that it is necessary to accept responsibility for the company, society at large, and the environment! In this respect, there is a strong correlation between conviction and effectiveness.

KM: How big is your communications unit, and how is it structured?

At present, 240 associates in total, in Germany and around the globe. The second part of the question is more interesting, because it's something that all communication departments are asking themselves: what is the best set-up in today's rapidly changing, digital world? Here in our unit we're looking into this question as part of our internal strategy process.

KM: How do you work together in the Bosch Group's global communications?

The internationalization of corporate communications is no longer a new phenomenon. It is simply growing in strength. Interaction is increasingly virtual and intensive, also across national borders. Such intensive interaction has been a normal feature of work for all global communicators at Bosch since 2004, both in a virtual form and in face-to-face encounters at our international conference, held once every two years, and various annual meetings in the regions. Similarly, conference calls and video conferences are a regular feature of our daily work. No-one finds it unusual that an Indian associate who used to head the communications office in Bangalore is today in charge of communications for Asia Pacific and based in Shanghai. The people who form part of our worldwide communications network, in Germany and elsewhere, can be transferred to any country in the world for anything from a short three-month assignment to a longer stay of three or five years. This strengthens ties within the network and greatly promotes intercultural understanding. The fact that we are responsible for budgetary matters and goal achievement has also made the team more closely knit.

KM: You have almost 30 years' experience in communications work: what changes have you seen in the media world?

A journalist's work is far more demanding than it used to be. The media world is extremely fast-paced, electronic, networked, global, and fiercely competitive – especially when it comes to the new media. There's enormous economic pressure, which leaves little time for intensive research. That makes trying to produce top-quality journalism day after day a huge challenge, especially in today's world where politics, business, technology, and society have become so dynamic and complex – a world that is changing at a breathtaking pace to boot. And let's not forget that we as journalists also have to take into account completely new habits of media use.

KM: What does this mean for corporate communications?

Companies that want to be lastingly successful have to face up to many different, demanding challenges. The demands made by society have changed significantly, customer requirements are different, the pressure to innovate is higher than before, corporate cultures are multinational, markets are affected by social and political instability, a totally new set of media use habits, new communication techniques, and a growing number of competitors from other sectors of industry who employ radically different marketing techniques.

As a result, the importance of corporate communication has grown considerably over the past 20 years. The issues it deals with have never been more complex, and so the need to provide explanations to both internal and external stakeholders is also greater than before. Information

travels more quickly than ever before, and this via new communication channels. In such a diverse environment, it is becoming increasingly important to know what the interrelations are and to respond accordingly.

KM: How would you define the mission of a modern communications department?

To build up, extend, sustain, and improve the reputation of the company and its brand and to do so in open dialog with all relevant stakeholders, in a context that is increasingly dynamic, volatile, and digitized. Communication based exclusively on the CEO's statements is a thing of the past. Internet and modern communication for executives are being used to an increasing extent. Corporate communications enables people on all levels of the enterprise to freely exchanging their views on all important issues of topical interest. Crisis prevention and management have become the order of the day.

KM: What does this mean in terms of brand management?

These days, brands have to hold their own in digital worlds and still be recognizable when new forms of collaboration with other companies are established. It's a question of establishing an unmistakable digital signature while at the same time minimizing the complexity of the corporate design. This includes embedding a strong emotive element in the brand's digital presentation. At the same time, we never lose sight of the long-term development of our brand values, and do not abandon what made them strong in the past.

KM: What consequences does this have with regard to the responsibilities, working methods, and organization of communication departments?

Communication departments are increasingly playing an active role in the entire bandwidth of corporate activities. At Bosch, we already fulfill a number of roles. In our corporate function, we issue directives concerning corporate messages, brand positioning, corporate design, and so on. In our service function, we deal with tasks such as marketing communication for the Automotive Technology business sector. And we also have an advisory function. We not only advise the board of management but also help to supervise on-site projects on behalf of various divisions. In this role we're also present during kick-off meetings in connection with the preparation and execution of mergers and acquisitions, reorganization measures, and change projects. In doing so, we keep our sights fixed on the company as a whole. Added to which, it's never been more important to be aware of what the outside world is doing and, as an organization, to network with the relevant stakeholders.

KM: From your point of view, what is the decisive success factor in change projects?

Change is a major and unavoidable fact of modern business life. The better associates appreciate this, the easier it will be for them to accept and adopt changes, and the less resistance to change there will be. One of the most important factors is the "incubation time," a term invented by Götz Werner, the founder of the DM drugstore chain in Germany. This refers to the time it takes for a company to anchor decisions or changes in the minds of the whole workforce, so that they can be implemented on a worldwide basis. A right decision can become a wrong decision if too much time elapses before it takes effect. Rapidly putting decisions into practice is one of the many new challenges that companies with global operations – such as Bosch with its approximately 300,000

associates in 150 countries – have to face. The existing communication channels simply aren't enough to meet this requirement. Above all, what's needed today is a distinctive corporate culture that inspires through the establishment and promotion of objectives that associates can identify with and will enable them to take forward-looking decisions in the interests of the group as a whole. This also depends on the active support of managers who have a profound understanding of communication processes and the company's fundamental values and objectives. Moreover, in today's volatile business environment, it's more important than ever before to continually question decisions made in the past. These are essential tasks for communication, both now and in the future.

KM: What skills are required of today's and tomorrow's communicators?

The skills required have gone up another level over the past 15 years: communicators must be able to think and feel in intercultural terms and be able to work anywhere in the world – something which goes beyond mere sensitivity for intercultural issues; they must understand and be adept at new media, so that their communication is tailored to the specific nature of all the various media channels; they must have consultancy and conceptual skills; they must be able to make communication integrated, strategic, and proactive; they must have the political nous that will allow them to steer corporate communications through times of political and social upheaval; they must master project management skills (for diversity projects, say); they must know and understand the current international media world; and they must be able to run stakeholder experience management programs.

Communicators must have a firm handle on brand management in the digital world. We've become mediators both internally and externally. In fact, we work almost exclusively in interdisciplinary, international teams – whether meeting up on-site or online – and we're highly networked. What's more, we have to make the right decisions in shorter timeframes and in significantly more complex environments than before. It's more and more the case that there's no time for pilot projects anymore, unless you want to arrive too late! In addition, issues have to be envisaged in scenarios as far in advance as possible. And these are just a few of what I consider the main skills required for today's and tomorrow's communicators.

KM: So communicators are visionaries?

Well, it's always been our job to predict the consequences of the management's decisions and actions. We work together with Bosch's corporate strategy department to research changes in megatrends such as globalization, climate change, energy, demographics, and urbanization. We offer the management our interpretations of these, as well as delve deeper into newly emerging issues. This collaboration between communication and strategy departments is very fruitful, because both sides contribute their specific strengths. Moreover, communicators are very much born futurists thanks to their view of the big picture, their contacts outside the organization, and their antennae tuned to all our relevant stakeholders.

KM: When you took over responsibility for global corporate communications ten years ago, Bosch had a much weaker public profile. How did you succeed in making Bosch more present, open, and transparent? How did you manage to give people a better insight into how the company ticks?

From the outset, there was a clear understanding with the CEO at the time, Franz Fehrenbach, that Bosch and its communications should open up and develop. And so from 2004, we adopted a proactive, strategic, and emotive approach to communications via all communications channels at the interfaces with relevant stakeholders. This approach was no doubt at its most visible during our anniversary year 2011, which saw a total of 850 national and international communication initiatives. Less visible, but nevertheless decisive for our work, is the high level of acceptance enjoyed by our communications experts.

KM: In July 2012, Dr. Volkmar Denner took the reins as the new chairman of the Bosch board of management. Did this change at the top also mean a change in corporate strategy and communications, in particular CEO communications?

For the most part, Volkmar Denner has embraced and pursued the existing corporate strategy while further refining certain aspects. Every new CEO brings their own set of focal points to the table and it's important that they communicate these in a genuine manner. Our communications strategy takes account of these new areas of emphasis. In particular, more communication is needed when changes are made. One thing Volkmar Denner is doing differently is using social media and Enterprise 2.0 to communicate internally with associates. A request for suggestions on possible areas for improvement within the company generated more than 200,000 hits and 5,000 suggestions in a short space of time. After only three days, 700 volunteers from around the Bosch world had come forward offering to help develop and implement the suggestions. All this is exciting new territory for Bosch. Getting associates more involved in order to find solutions faster is something for which modern media channels and new technologies are ideal. In terms of our priorities, we're intensifying our focus on communicating the benefits of our diverse range of products, services, and systems in line with our strategic imperative "Invented for life" – in other words, solutions that improve quality of life.

KM: After almost 30 years in the communications and media sphere and 10 years of Bosch communications, what do you plan to do next?

Bosch remains a fascinating, highly innovative, and responsible company with a global presence. Its corporate structure with the Robert Bosch Stiftung allows the company to take a long-term perspective. In addition, discussions with the Bosch family always give us valuable input. The company and the Robert Bosch Stiftung are involved in civic initiatives, and there is a certain overlap in their priorities, such as their focus on the high rate of youth unemployment in Europe. I've been working with an outstanding, highly motivated team since early 2004 to push ahead with this issue and many others. We enjoy the confidence of management, and there's a lot we still want to achieve. As an ex-journalist, there's only one thing I really miss in the high-tempo everyday bustle of communications work, and that's the in-depth exploration of issues such as sustainability. Which is why I've undertaken to expand our work on this kind of content over the next few years.

KM: Would you also be tempted by a challenge outside communications?

Content without communication reaches nobody, while communication without content is worthless. By definition, therefore, communicators are people who work at the interface of business, media, politics, and social engagement, and thus people with many ideas for the future.

Uta-Micaela Dürig has been head of global communications for the Bosch Group since 2004. Since 2009, her responsibilities within corporate communications have also included brand management, advertising, and marketing communication. Responsibility for sustainability was added in 2010. A classically trained newspaper journalist, she studied part-time at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. Following various jobs at daily newspapers, including for the Springer publishing house, she worked as a political press officer at the Berlin Senate department for transport and business and as the head of corporate/marketing communications and as press spokesperson for organizations such as the technology company ABB AG, the telecommunications company Krone AG, and the energy company RWE AG (where she worked in the environment and energy services division). In 2002, she received a gold award in the change management category at the German PR Awards, and in 2009 she picked up the award for best German company spokesperson of the year. She has published and taught in the field of international corporate communications and public relations at various universities and journalism schools since 1996. She is married with a daughter.