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Managing CEO communication and positioning: A cross-national study among corporate communication leaders

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Abstract

Purpose – The study examines the practices of positioning Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and other top executives in the public sphere and approaches to manage their communication activities.

Design/methodology/approach – A neo-institutional framework is used to explain the growth of CEO positioning in mediatised societies. Research questions are derived from previous research and tested in a quantitative online survey with 512 heads of corporate communication in 21 countries across Europe and a qualitative survey with 42 communication leaders in 12 countries.

Findings – The majority of companies position their CEOs and/or other top executives, but only a minority guide these activities through a sound management process. European CEOs are primarily presented based on their functional and ethical competencies. A minority of communication leaders prefer the uniform positioning of their CEOs in different markets; others argue for localised approaches. More companies in high power distance countries have a specific communication strategy for their CEOs, compared to companies in low power distance countries. Significant differences were also identified between listed and privately-owned companies.

Research limitations/implications – The study indicates the importance of CEO positioning from the perspective of corporate communication leaders. Investigating the expectations and experiences of CEOs themselves might provide additional insights.

Originality/value – The article presents the first large-scale study on CEO positioning, informs practitioners on the state of practice in Europe and identifies knowledge that can be integrated into education of business and communications students alike.

Keywords – CEO positioning, CEO communication, Corporate communication, Cross-cultural communication, Comparative research, Mixed methods research.

Paper type – Research paper.

Introduction

The last decade has seen a rise in the mediatisation of society and organisations alike (Livingstone, 2009; Lundby, 2009). The public is taking increasing interest in the activities of corporations. Stakeholders gather information from the mass media or social media. In turn, organisations become reflexive (Ruler and Verčič, 2005). They use strategic communication and public relations as a professional practice to manage communication activities and relationships between organisations and their stakeholders (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007; Verčič and Grunig, 2000).

As organisations are mainly represented by their formal leaders in the public sphere, a major task within this field is positioning Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and other top executives in the mass media and in social media. At the same time, their communication activities must be monitored and managed as a part of overarching communication strategies that embrace financial, internal and marketing communications, as well as public relations – both symbolically (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011) and behaviourally (Grunig, 1993). Organisations use news factors like personalisation in messaging strategies (Nessmann, 2009), reputation management (Gaines-Ross, 2003) and impression management (Pollach and Kerbler, 2011) to position their top executives: “CEOs personify and represent their organizations through their visibility in media. In this way their leadership influences perceptions of the organization among stakeholders, and thereby organizational reputation and performance” (Meng and Berger, 2013, p. 307). Strategic positioning constructs a frame of reference for corporate communications (Zerfass, 2008) and aims at owning a concept or word in the public mind, relative to the position of competitors (Ries and Trout, 1981).

While the relevance and rationale of CEO communication and positioning is prevalent in academic and professional literature (i.e., Bendisch *et al.*, 2013; Brettschneider and Volbracht, 2011; Fanelli and Misangy, 2006; Gaines-Ross, 2003; Men, 2012; Schwalbach, 2015; Sohn *et al.*, 2009; Wæraas, 2010; Zorn, 2001), there is a dearth of both theoretical concepts and empirical knowledge about these practices.

From a theoretical standpoint, CEO communication and positioning involves interactions between the media, society and organisations. This can be elaborated with the help of neo-institutional theories. Organisations are embedded in social environments and governed by structural preconditions that are driven by a need for legitimacy (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008). Therefore, the practices of strategic communication in general, and CEO communication and positioning specifically, are created, altered and performed through organisation-environment relations (Fredriksson *et al.*, 2013). Strategic communication helps to legitimise the actions of the organisation in public discourse (Frandsen and Johansen, 2013; Gregory *et al.*, 2013; Sandhu, 2009; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). Legitimacy is an attribute of the organisational environment. For that reason, organisations, their actions and their leaders are permanently evaluated and assessed by their stakeholders. The mass media support and reinforce this in their own struggle to gain a greater share of the audience market. They focus on high-profile representatives and they use personality stories when reporting about corporations and other complex entities. In turn, CEO positioning and communication tends to become institutionalised in communication departments. Once this process has started, isomorphism explains why other organisations follow this route and develop positioning and communication activities for their CEOs and top executives as well (Fredriksson *et al.*, 2013). As a consequence, an overall trend for top managers to become celebrity CEOs or superstar CEOs has evolved (Graffin *et al.*, 2012) in many Western cultures.

From an empirical point of view, little is known about the status of CEO communication and positioning. This is especially true in multi-national and cross-cultural settings. Researchers have used content analysis to explore how companies in the United States and Europe shape their CEO's profiles (Pollach and Kerbler, 2011). But the routines

behind these activities, as well as the factors that influence diverging approaches to CEO positioning and communication, have not been researched until now.

The present study aims to close the research gap by providing new empirical evidence on the institutionalisation of CEO positioning and communication in companies across Europe on a national and international level.

Literature Review

Institutionalisation of CEO and executive positioning

CEOs have joined politicians and entrepreneurs in becoming public personae – based on the need to reduce complexity in fragmented and mediatised societies (Hutton *et al.*, 2001) and the move towards values of individualisation in many cultures (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). Journalists, employees and customers, as well as policymakers and activists inquire and discuss CEOs, presidents and managing directors, regardless of the title given to their role.

The concept of position and positioning derives mainly from marketing (Ries and Trout, 1981), “where a position refers to communication strategies that allow one to ‘place’ a certain product amongst its competitors. This usage is close to the military meaning of a ‘position’: in that sense a position is always taken against the position of the enemy” (Harré and van Langenhofe, 1991, p. 395). Hollway (1984) has introduced the concept into social sciences in a broader sense when analysing of the construction of subjectivity in heterosexual relations (Harré and van Langenhofe, 1991, p. 395; see also Harré, 2011; Harré *et al.*, 2009). In communication science, positioning is “an essential concept in communication management, public relations and marketing communication. The process of positioning includes identifying, defining and managing the perception relevant audiences have of a particular organization, product, person or idea” (Zerfass, 2008, p. 3822). James (2014) combined positioning theory and strategic communication in a thought-provoking book. However, her focus is on framing theory and how to position (i.e. frame) topics and situations in public discourses. The approach helps to understand communication strategies in general, but is not related to the positioning of CEOs and other executives.

Therefore, we define *CEO positioning* as a specific communication strategy that uses both persuasive and collaborative communication activities to increase awareness of the highest representative of the organisation among all stakeholders and differentiate him or her from others in a credible way in the public sphere (Bentele and Nothhaft, 2010). It is part of CEO communication, which means that it is necessary “to structure the CEO's activities within the overall public relations plan, position the CEO's internal communication role vis-a-vis other managers, and coordinate the CEO's messages with appropriate media. On the strategic level, it is vital that the CEO's communication activities be assimilated into corporatewide communication efforts across all levels” (Pincus *et al.*, 1991b, p. 26; see also Pincus *et al.*, 1991a).

There seem to be *differences in CEO positioning in various parts of the world and in different types of organisations*. While the personalisation of political parties is a fairly researched phenomenon (Grbeša, 2008), personalisation in business has rarely been examined. Personalisation has primarily been the domain of entrepreneurs and company founders (Robert Bosch, J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Werner von Siemens, and lately, Richard Branson, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg), but much less that of professional managers. The personalisation of CEOs seems to be more prevalent in the United States (e.g. Jack Welch). In Europe, for a long time –due to negative historical experiences with charismatic leaders – some of the largest companies practiced collective leadership structures with low visibility to the general public. Major companies like Shell, Unilever, SAP or Deutsche Bank had or have dual leadership structures with two CEOs. Public companies that are listed on the stock exchange may demand visibility for their leaders that is different from that of privately owned companies. On the other hand, the personal misbehaviour or

communication failures of CEOs can undermine any positioning approach, and the reputational effects on companies or brands may diminish if those CEOs resign and continue to work for other organisations (Eisenegger and Imhof, 2008). Companies can minimise these risks by employing *extended positioning approaches*, i.e. by positioning both the CEO and other executives in different ways or spheres (Davies and Chun, 2009). For example, the executive board member responsible for human resources might engage in debates on diversity and fair labour initiatives, while the head of research would be a perfect match to establish thought leadership for a company in the field of new materials and engineering processes.

The literature on CEO positioning and communication mostly refers to the *charismatic attributes* of top executives. Khurana (2002) states that stakeholders are not satisfied with executives that are merely talented and experienced – people, as well as the media, prefer charismatic leaders, sometimes even celebrity CEOs or superstar CEOs (Graffin *et al.*, 2012; Hayward *et al.*, 2004), who are covered in popular magazines like movie stars, sport heroes or royals. Tkalac Verčič and Verčič (2011) explored charisma as a multidimensional concept across professional domains and concluded that ‘all people can be considered as potentially charismatic, having different values for different dimensions of the construct’ (p. 17) – which raises interesting opportunities for its assessment and potential management. The charismatic approach refers to the different types of authority identified by Max Weber (1958). Weber describes prerequisites and modes of operation for charismatic, traditional and legal authority. Eisenegger and Imhof (2008, pp. 127-131) build on this typology and expand it by referring to the three-world concept by Habermas (1984), whereby all interactions in modern societies can be challenged from within the objective, social or subjective world. In order to gain acceptance, propositions or actions must be approved by common standards of true or false (objective world = legal authority) and by social values (normative world = traditional authority). Moreover, it might be useful to match personal expectations or emotional attractiveness (subjective world = charismatic authority). This can be linked to the model of professional competence developed by Cheetham and Chivers (1996). The authors identify *four different competencies*. All of them can be used to position CEOs or top executives. In the business world, people are expected to get things done, which means they need skills to accomplish the job (*functional competence*), and they also have to tax their brains – which requires them to be intelligent and possess relevant knowledge (*cognitive competence*). In light of the typologies by Weber and Habermas, this refers to the objective world of widely accepted rules. However, people, especially leaders, can also succeed if they always behave appropriately, professionally and intelligently in social interactions (*personal competence*). This reflects charismatic authority and refers to the social world. Last, but not least, it is possible to rely on traditional authority and the normative world (*ethical competence*) by demonstrating high standards of personal integrity and morale, as well as a commitment to professional values and responsibility for actions and consequences.

Different cultures, public spheres and stakeholder expectations may trigger *differentiated positioning approaches in different countries*. For example, a content analysis of corporate websites by Pollach and Kerbler (2011) has shown that CEOs in US companies are predominantly positioned in social, political and public life (based on personal and ethical competences), while their European counterparts are primarily presented with a focus on business (based on functional and cognitive competences).

However, diverging profiles and images of the CEO might have a detrimental overall effect on corporate reputation. Companies that operate in global markets must decide whether a *unified positioning or a diversified approach* is more effective. A globalisation in CEO positioning might emanate from the organisational environment, i.e. it may be driven by global news reporting or investors that act on foreign stock exchanges, where many European

companies have at least secondary listings. These thoughts have stimulated the first research questions:

- RQ1. To what extent do companies *position* their top executives in the public sphere?
- RQ2. What are the dominant approaches used by companies when positioning their CEOs on a national and international level?

Managing CEO positioning and communication

Like any other communication activity, CEO positioning and communication will usually be more successful and sustainable if it is based on a sound *management process*. This has been outlined in the literature, which also states that any efforts in this field must be aligned with the overall corporate communications strategy (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011; Graham, 1997; McGrath, 1995; Nessmann, 2010). For instance, Nessmann (2010, pp. 384-389) elaborates on a public relations process to position people effectively. In a first step, problems, viewpoints and goals will be discussed. In the analysis phase, all facts related to the individual and the company must be researched, i.e. the actual image and reputation, values, visions, networks, market positions, competitors and their communication activities, and so forth. These analyses must be melded into a consistent positioning and communication strategy that combines goals, target groups, key messages and guidelines. More detailed measures must be planned in the tactical phase. At this point, Nessmann (2010) emphasises four different clusters: The *self-management cluster* merely includes a basic documentation of personal data – for instance, the CEO’s profile on the corporate websites and in biographies. Second is the *impression management cluster*, which enhances self-presentation techniques. Related to this, there may be training in communication skills. All aspects of public positioning and how to handle (social) media are part of the *media management cluster*. Finally, the *social management cluster* covers all activities and commitments of the CEO or top executive in society. Communication activities within these tactical clusters are executed and evaluated, which re-starts the communication management process from the beginning. Ideally, companies should implement routines to monitor CEO reputation (analysis, evaluation), develop specific positioning profiles and communication strategies for the CEO (planning) and employ specific communication instruments for the CEO (execution). Previous research on the practices of communication management in Europe at large has shown that evaluation is often neglected (Zerfass *et al.*, 2011, pp. 96-103). Accordingly, it can be assumed that monitoring routines are employed less often than activities in the other phases of the communication management process, which is reflected in the next research question:

- RQ3. To what extent is CEO communication supported by a sound management process that ranges from analysis to planning, execution and evaluation?

Cultural and organisational drivers of CEO positioning

While it is important to identify the general practices of corporate communications and related management processes, researchers must not neglect the impact of cultural and economic frameworks on the communication function. Zorn (2001, p. 28) assumes that, through globalisation, the trend towards personalisation in politics and business has a ripple effect on communications everywhere. Even so, Zorn refers to the ‘Power Distance Index’ developed by Hofstede (2010).¹ He claims that in countries characterised by low power distance, such as

¹ “Power distance can therefore be defined as *the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.*” (Hofstede, 2010, p. 61; italics in original)

most English-speaking countries, the trend towards personalisation will be more apparent than in countries with a high power distance (Zorn 2001: pp. 45-46).

Based on this thought (which was not empirically tested by Zorn), there might be significant differences between the practices of CEO positioning in *countries and cultures with different specifications of power distance*. In composing the Power Distance Index (PDI), Hofstede (2010, pp. 55-62) used three survey items in a worldwide sample of IBM employees in more than 74 countries all over the world. Although Courtright *et al.* (2011, p. 132) criticise Hofstede's dimension by referring to globalisation and the tools of rhetoric, as well as perspectives of incongruity, Hofstede (2010) himself acknowledged this, saying: "So far the picture of differences between countries with regard to power distance has been static" (p. 86). "Nobody, as far as we know, has offered evidence of a convergence of countries toward smaller differences in power distance. (...) A worldwide homogenization of mental programs about power and dependence, independence, and interdependence under the influence of a presumed cultural melting-pot process is still very far away, if it will ever happen" (pp. 87-88). While the limitations of any cultural classification are obvious, the PDI scale can be used to make a first assessment of the possible drivers of CEO positioning and communication based on the corporation's home country.

Another obvious factor that influences the practices of CEO positioning and communication is the *legal status of the company*. Listed companies must deal with financial communities and shareholders, in addition to the multitude of stakeholders that every company must face. Moreover, CEOs of listed companies are usually appointed for a limited time and their re-appointment is often discussed in the media. Unlike private companies, which are often linked to the reputations of the owners' families, there are seldom alternatives to position personalities other than those of the members of the top executive group. Thus, it can be assumed that CEO positioning is considered more important and is practiced more intensively in listed companies. Those insights are reflected in the next research question:

RQ4. How do PDI differences and the legal status of the company influence CEO communication and its management process?

Future trends and challenges in CEO communication and positioning

Any research in corporate communications and public relations should realise that the communication and business environment is changing faster than ever – so there might be developments that have not been discussed or even identified by previous research. For example, the practices of CEO communication might be influenced by the opportunities and risks of social media communication. Some companies might even follow the paradigmatic shift proposed by De Bussy (2013): "Rather than focus on the representation, power and behavior of public relations specialists within the dominant coalition, the values of strategic public relations management could be internalized by other (often more powerful) organizational leaders" (p. 82) – which means that CEOs are no longer the object of positioning and communication strategies, but the driving forces and subjects behind strategic communication. Interesting questions also emerge about the strategic and pathological (Lasch, 1979) components of CEO personalisation. When trying to identify future trends it is possible to phrase a research question:

RQ5. What long-term trends in CEO communications are identified by the communication leaders of global companies based in Europe?

Method

The research reported in this paper combines quantitative and qualitative methods. As Creswell and Plano Clarc (2010) emphasise: "Mixed methods research provides strengths that

offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research” (p. 12). A quantitative survey was used to gain an overall picture of the topics at hand. A qualitative survey was added to investigate some aspects in detail and to gain further insights. As the overall population of communication professionals in Europe is not known, both surveys can not claim to be representative. However sampling was based on solid databases and this approach seems reasonable as the topic has not been explored on a cross-national level before. For the same reasons, using the English language was considered appropriate. Professional communicators in large European companies are usually able to understand and comment on their activities in this language, and the study did focus on concepts which are well-known in the profession.

Quantitative survey

The quantitative part of the study has been conducted as part of the annual European Communication Monitor (2013) among communication professionals (Zerfass *et al.*, 2013). The special section on CEO communication and reputation addressed the following questions, which were derived from the literature review above: First, the practitioners were asked about the importance of the communicative assets of the CEO for the overall success of the organisation. Secondly, respondents were asked whether their organisation pursues a number of relevant activities for CEO communication and positioning. Third, the competencies at the centre of the CEO positioning and communication strategy were explored. A pre-test was held with 36 practitioners in 13 European countries. In March 2013, a personal invitation was sent to communication professionals throughout Europe via e-mail based on the largest database of the profession on the continent, provided by the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD). The database contained more than 30,000 addresses from 50 countries. Also regional and national professional associations were asked to invite respondents. There were 4,808 respondents who started the survey, and 2,802 of them completed the questionnaire in the English language. The data for this study is based on a sub-sample of 512 respondents who identified themselves as the head of communications in a company. Of those respondents, 53.9 percent were female (n = 276) and 46.1 percent were male (n = 236). The majority of the respondents have more than 10 years of experience (74.6 percent, n = 382), followed by a group with 6–10 years of experience (18.8 percent, n = 96) and the rest were composed of a small group with less than five years of experience (6.6 percent, n = 34). The professionals who were interviewed worked in either the communication departments of listed companies (53.9 percent, n = 276) or private companies (46.1%, n = 236). The respondents were based in 21 European countries (listed in Appendix A). The results have been statistically tested with Pearson's chi-square tests (χ^2), and Cramér's V.

Qualitative survey

To dive deeper into the topic, Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) who worked for European-based companies with business activities in more than five countries and on other continents were invited personally, via e-mail, to take part in a qualitative survey in May 2013. The structured questionnaire, which was attached as a PDF file in the English language, consisted of eight open-ended questions, covering topics about (1) the biggest challenge for the CEO in communicating his or her message, (2) how Chief Communication Officers position their CEOs in different markets, and finally (3) what long-term trends in CEO communication are expected by the respondents. Digital formatting allowed the professionals to respond with unlimited space. The questionnaire was pre-tested with five communication professionals and changes made where necessary. There were 281 CCOs who were invited across Europe, based on lists of the largest global companies in key markets. Up to early August 2013, 42 Communication Directors from 12 different countries responded anonymously. The sample included 30 male and 12 female global heads of communication of

listed and private companies with an average of 67,000 employees. As the answers were anonymous, it was not possible to identify respondents who took part in the quantitative survey as well. The responses of the qualitative study were analysed by means of an inductive content analysis; statements were summarised into core issues, which were chosen and classified by repeated examination and comparison.

Findings

The results of this study show the importance of CEO communication and positioning: Although the majority of companies position their CEOs and/or other executives, only a minority of the communication departments support the CEO's positioning by a sound management process. This inconsistency involves the risk that companies will not be prepared to handle a crisis in CEO reputation. European CEOs are primarily presented based on their functional and ethical competencies. A minority of communication leaders in global companies prefer a uniform positioning for their CEOs in different markets. Significantly more companies in high power distance countries have a specific communication strategy for their CEOs, compared to companies in low power distance countries. Highly significant differences were also identified between listed and privately-owned companies in almost every phase of the CEO communication process.

Institutionalisation and practices of CEO and executive positioning (RQ1, RQ2)

Positioning the CEO, as well as other executives, is an activity that more than two-thirds of all corporations pursue (83.2 percent position their CEOs and 72 percent position other executives) (see Table I).

TABLE I.
CEO and executive communication activities in companies

Activities and assets	Agreement		Disagreement	
	Frequency	(%)	Frequency	(%)
Positioning of the CEO	417	83.2	84	16.8
Positioning of other executives	362	72.0	141	28.0
Specific communication strategy for the CEO	341	67.9	161	32.1
Specific communication instruments for the CEO	339	67.0	167	33.0
Monitoring the CEO's reputation	300	61.0	192	39.0

Notes: n_{\min} = 492 heads of communication (CCOs) of companies in Europe. The values show how many of the respondents approved each statement. Q: Does your organisation pursue any of the following activities?

When CEO positioning is part of the daily business for communication professionals, it is interesting to explore the ways in which this happens. Of the companies, 55.1 percent ($n = 224$) rely on either of those competency sets when shaping the image of their CEOs. More specifically, functional competencies, such as having the skills to accomplish the job or being capable, are preferred by 31.0 percent and cognitive competencies, i.e. processing relevant knowledge or being intelligent, by 24.1 percent. This result is based on 407 answers, as 79 heads of communication did not answer this question and 66 stated that none of the given answers were appropriate.

Only 14.7 percent of the organisations ($n = 60$) focus on personal competencies like behaving appropriately or being smart when positioning their CEOs. However, ethical competencies (holding personal and professional values, as well as being responsible) are

preferred by 30.2 percent (n = 123), and as such, they are almost as relevant as functional assets.

A close majority of the CCOs interviewed in the qualitative survey prefer a uniform positioning for their CEOs in different markets (22 out of 38). As a Head of Corporate Communication of Denmark stated: “It all starts local. The image of a company in the local press is essential before going global. Finding a company’s differentiator is another important step. What is exactly that the company does better than everybody else and how – if at all – does the CEO personally reflect this? ...[A] uniform positioning is to my belief the best approach. A differentiated approach may include the risk of mixed signals which with today’s integrated global communication rapidly will be discovered and scrutinized.” A Senior Vice President of Corporate Communication and Government Relations from Germany agrees: “Basically we follow and recommend a one voice – one company approach. ... As the world is growing smaller we are following the one voice strategy, adapted to countries where we are also positioning local managers as key representatives of our company.” Only nine respondents in this sample have implemented a differentiated positioning strategy and seven CCOs try to implement a mixed approach. They use a core set of attributes, which are tailored for different countries and cultures: “Consistency across all markets but not uniformity – ‘translation’ into local cultures by local communicators is a must” (Head of Group Communication, Germany). One interviewee put it in a nutshell with the idea of a ‘glocal’ positioning, and another added: “[E]very local communication is global”.

Managing CEO positioning and communication (RQ3)

Ideally, CEO positioning and communication would be based on a management process that ranges from analysis to planning, execution and evaluation. More than three-fourths of all companies in the sample pursue such activities (see Table I). However, only 67.5 percent (n = 272) of those who practice CEO positioning monitor their CEO’s reputation, which is essential in the stages of analysis and evaluation. A stronger degree of institutionalisation could be identified in the planning stage, as 78.7 percent (n = 325) have a specific communication strategy, and in the execution phase with 74.0 percent (n = 307) of the respondents reporting about communication instruments for their CEOs. Overall, only 46.0 percent of the organisations (n = 192 out of 417, who position their CEO) indicate that they use a sound management process with activities or instruments required for each distinct phase. Monitoring is employed less often than any other activity within the process of managing CEO positioning and communication.

Cultural and organisational drivers of CEO positioning (RQ4)

The literature review identified two factors that might explain different practices in CEO positioning and communication. On the one hand, cultural differences, i.e. variations in power distance in different countries, may influence the perception of leaders and the modes of presenting them. Second, personalisation plays a different role in alternative types of organisations (listed or privately-owned companies), which in turn, might affect CEO positioning and communication.

Cultural differences (high and low power distances)

Table II shows that the study did not reveal statistically significant differences in the overall proliferation of CEO positioning in high power distance countries (80.5 percent) and low power distance countries (85.7 percent). Although CCOs from low power distance countries position their CEOs and other executives as frequently as their colleagues from high PDI-countries, the study reveals significant differences for the management process. A specific communication strategy for the CEO is significantly more prevalent in high power distance

countries (in 83.1 percent of those organisations that practice CEO positioning) compared to low power distance countries (74.1 percent). More companies in high power distance countries have specific communication instruments for the CEO (79.8 percent compared to 69.5 percent). However, there are no significant differences between the groups regarding the monitoring of CEO reputation (see Table III). Overall, the results indicate that personalisation is a global phenomenon, but more efforts are put into it in cultures with high-power distance.

TABLE II.
CEO and executive communication activities in different countries and cultures

Activities and assets	Companies in high PDI countries		Companies in low PDI countries		<i>Chi-square test</i>
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	<i>p</i>
Positioning of the CEO	169	80.5	221	85.7	0.135
Positioning of other executives	149	71.3	188	72.0	0.860
Specific communication strategy for the CEO	145	68.7	169	65.5	0.461
Specific communication instruments for the CEO	148	69.5	168	64.6	0.263
Monitoring the CEO's reputation	133	63.9	144	57.6	0.167

Notes: n_{\min} = 458 heads of communication (CCOs) of companies in Europe. There are no respondents from Italy, which is classified as a high and low PDI country. The power distance index (PDI) is based on Hofstede (2010) and www.geert-hofstede.com; see Appendix A. The values show how many of the respondents approved each statement. No significant differences (chi-square test, $p > 0.05$).

TABLE III.
Management processes for CEO positioning in different countries and cultures

Companies practising CEO positioning that ...	Companies in high PDI countries		Companies in low PDI countries		<i>Phi</i>
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	ϕ
have a specific communication strategy for the CEO *	138	83.1	163	74.1	-0.108
have specific communication instruments for the CEO *	134	79.8	153	69.5	-0.115
monitor the CEO's reputation	115	71.0	137	64.0	-0.073

Notes: n_{\min} = 376 heads of communication (CCOs) of companies in Europe, who position their CEO (n_{\min} = 162 in high PDI European countries and n_{\min} = 214 in low PDI European countries). There are no respondents from Italy, which is classified as a high and low PDI country. The power distance index (PDI) is based on Hofstede (2010) and www.geert-hofstede.com; see Appendix A. Values show how many of the respondents approved each statement.

* Significant differences (chi-square test, $p \leq 0.05$).

Organisational differences (listed companies vs. privately-owned companies)

The data analysis reveals highly significant differences between the frequency of CEO positioning in listed companies (87.4 percent) and private companies (78.4 percent). Along this line, there were also highly significant differences for positioning other top executives (77.5 vs. 65.5 percent), pursuing a specific communication strategy for the CEO (73.0 vs. 62.1 percent) and monitoring the CEO's reputation (67.8 vs. 53.2 percent) (see Table IV).

TABLE IV.
CEO and executive communication activities in different types of companies

Activities and assets	Listed companies		Privately-owned companies		Overall	<i>Phi</i>
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	%	φ
Positioning of the CEO **	236	87.4	181	78.4	83.2	0.121
Positioning of other executives **	210	77.5	152	65.5	72.0	0.133
Specific communication strategy for the CEO **	197	73.0	144	62.1	67.9	0.116
Specific communication instruments for the CEO	192	70.3	147	63.1	67.0	0.077
Monitoring the CEO's reputation **	177	67.8	123	53.2	61.0	0.149

Notes: $n_{\min} = 492$ heads of communication (CCOs) of companies in Europe ($n_{\min} = 261$ CCOs of listed and $n_{\min} = 231$ CCOs of privately-owned companies). The values show how many of the respondents approved each statement. Q: Does your organisation pursue any of the following activities? ** Highly significant differences (chi-square test, $p \leq 0.01$).

An analysis of the management processes that guide CEO positioning identified highly significant differences for monitoring CEO reputation, i.e. for the first and last phase of a typical management process. Significantly more listed companies (81.5 percent of those that pursue CEO positioning) monitor, compared to 59.9 percent of private companies (see Table V).

TABLE V.
Management processes for CEO positioning in different types of organisations

Companies practicing CEO positioning that ...	Listed companies		Privately-owned companies	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
have a specific communication strategy for the CEO	190	81.5	135	75.0
have specific communication instruments for the CEO	176	74.9	131	72.8
monitor the CEO's reputation **	166	73.5	106	59.9

Notes: $n_{\min} = 403$ heads of communication (CCOs) of companies in Europe ($n_{\min} = 226$ CCOs of listed and $n_{\min} = 177$ CCOs of privately-owned companies), who position their CEO. The values show how many of the respondents approved each statement. Q: Does your organisation pursue any of the following activities? ** Highly significant differences (chi-square test, $p \leq 0.01$, Cramer's $V = 0.144$).

Future trends and challenges in CEO communication and positioning (RQ5)

What are the long-term trends in CEO positioning and communication from the perspective of communication leaders? First and foremost, the proposition that the CEO will become even more important in corporate communications was only supported by a minority of the CCOs in the qualitative survey. Obviously, top executives are already a key driver of corporate reputation, for good or bad. As a Senior Vice President of Corporate Communication from a company based in Finland stated, this role is far from being simple: "CEO needs to be able to address large audience with simple messages and at the same time he/she needs to be a great

leader of the business in question. These characteristics don't always go hand in hand.” However, the communication heads confirmed that CEOs are becoming more visible and their personalities are becoming more important. The CEO must be positioned authentically and humanly. One interviewee asked for a “more personal approach with a human face. All communication should include storytelling – numbers are desirable, but not enough” (Communications Director, Croatia), and another CCO envisions a “stronger orientation towards corporate citizenship: The CEO as the “first citizen” of the corporate citizen” (Vice President of Corporate Communications, Germany). The challenge for communication leaders today is to handle this trend towards personalisation across all fields of corporate communications. Moreover, communication professionals must position their CEOs in the sphere of digital and social media. This challenge has been identified by a quarter of the communication heads in the qualitative study. A smaller group among the CCOs hold that the communication skills of CEOs and top executives will become more important for building stronger relationships through stakeholder dialogues. Company leaders must ‘walk the talk’. All of that was summed up by a Chief Communications and Marketing Officer from Belgium: “The arrival of the human CEO – what social media has allowed is for any consumer or employee to be able to level the playing field. CEOs of the old days were considered remote and very inaccessible to the common man. As they engage more online, both employees and customers want to know the person more and more as a human being: What do they like? What are they doing? And finally: Can they be trusted? In a sense a CEO will become like a politician – managing is constituencies, approval ratings, reputations more directly and with more and more of a human touch with the ground level.”

Discussion

The study reveals that most companies try to position their CEOs (83.2 percent), as well as other top executives (72 percent), but only a minority of them (46.0 percent) have implemented a fully-fledged management process to guide this endeavour through all phases of analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation. There is a large gap between striving for CEO positioning and the management practice of CEO positioning and communication. This reflects a lack of professionalism and a weak grade of institutionalisation in this field of corporate communications.

Limited monitoring and evaluation practices reflect uncertainty in the wider field of corporate communications. For instance, measuring CEO reputation is complicated due to the lack of agreed-upon methods for reputation measurement in general. Reputation models and dimensions vary widely (Dowling and Gardberg, 2012; Rinkenburger, 2012; Schwaiger and Raithel, 2013; Stacks *et al.*, 2013). Without this, it is difficult to measure CEO reputation and align it to overarching communication and business goals. The CEO is not the only asset a company has to offer, and he or she can shine quite differently in various environments. A majority of the organisations in the sample use positioning strategies for other top executives as well, and a relevant number use localised approaches for various countries. This seems reasonable, as different practices are reported in high and low power distance countries, so there are clearly varying cultures of CEO communication around the continent. This makes thorough analyses and evaluation even more relevant. Companies should, as already suggested by Courtright *et al.* (2011), position their CEOs ‘glocally’ in the public sphere.

The differences between practices in listed and private companies point to the interlinkage between communications and business strategies. Many propose uniform models of excellent communication and reputation. Institutionalisation theory, however, draws our attention to overarching structures like diverging roles of corporate representatives related to the type of ownership, and to the dynamics of the organisational field that influence communication practices. From this point of view, companies should strive to establish a

sound management process of CEO positioning and communication, which allows them to develop and execute strategies aligned to organisational frameworks and business goals.

It can be concluded that while positioning top leaders in the public sphere is a generally accepted and institutionalised practice in European companies, it is the management process of CEO positioning and communication that deserves further study and explication. Our results show that there is a lack of sound management practices – and probably conceptual frameworks that can guide these practices – which support the intentions of CCOs to support their clients – CEOs.

What are the major venues for future conceptualisation and research that can be deduced from this study? First, highly significant differences between listed and privately-owned companies in almost every phase of the CEO communication process identified in this study underline the importance of neo-institutional research into different forms of businesses. In this study were included only listed and privately-owned companies. With many new entrants into the global market from developing and emerging countries with a dominance of government- and family-controlled companies, new questions arise: what are the differences between all these different forms of business organisation? And also the reverse question needs to be asked: not only how different ownership structures affect institutionalisation and management of the CEO communication positioning, but how can different institutionalisation and management practices (if confirmed in further studies) affect business performance? And how can different approaches towards personalisation in various cultures be catered for? Second, more research is needed into a paradox of simultaneous demands for “uniform positioning” on one side, and “humanisation” – which can be either seen cynically as simply making personal life of the CEOs a part of the global “reality TV” or as a sincere strategy for dialogue – on another; but that in a global village calls for requisite variety and localisation. Probably studies of non-Western researchers on Western companies positioning their CEOs in non-Western cultures could bring a new perspective to this problem. And third, more studies are needed in the future of the communication function also in the context of CEO positioning. A Head of Communication Services from Switzerland predicted: “We will see a move from companies that have a communication department to communicating companies.” Who will work on positioning strategies for CEOs and who will manage them? Similarly a Head of Corporate Communication from Germany sees a future different from the present: “Communication function will be shaped by general trends that affect global companies: digitalization, change of customer needs and stakeholder expectations, increased inter-connectedness, efficiency expectations as well as increasing emphasis on risk management. Communicators will act as change consultants and project managers. Communication will become more project- and topic-related. This will be reflected in the organizational set-up of corporate comms.” There is hardly any research to address these real-life challenges.

Limitations and future perspectives

While this study is based on reports by high-profile communication leaders, it was not possible to double-check the insights by asking CEOs or top executives themselves. Recent research has identified significant differences between the experiences and expectations of CEOs and CCOs regarding corporate communications in general (Zerfass *et al.*, 2014). Another group of actors to be questioned are members of governing boards and owners, who are ultimately responsible for hiring or firing CEOs. Their attitude towards personalisation could influence CEO positioning strategies.

Even if there is a joint vision for CEO positioning and communication, it should be noted that top executives do not always fit under the tailored and harmonised umbrella of a given corporate communications strategy. They are required to represent and communicate, but they are usually neither trained nor primarily chosen because of these aspects. This raises

questions of whether corporate communications should be conceptualised as a polyphonic body with multiple voices (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Christensen *et al.*, 2008), and how CEOs should be located within this approach. More research is also needed about CEO positioning and communication in a global context, as well as the tendency to fuse the roles of top executives and communication leaders (De Bussy, 2013).

From a more general perspective, research regarding personalisation in election campaigns in political communication suggests the limitations of such strategies (Kriesi, 2012). Lengauer and Winder (2013) have argued that more (de)personalisation research in media studies is required (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011; Park and Berger, 2004). Nevertheless, personalisation is an overarching trend in media, society, and organisations. Positioning CEOs in the public sphere and developing suitable communication strategies will be an ongoing challenge for communication leaders.

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Appendix A

European countries in the quantitative sample with number of respondents, power distance index (PDI), and practices of positioning top executives

Country	Frequency	Percent	PDI	Power distance	CEO positioning	Positioning other executives
Austria	28	5.5	11	Low	96.3%	70.4%
Belgium	21	4.1	65	High	80.0%	75.0%
Bulgaria	16	3.1	70	High	93.3%	73.3%
Croatia	13	2.5	73	High	93.3%	76.9%
Czech Republic	14	2.7	57	High	85.7%	92.9%
Denmark	15	2.9	18	Low	93.3%	73.3%
Finland	13	2.5	33	Low	69.2%	69.2%
France	21	4.1	68	High	81.0%	85.7%
Germany	45	8.8	35	Low	95.3%	86.7%
Italy	34	6.6	50	High-Low	81.8%	75.8%
Netherlands	44	8.6	38	Low	86.4%	75.0%
Norway	17	3.3	31	Low	94.1%	82.4%
Poland	17	3.3	68	High	81.3%	60.0%
Portugal	16	3.1	63	High	81.3%	50.0%
Romania	20	3.9	90	High	80.0%	40.0%
Russia	15	2.9	93	High	60.0%	71.4%
Slovenia	21	4.1	71	High	85.0%	80.0%
Spain	41	8.0	57	High	77.5%	75.6%
Sweden	26	5.1	31	Low	66.7%	48.0%
Switzerland	32	6.3	34	Low	71.9%	46.9%
United Kingdom	43	8.4	35	Low	88.4%	83.7%
Total	512	100.0				

Source: PDI data and classification by Hofstede for selected European countries, based on information available at <http://geert-hofstede.com> (accessed 7 June 2014)

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