

THE SPECIFICS OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN PROMOTING THE IMAGE OF AGRICULTURAL HOLDINGS

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Abstract

Considering the premises and theories of public communication, this paper aims, through a qualitative study, to capture, on the one hand, the main aspects of the image of agricultural companies with direct impact on their profitability and, on the other hand, to identify the mechanisms of public communication that have the greatest impact on image formation. The importance of agricultural companies is becoming more and more strongly perceived lately, the post-Covid 19 experience, the danger of uncontrolled increase in prices of basic foods, have made it easier for public opinion to understand the role of agricultural companies in ensuring food security. Certain governmental strategies to promote Romanian products, cooperation on the short producer-consumer chain, have led to putting on the public agenda, especially in recent years, the role and importance of agricultural companies within the Romanian society. In this context, the paper aimed to analyze the specific public communication strategies in promoting agricultural companies for increasing their credibility, enhance their competitiveness and conquest new markets. The qualitative research conducted through the method of the self-administered structured questionnaire analyses how agricultural companies, through their communication strategies, use recommendations and European funds in promotional campaigns to increase market image and build their own brand. The scientific premises, on which the research was based, were validated, the responses showing a significant correlation regarding information, access to funds, or the use of online promotional campaigns for building the image and brand.

Key words: public communication, image strategies, public opinion, target audience

INTRODUCTION

It is challenging to think of a more critical economic sector in today's world than agriculture. It is an industry that directly impacts the lives of all people, which is why governments worldwide take measures to protect and develop agriculture, ensuring the agricultural security of their people is safeguarded. This was highlighted, perhaps more than necessary, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Countries that could not predominantly secure their basic food security faced initial crisis moments.

A second impact, at the level of the EU and especially of the European countries neighbouring Ukraine which is facing hostilities. The shockwave, among other things, hit agriculture, in general, and agricultural companies, in particular. There is and was a need for additional funds

distributed by the EU, as well as protectionist policies to assist farmers and those working in agricultural and agri-food companies. Today, from the Polish-Ukrainian border to Paris and Brussels, farmers have taken to the streets, frightened by the unfair competition of Ukrainian products or by the protection measures (subsidies) considered insufficient. It is a state of insecurity that the public opinion is increasingly aware of.

A third impact is directly or indirectly related to the impact of climate change on agriculture. This process has already begun and is already predominantly manifesting in southern Europe. Blaz Kurnik, an expert in the impact of climate change and adaptation to it, stated in 2019, following the Agency's Report on this aspect [12], that heatwaves and extreme weather phenomena are breaking climate records in Europe, once again emphasizing the importance of adapting to climate change. The expert mentioned that the phenomenon

will not stop but will have an increasingly sustained dynamic. The European Environment Agency monitors evaluations made at the national, regional, and urban level by member states and manages the European Climate Adaptation Platform (Climate-ADAPT), whose mission is precisely focusing on advising and helping EU countries to build and develop adequate resilience against climate change [10]. On the other hand, the European Environment Agency has made available to the EU a database to adopt an Adaptation Strategy through the Common Agricultural Policy, adapting agricultural policies to climate change. The latest adaptation was in 2021 and aimed to answer how the EU can adapt to the inevitable impact of climate change and become resilient by 2050 [9]. The CAP for the period 2021-2027 has a clear objective of adaptation .

From another perspective, the future of the agricultural and food industry will be increasingly supported by the application of automated and scientifically precise agricultural techniques, which respect the soil and the environment and help rural communities in the long term. This complex situation in the agricultural sector has been attached to the relatively new concept of sustainable agriculture [2].

The general objectives of sustainable agriculture, capable of creating resilience, are [2, 5, 8]:

-the production of food in sufficient quantities and of high quality.

-the conservation of natural resources: products obtained from nature must be returned to nature in various forms, resources such as water, soil, and air need to be replenished and made available to future generations. It is necessary to minimize the use of pesticides to achieve this objective.

-landscape management: agricultural enterprises manage agricultural lands while conserving habitats of great value and maintaining biodiversity.

-animal welfare: animals are cared for and treated appropriately. Their natural behaviour is respected, being subject to a natural diet, adapted to each species.

-economic viability: agricultural enterprises generate sufficient income to be viable. Viable agricultural enterprises contribute to the strengthening of rural communities.

-social equity: agricultural enterprises are places of employment where interested individuals can earn a living.

These general objectives represent the future panacea for promoting the images of agricultural companies. Agriculture is the backbone of rural communities across the entire EU territory. These communities face several challenges, such as demographic aging and inadequate infrastructure, as well as a lack of services and employment opportunities. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) contributes to promoting resilience in rural communities in several ways. Furthermore, the CAP recognizes and strengthens the relationship between local communities and the rural environment. Measures that protect landscapes, wildlife, and natural resources, such as clean air and rivers, not only benefit agriculture and the environment but also contribute to the quality of life in rural areas, as well as to the opening of opportunities for recreational and tourism activities, to further support rural communities. The European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) is a tool developed for this purpose. Essentially, the network serves as a hub for exchanging information about how rural development policies are implemented and how they can be improved [11]. Everyone interested in this subject, from National Rural Networks, Local Action Groups to agricultural advisory services, agricultural researchers, and agricultural companies, can find support if their concerns are related to better involvement in rural development, improving the quality of rural development programs, or information regarding the benefits of rural development policy.

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The agricultural sector is very important for the economy and society, considered critical both at the level of the European Union and Romania. Its contribution to the GDP cannot be overlooked, just like the number of people employed in agriculture, which amounts to about 10 million people at the EU level, that is almost 5% of the total. In Romania, agriculture is even more important considering the rural population of about 9 million people, according to the National Institute of Statistics (INS) data.

Public communication promoting the image of agricultural companies

Public communication is a fundamental aspect of communication sciences and targets any exchange of information through which an organization becomes known in the market. Even if the organization's immediate purpose is to profit from its main activity, which represents, in fact, the organization's reason d'être [1], the reason why it was established, objectives related to building and promoting the image have become an integral part of the organization's efficiency and effectiveness [16].

Before highlighting some conceptual benchmarks necessary for the qualitative research underlying the scientific study, it is necessary to clarify how we conceptually constructed the term "agricultural company." In the context of this article, the phrase "agricultural company" transcends the framework of Law no. 36/1991 [12, 14] regarding agricultural societies. For us, any association in the agricultural field, including agri-food, aiming at the creation of agricultural products through cultivation or processing and covering any necessities included in the concept of food security, directly or through marketing, falls under the definition of an agricultural company. The food chain, a concept associated with sustainable agriculture, consists of an entire series of stages and operations involved in the creation and consumption of food products, from initial production to final consumption. This includes activities from the initial production to the final consumption, including the traceability of food products within the chain [13]. Clearly, we are talking about

domestic agricultural companies. We made these clarifications because we wanted to explore more general aspects related to the management of agricultural companies' images and to connect, even complement them, with the EU actions in the field.

The social responsibility of the agricultural company is very important when discussing the impact it has on society or the community, about the image and prestige associated with an agricultural company.

To achieve these objectives, to reach these goals, agricultural companies develop, internally or through specialized partners, various planning, organizing, decision-making, or implementation-control tools. The intrinsic connection between these tools and their corresponding departments is made through a communication infrastructure, which can be internal or external [15]. The aim of this study is to examine the ways in which communication infrastructure is used for promoting the image of agricultural companies, how these companies manage to utilize communication facilities and the financial resources provided by the EU for their own image promotion, as well as how companies distinguish themselves in the market through their own resources or by accessing government funds.

It must be noted that the communication strategy of an agricultural company addresses both aspects, which go hand in hand and are, in terms of efficiency, complementary. In other words, the public communication of an agricultural company is both internal/external and can be operational or strategic. Internal operational communication refers to communication processes undertaken with the goal of ensuring the company's efficient activity. Communication within teams, task management, understanding management's expectations by employees, operational meetings, etc., are communication elements that occur in relation to the managerial work process – planning, organizing, decision-making, implementation, and control.

External operational communication encompasses the entire communication process through which stakeholders receive information about the organization's activities

– shareholders, media, stakeholders, consumers, etc.

The most important objective of public communication is to create and strengthen the company's image and identity, ultimately transforming the entire structure that builds the basic elements of the agricultural company's aim, into a brand.

In this context, the paper aimed to analyze the specific public communication strategies in promoting agricultural companies for increasing their credibility, enhance their competitiveness and conquest new markets.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The qualitative research we conducted for the scientific grounding of the study focuses on how agricultural companies utilize EU expertise and financial resources made available to make themselves known in their market, to position themselves in the market, and to develop their image, thereby building a brand.

As a research technique, we used a self-administered structured questionnaire with open-ended questions, which included a total of 7 questions. Regarding sampling, since it was qualitative research, we did not analyse the representativeness of the sample but chose 20 companies from each category. We considered how EU legislation defines micro-enterprises, small enterprises, and medium-sized enterprises.

For the sampling construction technique, we chose the "step by step" technique, selecting a step of 50, using the list from the National Trade Register Office as the official sampling document. I used NACE codes 01 – Agriculture, hunting and related service activities, code 03 – Fishing and aquaculture, and code 10 – Manufacture of sugar.

Regarding the actual construction of the sample, we started with micro-enterprise number 50, 100, 150, etc. For each sub-sample, I repeated the operation.

Methodologically, we note that we did not give importance to the company's name (the questionnaire was anonymous anyway, as a fundamental condition of any qualitative sociological research). The small number of

questionnaires, as well as the small number of questions (which were otherwise focused on what we were aiming for), allowed for the empirical processing of the research results. For some correlations considered significant, we used SPSS – Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

The working scientific hypotheses were as follows:

1. Agricultural companies, regardless of their size, have access to information and research opportunities offered by the EU or EC for enhancing their market image.
2. Agricultural companies, regardless of their size, access European funds allocated for campaigns promoting products or activities specific to agricultural companies.
3. Agricultural companies predominantly use promotional campaigns specific to the online environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The qualitative research was conducted among Romanian agricultural companies from the perspective of image building and identifying elements that can lead to brand creation targeted 60 agricultural companies included in the three categories (micro-enterprises, small enterprises, or medium-sized enterprises as defined by the Recommendation of the European Commission) [3]. Although the actual number of companies differs, favouring agricultural micro-enterprises, it was chosen an equal number of companies for the sample—20 from each type: 20 micro-enterprises, 20 small enterprises, and 20 medium-sized enterprises.

SMEs are the backbone of the European economy, representing 99% of all businesses, with around 21 million SMEs fostering the spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation, encouraging the growth of competitiveness.

The European Commission supports the businesses of these companies through European and national programs, offering assistance or intervening financially in special situations. Specifically related to the theme of our scientific study, for the year 2024, the Commission has allocated 185.9 million EUR

for financing activities promoting sustainable and high-quality agri-food products from the EU, not just within the Union, but worldwide [4, 6, 7]. The Commission adopted the work program on promotion policy for 2024, contributing to the achievement of the European Commission's political priorities for the 2019-2024 period, especially the "Farm to Fork" strategy.

The promotion projects selected in 2024 are expected to highlight and favour products that meet objectives such as:

- Encouraging sustainable practices in EU agriculture
- Improving conditions for animals
- Promoting the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables and a healthy and sustainable diet.

The Commission has at its disposal two types of promotion actions: those carried out by professional or interprofessional associations and co-financed by the EU, as well as actions carried out directly by the EU, including the activities of the European Commissioner in charge in third countries for developing trade with agri-food products, participating in fairs, and communication campaigns.

Regarding the responses processed from the qualitative research, we make the following methodological clarification: although initially we wanted to divide the agricultural companies that were interviewed into companies owned by foreign entities and domestic ones in order to analyse a possible correlation between the tendency to follow the Commission's activities for each entity individually, we considered that this approach is complex and could be analysed through a separate qualitative research.

To question 1, regarding whether the interviewed companies are aware of these opportunities from the EU and the Commission and whether they constantly follow the activities of the European Commissioner for Agriculture, the responses indicated the following: the activity of the European Commissioner is followed by approximately 50% (29 companies), predominantly by medium-sized companies, over 75%, 16 out of 20, followed by small companies 11 out of 20, over 50%. These

figures show a medium level of interest in what happens at the level of the agri-food sector in the Commission.

To question 2, regarding the funding by the EC for the promotion of agri-food products in 2024, 50 out of 60 companies, over 80%, stated they are aware of this program. The largest share is from medium-sized agricultural companies, which likely have people specifically focused on these activities.

To question 3, about how many of the interviewees participated in "Promotion of Agricultural Products: Info days 2024," a hybrid event held between January 31 and February 1, 2024, in Brussels, only 15 companies stated that they participated, approximately 25% of those questioned, the majority being small and medium-sized companies, and 2 medium-sized companies stated they were physically present.

To question 4, regarding their intention to submit proposals and what type of proposals they wish to submit, simple or multi-program, the responses were as follows. 32 companies, (over 50% of those interviewed), 2 micro agricultural companies, the rest small and medium-sized companies declared they are prepared to submit proposals, with the call being open until May 14, 2024. Most proposals will be simple programs targeting one or more companies from the same country. Only 4 companies stated they are preparing multi-program proposals through the association of at least 2 members from one country with at least 2 members from other European countries.

To question 5, regarding the aim/effect they pursue through the project applications submitted, the responses highlighted that the objectives are diverse, from maintaining or increasing market position, 6 responses, awareness of products in some markets as well as conveying the quality of these products, 15 responses, obtaining preferential positions, 5 responses, to building or promoting a brand, 2 responses, customer loyalty and launching new products, 4 responses.

From the responses given, it is clear that the effects of promotion aim at both sales effects and effects on public communication. Indeed,

the 68 new campaigns proposed by the Commission, 50 generically named "Simple" and 18 "Multi," generally target these two objectives.

To question 6, regarding the type of promotional campaign for which agricultural companies can receive funding through the EU program, we asked what type of public communication they would like to use, from those eligible, for development. A primary observation is that online campaigns – websites or social media, dominate with a share of 75%. The production of communication materials in the form of leaflets, brochures, and guides holds a 60% share, but those online sent via e-mail, or other forms of online communication prevail. Participation in exhibitions and fairs, organizing masterclasses, and exchange of experiences are favoured by 40% of the interviewed companies. Advertising campaigns in the press, television, or radio are seen as important by approximately 35%.

PR activity – public relations is considered important by 35%, yet it is more directed towards social media and less towards classical public communication. There is a desire to focus PR more on concrete activities and less on generalist activities that target the overall organizational culture of the company (principles, values, etc.).

To question 7, regarding what other sources of information they access for promoting their image, the majority of companies are attentive to information coming from the Government, 90% of companies, and the Ministry of Agriculture, 85% of companies.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the premises formulated in the research, as well as other results obtained from the analysis and processing of the data, it appears that the three hypotheses are validated by the research outcomes. Summarizing the study results, we can say that the main conclusions drawn from the qualitative research are:

A first conclusion of the study is related to the fact that the level of information among agricultural companies is linked to credible

sources: the EC, Government, and Ministry of Agriculture. The EC's initiative on promoting agricultural products is considered a great opportunity by all Romanian agricultural companies, each trying to diversify their promotion campaigns for company development.

A second conclusion is that social media remains the most important way to enhance the company's image, to become known, and to explore other markets. The opportunities generated by social media will be exploited in the future by agricultural companies.

A third important conclusion is that agricultural companies are attentive to the philosophy and structural requirements of the EU and converge in focusing on these objectives in the future. Likely, the financing, subsidies offered, and the geopolitical situation have created a greater sense of belonging to the EU structures.

A final conclusion is that companies emphasize PR activities, despite all the changes and developments it entails. Recognizing the importance of public communication and promotion campaigns brings Romanian agricultural companies closer to the connections of the European and global agri-food market. Companies become bolder, despite the immense pressures of the last 3-4 years, understanding the importance of collaboration, information, and risk-taking.

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