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# GREEN COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH ISO 14 000 STANDARDS SERIES AND OTHER VOLUNTARY INITIATIVES

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## Abstract

Environmental communications have an important role to play in legitimizing business organizations to their stakeholders and in improving the green management in the context of green economy. In the last decade, scholars have shifted focus from general environmental risk to specific climate change and social problems.

The paper examines issues related to organizations' communications of their green and social initiatives and achievements through ISO 14 000 standards series and other voluntary initiatives at international and national level.

discussion focuses on the communication with stakeholders (employees, customers, local community, municipal authorities, suppliers, etc.) of organizations that have implemented standardized quality management, environmental and social responsibility systems.

Conclusions are drawn about the role of standards in the effectiveness of green communications covering both the environmental and social aspects of organizational management. Implications about improving the effectiveness of green communications through ISO 14063: 2006 environmental communication guidelines for case studies in Bulgarian context are discussed.

**Keywords** - Green communication; ISO 14063: 2006 environmental communication guidelines; environmental management standards; green management standards; Bulgaria.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Despite the many definitions of “green communications”, current academic research highlights their common goals of providing and receiving information, as well as conducting a dialogue with internal and external stakeholders. In the last decade, scholars shifted the focus from general environmental risk to specific climate change and social problems (Allen, 2016, Allen & Craig, 2016, Blackburn, 2007, GRI, 2002, SDGs Compass, 2015, WBCSD, 2017).

The various approaches to green communications discussed in the paper reveal them as processes of stakeholder interaction with the responsible management of business organizations. Communication with stakeholders is of great importance for the management of any organization responsible for the environment and society. It is not a separate activity or another modern project but should be part of the overall management philosophy, communication policy and strategy of each company.

Environmental communications, as required by international standards, are part of the strategic management of companies. At the same time, most social responsibility and sustainability communications conducted through fragmented CSR activities or reporting can be seen as separate communication tools and less often as models for “soft” sustainability management tools. A number of studies in recent years highlight the need for a strategic focus on sustainable communications and those related to CSR (Allen, 2016, Allen & Craig, 2016, Ivanova, Haradinova & Vasileva, 2016, Vasileva & Hristova, 2016, Stefanova, 2013).

The paper examines issues related to the organizations' communications of their green and social initiatives and achievements through ISO 14000 series and other voluntary initiatives at international and national level. In addition to clarifying the definitions and goals of green communications, the study

aims to reveal the role of standards as an overall framework for conducting strategic and targeted environmental communication.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

To meet the set objectives, this paper uses *descriptive approaches* to the analysis of specialized literature on concepts such as “green communications”, “environmental communications”, “ecological communications” and “pro-ecological communications” of business organizations. A *structural and content analysis* of the international standard ISO 14063: 2006 environmental communication guidelines has been made in several directions: basic principles; environmental communication policy and strategy; environmental communication activities; significant sources of environmental information; approaches and tools for environment communication. Case studies developed by the authors in the Bulgarian context have been used in relation to the implications about improving the effectiveness of green communications through ISO 14063: 2006 environmental communication guidelines (Hristova – Pesheva, 2018).

## **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 Definitions and objectives of green communications**

In general, environmental communications explore public perceptions of the real world and how they shape the relationship between man and nature. Environmental communications study “the role, techniques and impact of communication on environmental issues” (Cox, 2013, Hansen & Cox, 2015). K. Klöckner (2015) defines them as “a process by which is designated ... the exchange of environmental problems” through “verbal and nonverbal activities”. According to the author, these communications should be understood in terms of structural change, technological development and political initiatives (Klöckner, 2015). They are not only part of the overall communications of organizations, but above all, they are related to their management. At a higher than the organizational level, ecological communications can be seen as “part of society's changes to sustainability” (Klöckner, 2015). Green communications are “pragmatic when they train, alert, persuade and help people to take sustainability initiatives within and between organizations” (Cox, 2013). Communication is a fundamental process, “as it guides people to look at a certain perspective, sets certain values, and not others, and creates reference points to attract our attention and understanding” (Allen, 2016). M. Allen (2016) notes that communication takes place at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, organizational, inter-organizational, and macro-ecological level (Allen, 2016).

This paper focuses on the requirements related to stakeholder communications of business organizations that have implemented environmental management systems. In this context, it is essential in defining the basic concepts to pay attention to the voluntary standards for environmental communications developed by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

The common guide to Environmental Management Systems (EMS) principles, systems and methods of implementation embraces environmental communications as “an organization's process of providing and receiving information, as well as a commitment to a dialogue with internal and external stakeholders to promote a more general understanding of environmental issues, aspects and achievements” (ISO 14004).

On the other hand, ISO 14063: 2006 standard provides a comprehensive framework for conducting strategic and targeted environmental communication (ISO 14063: 2006). The ISO 14063: 2006 standard is also called “Environmental Communication Guidelines” and aims to support the environmental communications of organizations regardless of their size, type, location, structure, activities, products and services. This international standard from the ISO 14000 series gives guidance to the organization on the general principles, policy, strategy and activities related to both internal and external environmental communication (ISO 14063: 2006). It can be used in combination with any standard in the ISO 14000 series or on its own.

According to its requirements, environmental communication is defined as “the process that an organization conducts to provide and obtain information, and to engage in dialogue with internal and external stakeholders to encourage a shared understanding on environmental issues, aspects and performance” (ISO 14063: 2006). As can be seen from the definition, communication is not a sporadic act on a specific occasion, but a systematic activity. Moreover, the information is not transmitted only

inside out (from the organization to the outside world) but is an exchange in which the organization is also influenced by the surrounding environment. The organization itself, according to the standard, may be a company, corporation, firm, enterprise, body or institution, or part or combination of them all, which may be public or private and have their own functions and administration. For organizations that have more than one business unit, the individual business unit can be defined as an organization.

The standard considers *stakeholders* as the other important parties in communication. They are defined as “a person or a group associated with or affected by the environmental performance of an organization”. The stakeholders themselves may be too many and the organization may have a real difficulty in communicating continuously with each of them, or it may not be expedient. Therefore, organizations are encouraged to identify their *target groups*. The standard formulates the latter as “an interested party or parties selected as a focus of the organization's environmental communication activity” (ISO 14063: 2006). It provides detailed examples of potential stakeholders in the organization's environmental communication activities (Table 1).

Table 1. Stakeholders in environmental communication of organizations (ISO 14063:2006)

<b>Stakeholders</b>	
<b>Internal</b>	past, present and future employees and their representatives; shareholders
<b>External</b>	customers and consumers, suppliers, subcontractors, wholesalers, distributors, competitors, banks and financial/investment organizations, insurance companies, rating agencies, public authorities, legislators, regulators, politicians and leaders of public opinion, neighbors and the local community, stakeholders related to the supply chain, scientists and researchers, environmental specialists, the media and NGOs.

### 3.2 The ISO 14063: 2006 standard as a strategic approach to green communications

This study looks at green communications through the prism of environmental and social responsibility management standards introduced by organizations, as these standards provide the framework for a systematic and consistent approach to their implementation.

The ISO 14063: 2006 standard outlines the following basic principles for environmental communication (ISO 14063: 2006):

*Transparency:* the processes, procedures, methods, data sources and assumptions used in environmental communication should be available to all stakeholders, taking account of the confidentiality of information. Stakeholders should be informed about their role in environmental communication;

*Appropriateness:* In environmental communication relevant information should be provided to stakeholders, using formats, language and media that meet their interests and needs, enabling them to participate fully;

*Credibility:* Environmental communication should be conducted in an honest and fair manner, and the provided information should be truthful, accurate, substantive and not misleading to stakeholders. Information and data should be developed using recognized and reproducible methods and indicators.

*Responsiveness:* The organization should ensure that environmental communication is open to the needs of stakeholders. Respond to the queries and concerns of stakeholders should be in a full and timely manner. The organization should make stakeholders aware of how their queries and concerns have been addressed;

*Clarity:* The environmental communication approaches and language should be understandable to stakeholders to minimize ambiguity.

In Table 2 a comparison is made between the underlying principles of environmental communication in ISO 14063: 2006 and the SMART principles laid down by M. Allen (2016). As can be seen from the comparison table, CSR communications should conform to the SMART principles (Strategic, Memorable, Accurate, Relevant, Trustworthy) and be disseminated in the organization, along the supply chain and within inter-organizational cooperation (Allen, 2016). They are complemented by the principles of transparency, accountability and clarity developed in ISO 14063: 2006 for environmental communications.

Table 2. Comparison of the basic principles of green communications according to ISO 14063: 2006 and the SMART principles of CSR communications

<b>Basic principles of green communications</b>	
<i>CSR Communications - SMART</i> <i>(Allen, 2016)</i>	<i>According to ISO 14063: 2006 standard</i> <i>(ISO 14063:2006)</i>
<b>Strategic;</b> <b>Memorable;</b> <b>Accurate;</b> <b>Relevant;</b> <b>Trustworthy.</b>	<b>Transparency;</b> <b>Appropriateness;</b> <b>Credibility;</b> <b>Responsiveness;</b> <b>Clarity</b>

A. *Environmental communication policy and strategy*

The standard positions hierarchically environmental communication policy as an element of environmental policy as well as other policies, principles and strategies of the organization. The management officially expresses the environmental communication policy, highlighting the organization's overall intentions and guidelines related to environmental communication. For its part, the environmental communication strategy is the framework of the organization for the implementation of environmental communication policy and the establishment of communication objectives and tasks. The specific key objectives are set in the planning process after a situation analysis is made. This implies examining the context in which the organization operates and taking into account all aspects of influence, defining the strengths and weaknesses as well as the opportunities and threats to the organization, through a SWOT analysis for example.

*Environmental communication policy*

With regard to environmental communication policy, top management is committed to identifying, expressing its engagement, and promoting it. The very development of policy, according to the standard, is best to happen, as those responsible for the environmental management in the organization interact with those responsible for communication. Subsequently, all levels of management must implement the policy and contribute to its formulation and change. Policy-making must take into account factors such as: the business sector, the products and services of the organization; its size, infrastructure, corporate governance, market and "brand" strategies; the existence of an environmental management system, the taking into account of environmental aspects and impacts and their influence on health and safety; legal requirements regarding disclosure of environmental information, stakeholder expectations, voluntary codes of ethics. In addition, environmental communication policy should clearly indicate a commitment to a dialogue with stakeholders, disclosure of environmental performance results, addressing of key environmental issues, the importance of internal and external environmental communication in the organization, and policy implementation in practice.

*Environmental communication strategy*

The implementation of environmental policy is demonstrated through the communication strategy. The strategy is the materialized policy philosophy by defining clear objectives, identifying stakeholders, planning communication activities and providing resources for implementation. It is important to note that the environmental communication strategy is part of the environmental activities and must also be in line with other elements of the management systems, policies and activities. Several important issues need to be considered in the development of the strategy with regard to: the environmental communication objectives, the main environmental aspects and impacts of the organization, how all

internal and external stakeholders are engaged and coordinated, the time required for implementation of the strategy, specific messages and communication tools.

### **3.3 The ISO 14063: 2006 standard as a framework for green communications activities**

#### *A. Environmental communication activities*

The choice of communication activities is also done only after a number of questions have been taken into account.

Important planning issues are for example:

- whether the selected activity is compatible with the environmental communication policy?
- is two-way communication encouraged?
- will it help to reach the target groups?
- is it addressed to the key issues?
- is the result from it measurable?

The ISO 14063: 2006 standard describes the planning stages of the environmental communication activity; choice of content, approaches and tools of environmental communication; implementation of environmental communication activities; assessment of environmental communication. An overview of management and planning of inspections is foreseen.

#### *B. Significant sources of environmental information*

The standard also provides examples of significant sources of environmental information. Among the main ones are:

Information on the organization's strategies and their environment implications

Environmental policies, management practices and performance measures, possibly available from an organization's environmental management system

Lists of environmental aspects and impacts of activities, products and services

Life cycle assessment of products and activities

Data and other documentation used for environmental labels and declarations

Lists of environmental indicators

Data from environmental performance evaluations

Routinely and occasionally collected information, such as the reports from facilities located in a specific area, reports from subsidiaries, research reports, monitoring, control, etc.

Routine regulatory reports

Record of compliance with applicable legal requirements and with other requirements to which the organization subscribes

Plans, records and guidance on emergency response, and response to accidents

Manuals and records of employee training on the safe handling of materials

Professional qualification records of the organization's employees responsible for environmental matters (managers, technicians, experts)

Relevant financial and accounting data

Information from community outreach activities.

#### *C. Environmental communication approaches and tools*

The choice of environmental communication approaches and tools must be consistent with all the factors we have mentioned so far. The individual tools and approaches have their strengths and weaknesses that need to be known to make the most successful selection.

There are *written communication approaches and tools* that the standard presents (websites, environmental or sustainable management reports, printed materials such as brochures and newsletters, eco-labels or product or service declarations, posters, media articles); *verbal communication tools* (public meetings, stakeholder interviews/personal contact, focus groups, questionnaire surveys, open doors, information days, site visits, videos, tours with environmental focus, workshops, conferences, discussions, media interviews, citizen advisory groups or public relations groups, information desks, presentations, dinners with stakeholders, theatrical performances) and *other practical approaches* (cooperative projects, sustainability agreements, exhibitions).

At the stage immediately prior to implementing the strategy, it is important to define the responsibilities and commitments in relation to the entire process of collecting, processing, reporting, coordinating and communicating environmental information. The standard gives general guidance in this respect to ensure the communication process in the organization.

An important part of the strategy is the prior planning of environmental communication in the event of environmental crises and emergencies. The ISO 14063: 2006 standard details the considerations to be taken into account in this respect, such as, to make scenarios of potential incidents; to assess possible damage and casualties and the impact on the environment; to develop earlier messages to communicate with; to assess the resources and infrastructure needed for this purpose; to plan communication activities, the people responsible for them, etc.

The final stage of implementation of the environmental communication strategy is the assessment. To do this, however, it is necessary for the organization to provide preliminary indicators to measure its performance. They must reflect both qualitative and quantitative information. Examples are given in this respect, such as: the number of visitors per unit of time involved in environmental activities that the organization has committed to; number of letters /telephone conversations/ emails per unit of time received by stakeholders on environmental issues (such as emails per month) and analysis of their content whether its negative or positive; number or degree of complaints about certain environmental aspects, activities or issues; number of prizes received; number of publications made by the media; the number of visitors to the organization's environmental information pages on its website (e.g., visitors per month); response rate of environmental survey/questionnaire; number of activities completed to reach stakeholders and analysis of which were most effective by target groups through a survey/evaluation survey.

#### *D. Implications about improving the effectiveness of green communications in a Bulgarian context*

Implications about improving the effectiveness of green communications through ISO 14063: 2006 environmental communication guidelines for case studies in a Bulgarian context are discussed. The research on the case studies of two large energy organizations in Bulgaria (Hristova – Pesheva, 2018) identifies the difficulties in communicating “green” management and the opportunities to improve their green communications by applying standards. It examines the way the two organizations demonstrate, plan, implement, control and evaluate their green communications, taking into account the recommendations of the international standard ISO 14063: 2006 for environmental communication and the SMART principles for CSR communications (Allen, 2016). A high degree of compliance with the requirements of ISO 14063: 2006 has been established with respect to the conducted green communications; the application of the basic principles; the defining of their main objectives; green communication policy, strategy and activities; the identification of stakeholders; identification of the target groups; the applied approaches and tools. Opportunities for improvement within the long-term vision of green communications of both organizations have been found, revealing shared corporate values, mostly related to environmental protection, care for the local communities, health protection and support for education.

## **4 CONCLUSION**

There are numerous definitions of green communications. Above all, they set common objectives for providing and receiving information, as well as conducting a dialogue with internal and external stakeholders. This leads to building up reputation and legitimacy, along with improving the management of organizations responsible for society and the environment. These are messages based on SMART (**S**trategic; **M**emorable; **A**ccurate; **R**elevant; **T**rustworthy) principles in Corporate Social Responsibility Communications (CSR) (Allen, 2016), complemented by the principles of Transparency,

Appropriateness, Credibility, Responsiveness and Clarity developed in ISO 14063: 2006 for environmental communications.

Stakeholder communication is of great importance for the management of any organization responsible for the environment and society. It is not a separate activity or another modern project but must be part of the overall management philosophy, communication policy and strategy of each company.

In summary, according to ISO 14063: 2006, the overall process of managing green communications includes planning and designing environmental policy and synchronization with other corporate policies; developing environmental communication policy and strategy; planning and implementation of communication activities; assessment and review by the management and possible adjustments. When following these steps, stakeholders, target groups and environmental communication principles must be taken into account. This model ensures consistent and systematic communication that is accurately targeted and subject to regular control and improvement.

The standard does not provide a ready-to-use scheme that is applicable everywhere, but a methodology to ensure communication effectiveness if all the steps are taken into account. The most important feature of green communications, according to the standard, is that they represent an open system that is constantly influenced by internal and external factors. It is therefore necessary to regularly review and update it by applying the principle of continuous improvement of their management.

The case studies of two large organizations in the energy sector in Bulgaria researched by the authors find the difficulties in communicating green management and the opportunities for improving their green communications by applying the standards. A high degree of compliance with the requirements of ISO 14063: 2006 has been established with respect to the conducted green communications; application of the basic principles; defining their main goals; green communication policy, strategy and activities; identification of stakeholders; identification of the target groups; applied approaches and tools. Opportunities for improvement have also been identified in the light of the long-term vision of the green communications of the two organizations revealing shared corporate values.

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