Deliverable 10.3: Communication and public relations strategic master plan

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1. Executive summary

The purpose of this deliverable is to present an overarching strategy for ACTRIS communication and public relations. The principal context for the deliverable is the transition of ACTRIS from project-based organization to the status of ERIC. With this document, we aim to relay a roadmap to carry on successful communication and liaisons during operational phase of ACTRIS ERIC.

We analyse the ACTRIS communication dimension in terms of its brand identity and the public relation dimension in terms of reputation. We adopt a framework that integrate both essential dimensions using an existing framework, named Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde and Greyser, 2016). This approach is advantageous to strategic management as it helps to merge ACTRIS brand identity (representing the impact of ACTRIS communications) and reputation element (representing the impact of ACTRIS public relations) as one entity and align it with ACTRIS mission, vision and objectives. We draft recommendations for continuing building a well-recognized and networked research infrastructure and offer possible solution to potential issues and problems ACTRIS may be facing with internal and external stakeholders.

2. Leveraging ACTRIS brand identity to become a global research infrastructure.

The ACTRIS ecosystem is a network of interconnected actors, including people, organizations, technologies, and institutions, that interact with each other to create and deliver advanced scientific results, technologies and knowledges in the field of atmospheric research.

ACTRIS has a large European wide community. Now 22 countries have shown their commitment at organizational or state level and overall ACTRIS community involves more than 100 research performing organizations. These parties are considered ACTRIS internal stakeholders as participate in core activities of the research infrastructure such as running operations at ACTRIS Central and National Facilities, or managerial and strategic tasks of the ACTRIS ERIC Governance (Director General, General Assembly, Advisory Bodies).

ACTRIS is consolidating its position in the national, European and international landscapes, expanding its role as a key player supporting environmental research and knowledges dissemination to external stakeholders. For example, through scientific based information, ACTRIS can guide policy and decision makers towards efficient emission-reduction actions at different scales, from local to national and continental scale. ACTRIS mission aims at educating our society, scientific communities, general public and media on the effect of air quality on human health and climate change. ACTRIS' support to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals is linked to our role as key contributor and operator of the global observing system and to liaise with counterparts in different parts of the world. It is our ambition to be clearly recognized as a key player in the international organization and networks for Earth Observation system, supporting the policies, e.g., defined by the World Meterorological Organization (WMO), European Space Agency (ESA), or Group on Earth Observation (GEO).

Brand identity is a crucial aspect of any organization's overall strategy. Brand identity refers to the internal, strategic elements that define a brand. It encompasses the fundamental characteristics, values, purpose, mission, positioning, and personality that a brand wants to convey to its stakeholders. During ACTRIS IMP the brand of ACTRIS was solidified by defining clear statements for mission, vision, objectives, values as well as value propositions, as shown in Figure 1.

OUR VISION
ACTRIS is the fundamental European research infrastructure for short-lived atmospheric constituents, increasing excellence in Earth system observation and research and providing information and knowledge for developing sustainable solutions to societal needs.

OUR MISSION
ACTRIS shall establish, operate, and develop a pan-European distributed research infrastructure for short-lived atmospheric constituents. ACTRIS shall provide effective access for a wide user community to its resources and services in order to facilitate high-quality Earth system research.

OUR VALUES GUIDE US

User focus
We strive for a deep understanding of our user's needs and aim at meeting them in everything we do.

Innovation and renewal
We foster benchmarking innovation and embrace change through continuous learning and development.

Teamwork and passion
We are stronger together. Collaboration with each other and our stakeholders is at the heart of what we do.

Integrity
Our commitment and reliability must be unquestionable. We promote sustainable and ethical behavior.

OUR SUCCESS IS BUILT ON — Reliability — Expertise — Science-based technological leadership — Engaged & talented people — Partnerships & collaborations — Strong financial commitment of Members — Sustainability

WE DRIVE EXCELLENCE & SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES IN THE FIELD OF ATMOSPHERIC RESEARCH

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING
Scientific progresses based on high quality observations and user-focused services

INNOVATION DEVELOPMENT
Technologic advancements through partnerships and tailored services.

Figure 1. The cornerstones of ACTRIS strategy.

The relationship between brand identity and stakeholders is reciprocal and interconnected, as stakeholders both shape and are influenced by the brand identity. For this reason, whether we consider ACTRIS internal or external stakeholder, the ACTRIS identity represents the core of the ACTRIS ecosystem (Figure 2).
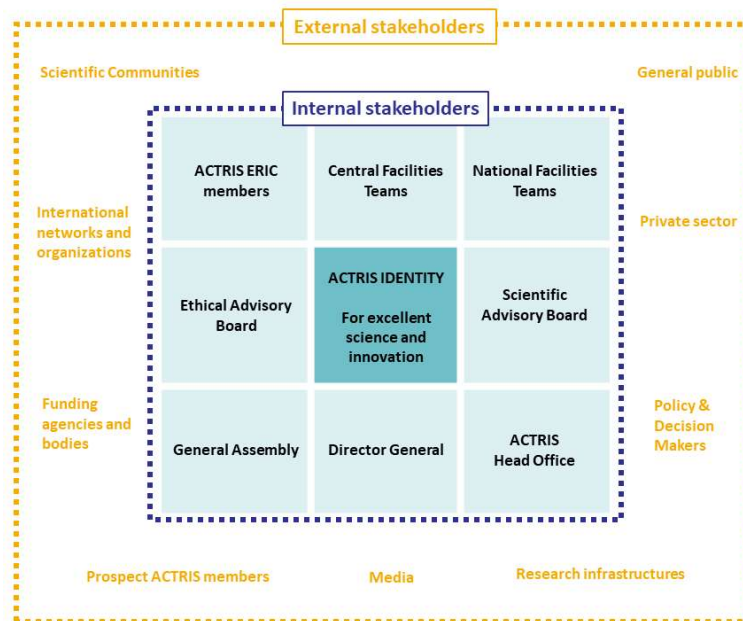
Figure 2. ACTRIS Ecosystem of stakeholders is built on ACTRIS brand identity.

3. Managing public relations and communications

3.1 Understanding the definitions of public relations and communications

Public relations and communications are two distinct but closely related fields within the realm of organizational management. Public relations primarily focus on managing and maintaining relationships between an organization and its various stakeholders, including the public, media, funding bodies, and employees. It involves strategically shaping and maintaining a positive public image, handling crises and conflicts, and creating effective communication strategies to enhance reputation and promote goodwill. Within the framework of ACTRIS IMP, we have defined guidelines dedicated to public relations, giving priority to science engagement, and crisis management and crisis communication (ACTRIS IMP MS 10.3)

Communication is a broader term that encompasses the exchange of information, ideas, and messages within and outside an organization. It involves the dissemination of information through various channels, such as media, social platforms, and internal networks, to reach specific audiences. ACTRIS communication strategy (ACTRIS IMP D10.1) presents the internal strategy (mechanisms, tools, methods) to present ACTRIS to external stakeholders, including measures to maximise impacts.

To sum up: while public relations are a subset of communications, it emphasizes relationship management and reputation-building, whereas communications encompass a broader range of activities, including internal communication, marketing communication, and media relations. We included this distinction in the ACTRIS stakeholder ecosystem shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Communication processes defines the perimeter between internal and external stakeholders. ACTRIS communication strategy glues together the internal components of ACTRIS, building a stronger sense of community. Via strategically coordinated communication actions, ACTRIS will be perceived by the external stakeholder as an ambition RI that drives scientific excellence in the field of atmospheric sciences.

3.2 Stakeholders' perspectives: brand identity and reputation

Brand identity refers to the visual and verbal elements that represent a brand and distinguish it from its competitors. It encompasses the collection of tangible and intangible attributes, including the brand's name, logo, colors, typography, tagline, voice, values, and overall personality. Brand identity is the visual and conceptual representation of what a brand stands for and how it wants to be perceived by its target audience. ACTRIS spokespersons are always encouraged, and periodically reminded, to apply ACTRIS brand identity in any communication and dissemination activity. In the future, we plan to also define guidelines for co-branding, e.g., when and how to co-brand communication activities co-organized or co-hosted by ACTRIS and partner organizations that are part of the ACTRIS consortia. Brand reputation refers to the overall perception and credibility built over time among its target audience, stakeholders, and the general public. It is the collective perception and evaluation of the brand based on its past actions, behaviours, products or services, customer experiences, and interactions. A positive brand reputation indicates trustworthiness, reliability, quality, and strong customer satisfaction, while a negative reputation suggests concerns, distrust, or dissatisfaction. During ACTRIS IMP, to some extent, ACTRIS reputation is evaluated via user surveys. In the future, ACTRIS shall have in place a set up that enables regular evaluation of ACTRSI reputation among key stakeholders, e.g., via surveys at events gathering large audiences.

In this context, we connect brand identity as a crucial point of ACTRIS communication strategy mainly to internal stakeholders whilst brand reputation being intrinsically part of ACTRIS public relations strategy

and linked to the engagement of external stakeholders. These connections are now added to the ACTRIS stakeholder ecosystem shown in Figure 4.

These two dimensions are the starting point towards brand awareness and brand recognition, two key building blocks towards ensuring/expanding reach of continuous positive brand reputation and trust for ACTRIS among external stakeholder segments. Internal stakeholders can help catalyze this as well as you show in Fig 4. These linkages are expanded in detail in the next section.
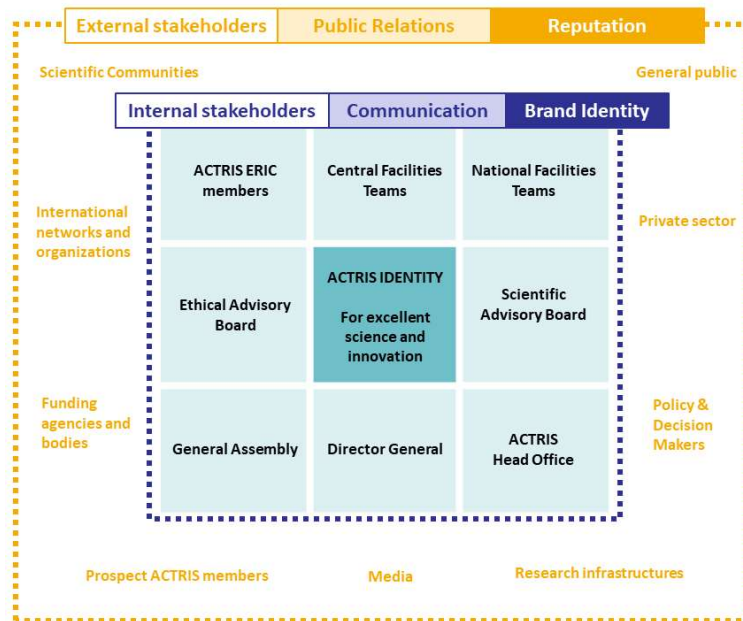
Figure 4. Internal stakeholders build the ACTRIS brand via implementation of ACTRIS communication strategy. This reflects by gaining a certain reputation for ACTRIS among external stakeholder via public relations.

3.3 Managing ACTRIS identity and reputation via communication and PR strategy

Brand identity, reputation, communication, and PR strategies are intricately connected. A well-executed public relations strategy can help shape and enhance a brand's reputation by effectively managing communications, addressing stakeholder concerns, and influencing audience perception. Communication strategies are planned to build and maintain positive engagements with stakeholders via proactive media relations, handle crises or issues effectively, and promote the brand's key messages consistently. In order to implement a communication strategy successfully towards external audiences, also internal communication guidelines (strategy) with clear definitions for processes, roles, responsibilities are fundamental (see ACTRIS IMP MS 10.3, ACTRIS IMP MS10.4, and ACTRIS IMP D10.1). This is particularly crucial for large and distributed research infrastructures such as ACTRIS that needs clear processes to ensure that cohesive messages are delivered with a common voice.

A communication strategy can reinforce positive brand attributes, respond to negative perceptions, and align the brand with values and interests that resonate with the target audience. Ultimately, a strong PR strategy complemented with strong understanding of stakeholder and target group needs and processes (e.g. it is important to understand how media works, what constitutes a news for media, what are the best media practices in different countries, etc.) can contribute to building a favourable brand reputation, fostering trust, and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders, thereby bolstering the brand's overall success, and standing in the market.

From ACTRIS strategy management perspective, we consider both brand identity and reputation as equally important and complimentary focus points. We recognize the value of adopting a brand-oriented approach (where ACTRIS identity is the focus), hence an inside-out perspective – to strengthen the internal ACTRIS brand strength and identity. Equally strong arguments identify reputation as the focus of ACTRIS strategy. In this case, a market-oriented approach (where the user is the focus point) would be satisfy the needs and wants of ACTRIS stakeholders. We recommend that both approaches, which are synergetic and not mutually exclusive, shall be integrated and combined in ACTRIS strategies following, for example, the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde and Wesley, 2016) described in the following sections.

3.4 Bridging ACTRIS Brand Identity and Reputation

We adopt the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix and Reputation Matrix of Urde and Wesley (2016) and adapt it to the case of ACTRIS. The framework provides guiding questions, and the structuring of the elements can help management tap into how its multiple stakeholders perceive the brand, and to what extent these external perceptions match the internally driven identity. We strongly advice applying the framework to periodically review ACTRIS brand identity and reputation in the future years of ACTRIS in its operational phase.

The brand identity is defined by 3x3 matrix of brand identity elements used in defining ACTRIS communication strategy. The brand core, expressed in terms of values, mission, or promise, is positioned at the centre of the matrix. Arrows radiating form the centre of the matrix indicate that all brand identity elements are interlinked and form one unique entity, one echoing into the others (Kapferer, 2012), so that the brand core reflects onto all elements, and vice versa.
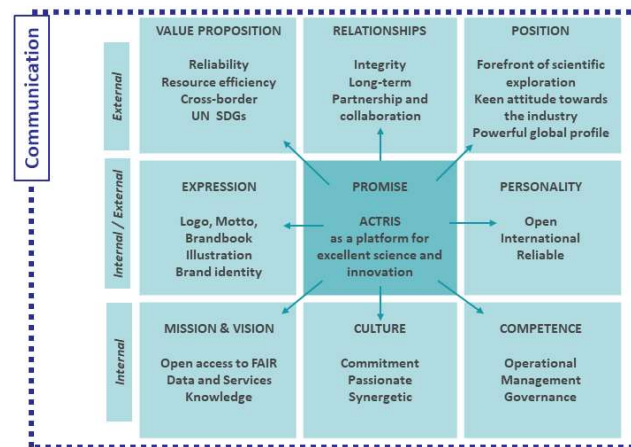
Figure 5. ACTRIS brand identity matrix.

As shown in Figure 5, the brand identity internal elements are described in terms of three organizational characteristics: 'mission and vision', 'culture' and 'competences': these are all relevant to the internal community of ACTRIS stakeholders. The external stakeholder component comprises 'value proposition', 'relationships' and 'position'. Mid-way we have three elements that are valuable for internal and external stakeholders. 'Personality' describes the corporate brand's individual character, 'expression' defines the verbal and visual manifestations of the brand. The 'brand core', consisting of ACTRIS promise, is at the heart of the corporate brand identity (Urde, 2013).

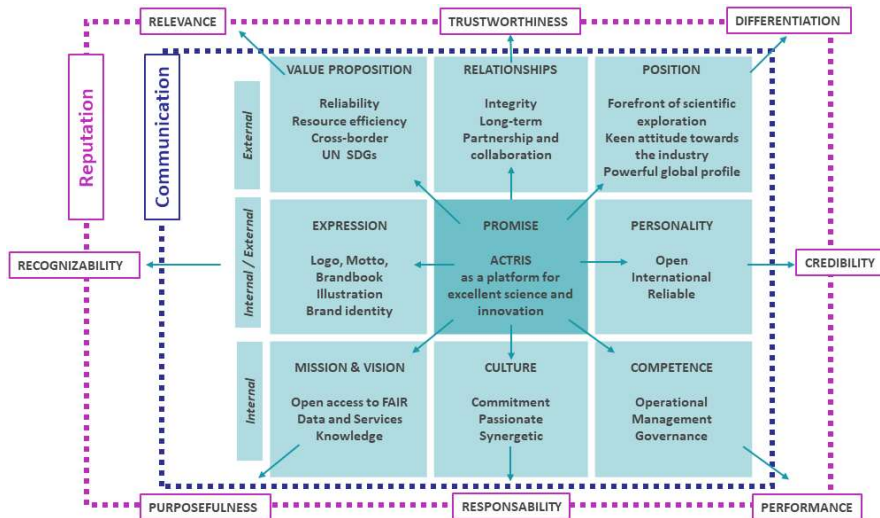We adopt the reputation elements defined in Urde and Greyser (2016) and presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6. ACTRIS brand and reputation matrix. Brand elements are indicated in blue and reputation elements in purple color.

The strategy diagonal cuts across the matrix (Figure 6) and spans between the reputation element "purposefulness" (bottom left) to" mission and vision" to the "brand core (promise)" at the centre of the framework, and continues to "position", which in turn points to the reputation element "differentiation" (top right). The component "position" is an identity element in the framework that emphasizes that ambition is part of what a brand stands for and how it would like to be perceived by internal and external stakeholders. In brand identity management, this diagonal is essential, as it connects the organization's mission and vision and its wanted position in the landscape. Lastly, the stakeholders' perceptions are reflected by purposefulness and differentiation.

The competition diagonal defines value-creating processes. The essence of the identity element "competences" (bottom right) concerns an organization's operational and managerial capabilities and resources and how they are combined into value-creating processes and potential competitive advantages. Competences are prerequisites to substantiate the "value proposition" (top left), and the connection between these two identity elements is the overall "promise". The strength and clarity of the competition diagonal is reflected by the stakeholders' perceptions of the reputation elements "relevance" and "performance".

The communication horizontal stretches between the two reputation elements "recognizability" and "credibility" which is closely linked to "personality". An organization's "expression" typically encompasses all forms of communication, including advertising, design, and choice of media. This identity element is primarily related to "recognizability", one of the reputation elements in the framework.

The interaction vertical demonstrates how the reputation elements "trustworthiness" and "responsibility" are connected to and influenced by a corporate brand's identity. "Trustworthiness", reflects 'the nature' of the relationships that ACTRIS is striving to build with its whole stakeholder ecosystem.

The extent to which an organization such as ACTRIS is perceived to be "responsible" is primarily reflected and shaped by its "culture". ACTRIS culture is built upon values of integrity, expertise, passion, and teamwork (Fig.1). The ACTRIS matrix links "relationships" and "trustworthiness". ACTRIS defines its relationships with stakeholders through dialogue and with integrity. The interaction vertical also connects "culture" and "responsibility". ACTRIS culture is defined with three words: commitment, passionate, synergetic which show the commitment towards the responsibility of ACTRIS towards our society.

4. Recommendations for ACTRIS communication strategy

The strategy consists in a planned approach or set of actions designed to engage and connect with specific target audiences. It involves reaching out to people or organizations outside of ACTRIS immediate sphere of influence to build relationships, convey information, promote ACTRIS services and values to society, or achieve certain objectives. ACTRIS communication strategy is outlined in ACTRIS IMP D10.1 and key elements are addresses point by point.

We recommend that the next update of ACTRIS (internal and external) communication strategy includes the following key elements:

1. Set goals and objectives: Establish what and how ACTRIS strategic objectives rely on communications, and, accordingly, define and prioritize communication targets and activities, whether it's increasing brand awareness, driving website traffic, generating leads, increase uptake of service or fostering partnerships with industry. Consider setting SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals, supplemented by KPIs for monitoring and assessing how the communication and PR strategy are progressing, as a good approach to plan the steps to meet the long-term goals in ACTRIS.

2. Identification of the target audience: Clearly define the specific individuals or groups ACTRIS wants to reach and how these groups help ACTRIS to reach its objectives. Understand their needs, interests, and preferences.

3. Research and planning: Gather insights about the target audience them (e.g., persona cards for internal and external stakeholders, user journey map, etc.) and identify the most appropriate channels and methods to reach. This may include social media platforms, email campaigns, events, partnerships, or direct outreach. Establish practices that are GDPR compliant.

4. Crafting compelling messaging: Craft messages that resonate with the target audience, communicate ACTRIS value proposition effectively, and address their specific needs or concerns.

5. Selecting outreach channels: Choose the most suitable channels and platforms to reach the target audience. This could include social media platforms, email marketing, content marketing, public speaking engagements, media outreach, or collaborations with other organization and relevant persons.

6. Implementing outreach tactics: Execute the planned activities and initiatives, such as sending personalized emails, attending industry events, hosting webinars, or creating targeted content.

7. Tracking and evaluation: Monitor the effectiveness of your outreach efforts by analysing metrics and feedback. This enables ACTRIS to measure the success of the strategy, identify areas for improvement, and make necessary refinements.

By developing a well-defined communication strategy, ACTRIS can effectively engage with their target audience, build relationships, and achieve their goals, whether they are related to user acquisition or community engagement.

5. Recommendation for ACTRIS Public relations strategy

A public relations (PR) strategy is a planned and systematic approach that outlines the objectives, tactics, and activities that an organization or individual undertakes to manage its relationships with the public, stakeholders, and the media. It is designed to shape and maintain a positive image and reputation, effectively communicate key messages, and build mutually beneficial relationships.

Currently ACTRIS has defined elements of its PR strategy. Guidelines for engaging in the scientific community and managing crisis events are found in An analysis report and recommendations for stakeholder engagements are defined in the milestone ACTRIS IMP MS10.4, while a more descriptive approach focused on the private sector is described in ACTRIS IMP D9.2 via a set of recommendation for the operation of ACTRIS liaison office.

We recommend that in the future ACTRIS develops a dedicated PR strategy that builds on the existing documents and involves the following elements:

1. Defining objectives: Clearly articulate the goals and outcomes ACTRIS aims to achieve through its PR efforts considering the overarching and long-term strategy of ACTRIS. These objectives could include enhancing brand awareness, managing a crisis, promoting a new product or service, or building relationships with key stakeholders.

2. Identifying target audience: Identify the specific individuals, groups, or communities that the PR efforts will focus on. This helps tailor messaging and outreach strategies to effectively reach and engage the intended audience.

3. Crafting key messages: Develop compelling and consistent messages that align with the organization's goals and resonate with the target audience. These messages should effectively communicate the organization's values, mission, unique selling propositions, or desired narrative.

4. Choosing communication channels: Determine the most appropriate channels and platforms to disseminate messages and engage with the target audience. This can include traditional media outlets (such as print, TV, and radio), digital platforms (websites, social media, blogs), events, speaking engagements, or partnerships.

5. Media relations: Build and maintain positive relationships with members of the media. This involves proactively pitching stories, responding to media inquiries, organizing press conferences, and cultivating partnerships to ensure favourable media coverage.

6. Content creation: Develop high-quality content, such as press releases, articles, blog posts, videos, and social media content, to disseminate information, engage the target audience, and establish thought leadership.

7. Monitoring and evaluation: Regularly monitor media coverage, social media engagement, and public perception to assess the effectiveness of PR strategies and tactics. This allows for adjustments and refinements based on feedback and data analysis.

By developing an effective PR strategy, ACTRIS will be more structured in building its credibility, managing its reputation, and establishing positive relationships with various stakeholders, and ultimately contributing to the achievement of ACTRIS strategic goals.

6. Concluding

The CBIRM (Urde and Greyser, 2016) is a valuable managerial tool that can be used to assess key reputational and identity issues. A systematic review of the key 'how' questions (external reputation elements), combined with the answering of the 'what' questions (internal identity elements), can reveal essential insights in the process of defining ACTRIS brand and create the grounds for assessing and reviewing ACTRIS strategy.

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ACTRIS IMP MS 10.3 "Guidelines for communication and public relations"

ACTRIS IMP MS10.4 "Analysis of the best practices to engage ACTRIS user groups"

ACTRIS IMP D10.1 "Updated plan for communication within ACTRIS"

ACTRIS IMP D9.2 "Means and recommendations for the operation of the ACTRIS liaison office"