

Communications for the European forest based sector: opportunities and challenges

Laura Dieguez, Bernd Wippel, Malte Viergutz (UNIQUE forestry and land use GmbH)

In a time marked by communication-overload, the task of identifying what to communicate, to whom, and how can be extremely challenging. In the particular case of the European forest sector, communications play a key role in the acceptance of the general public towards its operations, which can often pose a sensitive topic. Successful communicated information has the power to influence and even legitimize the sector's activities and its products. Keeping this in mind, the EU-funded project **What we wood Believe (W3B)**, strives to take a close look at not only how the forest-based sector is perceived in a number of selected countries (Austria, Germany, Finland and Slovenia), but how to developed tailored forms of communication specifically adjusted to the European context. Keeping in mind that wood is a promising resource to contribute to a transformation of society towards a bio-economy and how the latest has changed the views and demands on forests, the objective of the project is to develop cost-efficient ways of communication, customized to current topics of interest.

First things first: what is the current state of communications in the sector?

As a first phase, the W3B project looked into what the different segments of the European forest industry have done to communicate their sustainability efforts to the general public so far. An online content analysis in the project countries found that the forest-based sector is severely lacking a pro-active approach on sustainability communication, with big gaps on how to communicate to different stakeholders and how to build the image of the sector. Overall, 'forest and the economy' is the most communicated topic, particularly within large companies. Instead, the

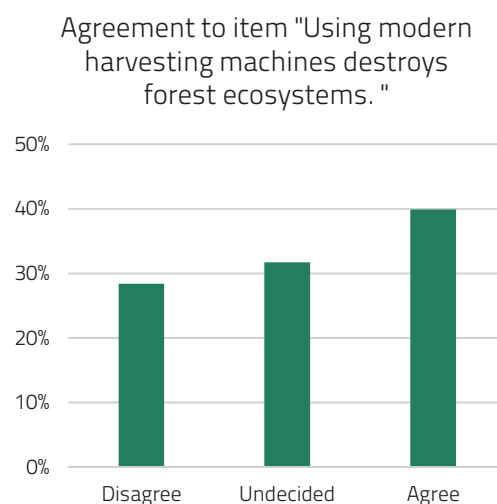
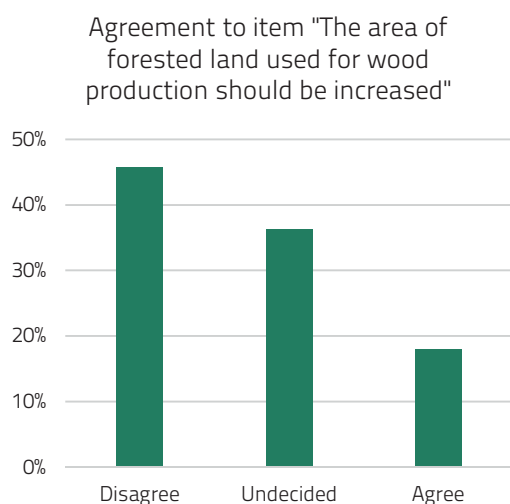
'added value of wood products', 'wood based innovations' and 'forest ecosystem services' were the least emphasized topics. The latest is alarming if one considers these are future-oriented topics.

What to communicate?

Through the conduction of a survey, and as a result of different activities (living labs, stakeholder workshops, etc.), different topics were examined and some conclusions can be drawn.

Survey results illustrate positive attitudes towards communicated messages concerning forest management in the different countries (like forest health and forest coverage). However, when sensitive topics such as harvesting of wood and the use of machinery arise, attitudes shift towards a more critical approach, or even rejection to such activities. Additionally, the project allowed to identify gaps of knowledge and therefore potential topics to be communicated.

Overall, the sector's sustainability communication works when deploying the image of forestry as a caretaker. However, this is not the case for forestry as a business. In this sense, there is a lot of work to be done in order to promote forestry and the use of wood as a business. People with little connection to the forest-based sector could be key, as results from the survey show that this groups tends to have gaps of knowledge, and to be more receptive to new information on the sustainability of the sector. To successfully reconcile the image of forestry as a business, this population segment needs to be specifically targeted in future communications.



In relation to wood as a building material, the project revealed that wood is perceived as a very desirable material for a wide variety of buildings, with attributes like comfort and durability being highly rated. However, there is lower acceptance when it comes to wood as a material for multi-storey buildings for private and public use. Furthermore, fire safety concerns prevail among many respondents when it comes to rate the performance of wood. On the topic of wood and its carbon storage properties, although the carbon sinking concept has been widely communicated by the sector, it is still a topic that very often raises doubt and confusions. Finally, although people are in general in favour of innovation, those who are not involved with the sector show little knowledge on the latest.

How to communicate?

Nowadays, the abundance of communication channels can be overwhelming for those in charge of defining ways, and messages to communicate. The project looked into the different channels in which communication can occur, ranging from personal communication (through friends or colleagues, for example), to printed or visual channels (including social media). Overall, it is important to notice that the channel to be used should be chosen while keeping in mind the target group. Regarding social media, the countries included in the project seem to be behind in innovative social-media campaigns with a wide reach.

W3B FACTS

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Participants

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4 countries
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Funding

WoodWisdom-Net

Coordination

Dr. Tobias Stern
Kompetenzzentrum Holz GmbH
Team Marktanalyse und
Innovationsforschung
t.stern@kplus-wood.at
www.wood-w3b.eu