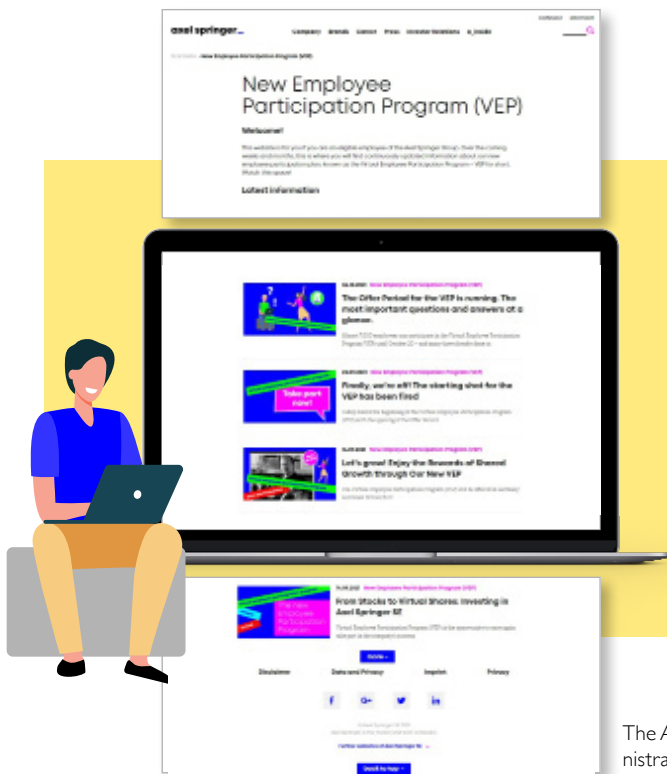


// CASE STUDY 2021 //  
Focus: Employee shares programme



Axel Springer SE is a media and technology company that is active in over 40 countries around the world. Its brands include BILD, WELT, INSIDER and POLITICO Europe as well as classified portals including StepStone group and AVIV Group. Axel Springer SE's primary goal is to be the global market leader in both digital content and digital classified. The company's headquarters are in Berlin, Germany, and it employs more than 16,000 employees worldwide.

The Axel Springer Intranet, the landing page and the website for its programme administrator, Global Shares, provide information about the virtual shares programme.

// AXEL SPRINGER VEP //  
Axel Springer brings in Unequity

In spring 2020, the Axel Springer Group decided to delist from the stock exchange to gain more flexibility in its core businesses and achieve its ambitious goals of being the global leader in digital content. The company is still a joint-stock corporation, but there are currently no freely floated shares. The stock market exit also meant the end of the longstanding employee shares programme.

To encourage continued investment in the Group and to allow as many employees as possible to participate in the

long-term development of the company, a new shares concept was rolled out in fall 2021: the Virtual Employee Participation Programme, or VEP.

Unequity conceptualised and implemented the strategic and creative communication campaign for the new programme, which was initially introduced in Germany and the United Kingdom.

**Das neue virtual employee participation program startet!**

Teilnahmeberechtigte erhalten Zugangsdaten zum Axel Springer EquityGateway von [noreply@equityadmin.com](mailto:noreply@equityadmin.com)

**einmalig** Der Zeitraum zur Teilnahme beginnt am 22. September um 10:00 Uhr

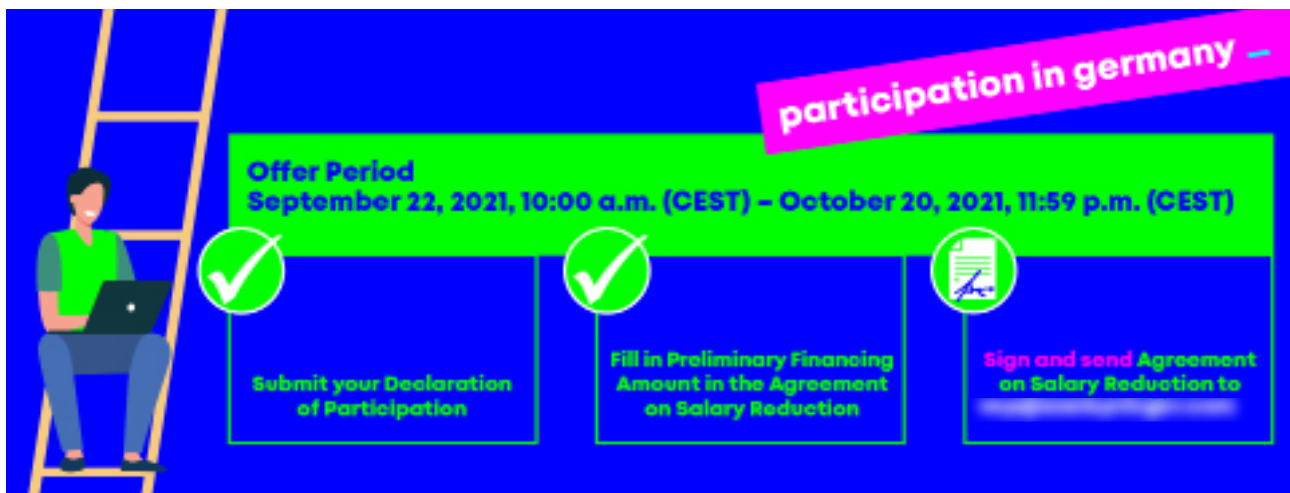
Der Zeitraum zur Teilnahme endet am 20. Oktober um 23:59 Uhr

Die Teilnahme ist ausschließlich im Axel Springer EquityGateway möglich! **virtuell** **let's grow!**

The online ticker shows the communication at the start of the participation programme. (German only)

## // GOAL OF THE PROGRAMME //

The (re)introduction of an employee shares programme at Axel Springer SE was intended to achieve several goals. The primary objective was to reward employees for their performance and loyalty by giving them the chance to be part of the long-term development of the company. The company also wanted to cultivate and strengthen a sense of belonging among global employees, who are located around the world in various national and international companies but are all under the umbrella of Axel Springer SE.



The banner on the Axel Springer EquityGateway also showed the required country-specific steps.

## // CHALLENGES //

### Communication for a new virtual programme

After shutting down the existing employee shares programme due to the company's exit from the stock market, and the resulting freeze outs, employees in Germany and the UK were to be given a new opportunity in the autumn of 2021 to benefit from the shared fulfilled goals of the company. Axel Springer Group shares have continually increased in value over the 35 years that the company was on the stock market.

The focus was placed on making people aware of the new programme, while capitalising on the trust that the employees had in the previous share programme. One notable challenge was the new format of the programme: virtual shares. This was new territory for the company. Additionally, legal issues meant that the participation process was different in the UK than in Germany.

### Purely digital communication

Due to time constraints – but also to underscore Axel Springer as a digital leader – the entire communications campaign was digital and virtual. This requirement played a decisive role in the conceptual phase of the planned media. For the first time, there would be no printed brochures, no letters sent in the post, no posters, and no on-location events. The only forms of communication were emails, a virtual roadshow, the Group Intranet (a\_inside) and a project-specific landing page on the Axel Springer website. This landing page was necessary because not all employees at the company's subsidiaries have access to the Intranet. The striking new Corporate Design was also used for internal communications within the Axel Springer organisation.

## // THE AGENCY'S TASK //

### Development of a communications strategy

A creative and strategic concept was required to communicate the intricacies of a virtual shares programme on suitable internal communication channels: Intranet and email. As not all employees in the various global companies had access to the Intranet, the official Axel Springer website and the programme administrator's website, Global Shares, were used to provide information. In addition, important multipliers within the company were given thorough training before the launch. Content for the campaign included the presentation of the new virtual programme, the processes for participation, and the reasons for continuing with the employee shares programme.



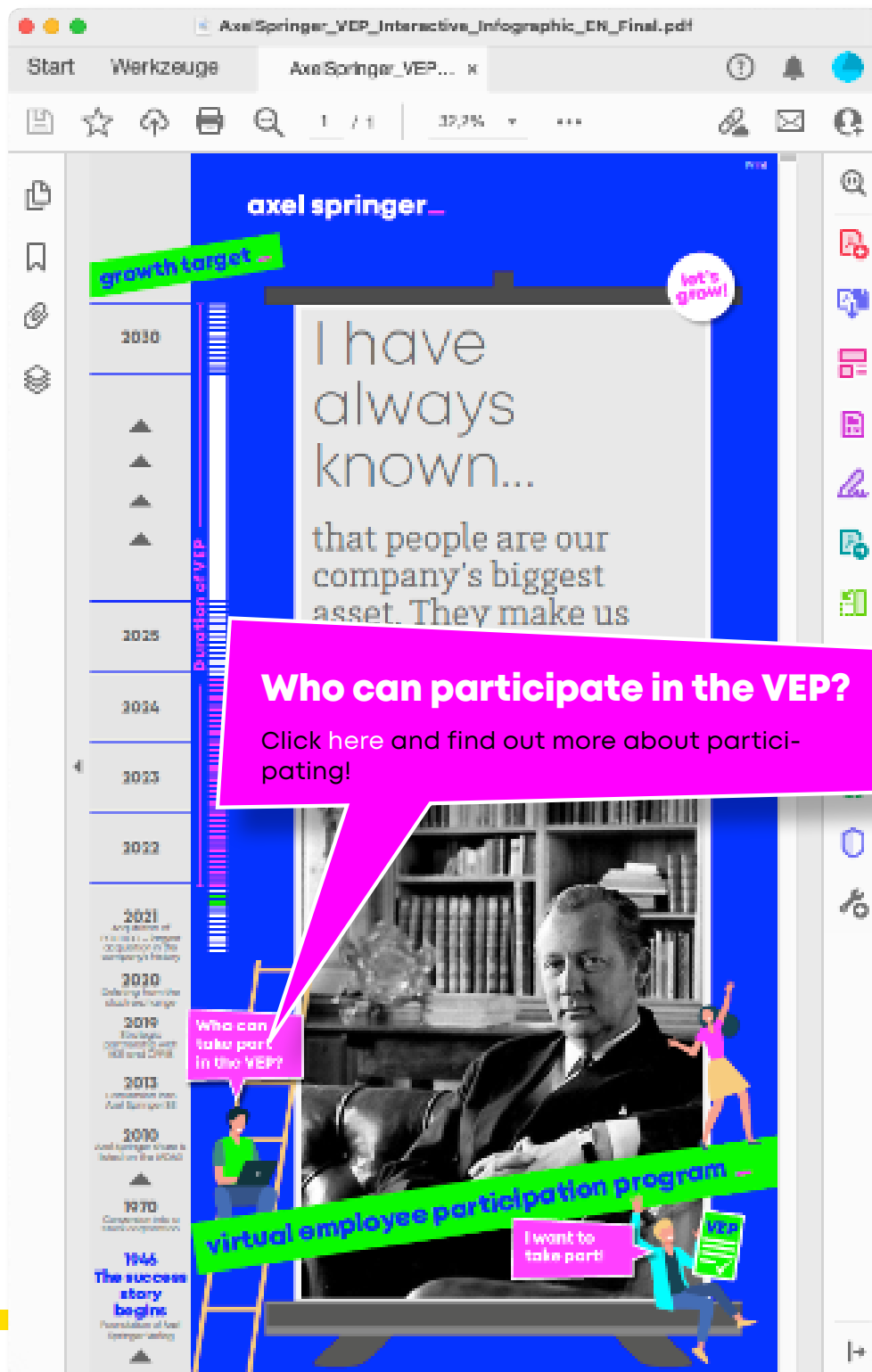
## // DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS //

### Stakeholder communications

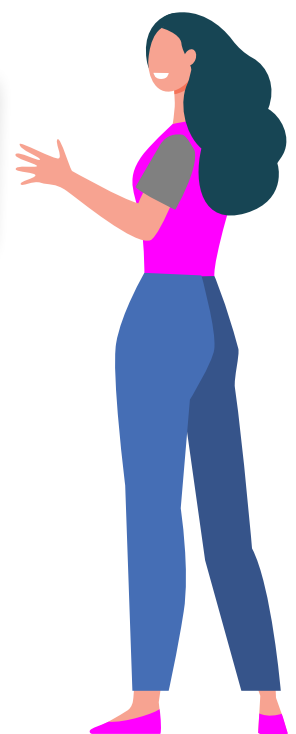
In advance of the VEP launch, multipliers and stakeholders were informed by email and received detailed online presentations in both German and English. This ensured that all of the important decision-makers and supporters at the company were well-informed about the programme, and could communicate this knowledge to their fellow employees.

### Purely digital communication

The heart of the overall communications effort was an interactive graphic illustrating the timing and participation rules for the programme and important digital milestones in the history of Axel Springer SE. The interactive elements of the graphic are rather playful, sparking interest in the programme and prompting viewers to engage while simplifying access and explaining the complex topics.



Interactive PDF that playfully describes the programme while informing about important deadlines.



## Purely digital communication by e-mail, Intra- and Internet

Eligible employees were sent multiple emails informing them of the background, processes, and rules for participation. The differences in participation rules for Germany and the UK were explained through the web portal. Repeated reminders were sent at the beginning and end of the offer period and again helped clarify the participation process. A countdown banner on the a\_inside Intranet showed how many days were left for participation.

Articles that presented the core information clearly were published on the Intranet a\_inside, and could be accessed at all times. Emails and articles announced the next steps, provided information, and presented the participation process in an easy-to-understand way with links to important documents in the web portal.

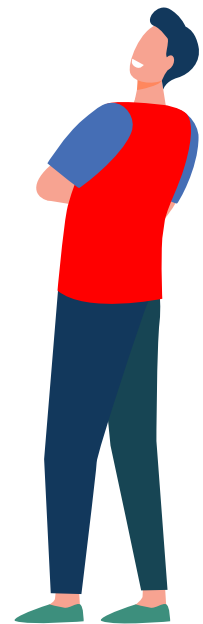
For employees who did not have access to the Intranet, essential information about the programme was published on the Axel Springer website. This was a first, because the information on the employee shares programme was publicly accessible. More detailed information was made available on the web portal through a unique link sent only to participating employees.

## The Axel Springer EquityGateway web portal

Using an online platform greatly expanded the digital registration and administration processes. It provided access to important, non-public documents – such as a detailed, visually-appealing FAQ sheet, the legally binding documents for Germany and the UK, and a calculation tool. After the offer period, participants can access the portal to track their investment and view the current value of their virtual shares.



The FAQ brochure can be downloaded as a PDF.



The animated banner on the info screen in the foyer at headquarters. (German only)



## // SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK //

### Digital communications for a virtual programme

Before the campaign, it was not easy to predict how employees would receive the VEP. The experience with the previous shares programme suggested that employees would be interested. Still, there was a chance that virtual shares, as a new form of employee participation, would be a bit more abstract than real-life shares in the company. Specific participation requirements were also put in place due to the extended maturity period of the programme, which ends in 2030. On the other hand, the programme does have one massive advantage: participants have no risk in terms of losses or share price fall because they will always get back at least the invested sum (minus any income tax and social security contributions).

### The result: expectations exceeded!

The result is clear. Expectations in terms of participation numbers were easily exceeded. In fact, the new programme won over more employees than the previous programme. Interest was also tracked in the click rates, and it proved to be very high, with overall reception very positive. What's more, everything was completed within the planned budget.

Unequity once again managed in a very short period to analyse, strategically plan, and intuitively communicate a complex and multifaceted subject – entirely digitally for the first time.

## // SO WHAT CAN WE DO FOR YOU? //

Unequity takes great ideas and uses optimised communications to make them a success. Whether it's employee shares or management programmes, bonus plans, company car arrangements or offers for pension plans – we make your Compensation & Benefits programme a big win for your employees and for your company.

Unequity. Good communications for good ideas.

**UNEQUITY**  
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## FACTS & FIGURES

Client:  
Axel Springer SE

**axel springer**

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Head of Global Rewards  
Management

Project period:  
July – December 2021

Agentur-Lead:  
Simone Schmitt-Schillig



Article in [GoingPublic Magazin](#). (German only)