

Online Public Relations

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INTRODUCTION

Online public relations involves the application of Internet technologies by organizations to communicate and build relationships with key publics: customers and consumers, employees, investors and donors, community members, government, and the news media. Beginning with the popularization of the Internet in the mid-1990s, public relations units within corporations, non-for-profit organizations, and public institutions have embraced the Internet widely. The result has been a dramatic change in how public relations is practiced.

Nature of Public Relations

Public relations is a management staff function that facilitates communication between an organization and its key constituencies. Public relations can go by many names, including *corporate communications*, *public affairs*, *development*, and *public information*. Importantly, public relations is the not only the organizational unit responsible for managing communications between an organization and key publics because communication is the constitutive process of management. Nonetheless, public relations units facilitate organizational communication and relationship building two ways: through counsel and communications.

Counsel

Public relations provides *counsel* to an organization on problems and opportunities that confront it. This counsel includes feedback based on formal and informal re-

search about public opinion, as well as recommendations on communications strategies that can be pursued across the organization to respond to audience needs, concerns, and interests and to speak effectively with a "single voice."

Online technologies have enhanced the capability of PR practitioners to conduct research and counsel organizations. *Environmental scanning* is the generic term for the process used to identify relevant concerns being discussed in the public, media, or public policy arenas of opinion. *Cyberscanning* adapts this technique to the surveillance of topics being raised in Web sites, discussion groups and chat rooms on the Internet. Whereas scanning is a more general form of intelligence gathering, *environmental monitoring* and *cybermonitoring* involve tracking specific, searchable topics. Public relations professionals routinely review Internet content themselves by tracking specific sites or key terms using search engines. Organizations also hire professional *Web monitoring services* that compile daily reports about Web and discussion group content.

Communications

Public relations also conducts strategically planned communications programs to reach key audiences. Today these programs integrate an array of both online and offline activities. These programs are grounded in clearly articulated organizational goals and communication objectives, involve carefully crafted strategy, and emphasize the objective evaluation of results. Some communications and relationship-building efforts are intended primarily to make audiences more *knowledgeable* about

an organization, products and services, candidate(s), or causes. Other programs strive to shape, reinforce, or change *attitudes* among key publics about an organization's policies or practices or to enhance an organization's overall reputation. Finally, many public relations programs are intended to prompt specific *actions*—to influence how people buy, invest or donate, work, vote, or care for themselves or others by avoiding risks.

Traditional Public Relations

Six principal specialties comprise the PR practice. These specializations are organized around the typical organization's key constituencies and include *employee relations*, *customer or consumer relations* (sometimes referred to as *marketing public relations*), *investor relations* (corporations) or *donor relations* (not-for-profit organizations), *community relations*, and *government relations*. In addition, almost all public relations departments are responsible for *media relations* (incorporating publicity), which operates as a conduit to reach all of these constituencies. Some manufacturing organizations also have special programs directed to *suppliers or vendors* (supplier relations).

Within each of these specializations, programs fall into four broad categories. *Promotional programs* are short-term efforts to influence actions, such as purchasing a new product or voting for a particular candidate. *Relationship-building programs* are longer term efforts undertaken to solidify patterns of behavior that benefit both the public and the organization. *Crisis communications* programs entail short-term responses to extraordinary triggering events that create uncertainty in an organization's operating environment. Organizations strive to minimize such disruptions and assuage concerns by providing timely and factual information. Finally, *issues management* programs focus on anticipating trends in public opinion and on responding to disputes or challenges by activists to an organization's philosophies or practices.

Online Public Relations

The advent of the Internet has dramatically altered the composition of PR programs and the mix of communications tools used by practitioners. As a result, many practitioners have been required to quickly learn about Internet technologies. Online or interactive media now constitute one of five major groups of communications media used in public relations (Figure 1).

Public relations traditionally relies on publicity coverage in the news and entertainment portions of *public media* (newspapers, magazines, radio and television) to communicate with the public-at-large and with business-to-business audiences (also known as trade audiences). Practitioners often augment these publicity-generating efforts with *controlled media*, which are tools manufactured and distributed to target audiences, such as brochures or annual reports. Public relations also depends heavily on *events*, or gatherings of key constituents such as speeches, conferences, awards ceremonies, and rallies. Finally, public relations practitioners employ *one-on-one communications*, where a representative of an organization interacts directly with individual members of key publics. One-on-one communication is prevalent when comparatively

small numbers of people are important to reach. Examples include lobbying, fundraising among major donors, consumer affairs and customer relations, and community outreach.

Online and interactive media fill a critical need in many public relations programs by providing the ability to respond to queries and by providing a potentially endless amount of information about an organization and its product and services, candidates, or causes. Online media also can enhance involvement with an organization through education and entertainment made possible by online media's interactive character. Online information can be updated by organizations instantaneously and accessed by users 24 hours a day, 7 days a week from anywhere in the world where Internet access is available. In addition, information can be *personalized* to the inquirer using *cookies*, *user profiling*, and *database technologies*.

Interactive media have reshaped the use of other public relations media as well. Online media allow organizations to be less dependent on public media to supply information to large audiences. Online media probably will not replace newspapers, magazines, radio, or television, however. Instead, public media will remain important tools when it is necessary for organizations to create broad public awareness, to communicate with the public quickly, or to respond to news events.

Interactive media also make organizations less dependent on controlled media. Web sites, for example, have reduced the direct and incremental costs of distributing printed matter. These materials otherwise must be given out through literature racks, personal visits, postal mail, or package delivery services. Interactive media are not likely to replace these communications tools, however. Similar to public media, controlled media will continue to be used in situations when it is necessary to "push" information into the hands of audiences instead of waiting for audiences to be "pulled" into a Web site, discussion group, or online chat.

Online communications can replace some events by creating opportunities for people in remote locations to come together online. These include webcasts, seminars and workshops, bulletin boards, discussion groups, online chats, and Web conferencing (two-way video and audio online exchanges between participants). Such applications are not yet fully developed, however, and their potential is less understood.

The Internet provides additional options for one-on-one communications between organizational representatives and individual members of constituencies. In particular, personal e-mails can complement personal meetings, telephone calls and postal mail to facilitate and speed up exchanges. This might be especially important as more people adopt wireless phones and personal data appliances that can deliver Internet content.

PUBLIC RELATIONS WEB SITES

Web sites represent the most visible and widely used Internet tool in public relations. When organizations first experimented with Web sites in the early 1990s, their first crude attempts were usually produced by "techies" in computer operations departments. Many computer

Media Group	Key Strategic Uses	Special Challenges for Successful Use
Public Media		
Newspapers, magazines, radio, television. Also out-of-home media, yellow pages and directory advertising, venue and specialized media	Build broad public awareness	Competing for attention Promoting newsworthiness
Interactive Media		
Web sites, CD-ROMs, automated telephone response systems, data bases (allowing file transfers), computerized bulletin boards, news groups and chat rooms, e-mail	Respond to inquiries Enhance involvement through education, entertainment.	Promoting access and use Facilitating easy navigation and location of information
Controlled Media		
Brochures, video brochures, annual reports, newsletters and other periodicals, books, direct response, point-of-purchase displays, advertising specialties	Provide detailed, promotional information.	Designing attractive and engaging materials Assuring distribution to targeted audiences
Events		
Speeches, trade shows and expositions, exhibits, conferences and meetings, demonstrations, rallies and protests, sponsored events, observances, sweepstakes and contests, recognition and awards presentations	Reinforce existing beliefs and attitudes	Guaranteeing attendance by targeted audiences Heightening participation and involvement levels
One-on-One Communications		
Letters, telephone responses (inbound), telemarketing (outbound), soliciting and personal selling, consumer affairs, community outreach, lobbying	Negotiate disputes, resolve conflicts. Obtain commitments.	Delegating authority to negotiate on behalf of organization Fostering positive personal dynamics between parties

Figure 1: Five major groups of communication media. From Hallahan (2001a).

specialists—and their bosses—quickly realized that technical staffs were ill-equipped to deal with content issues. It was then that public relations units became involved. Many managers recognized it was important that online content be managed so that Web sites reflected the organization's branding, positioning, and corporate identity. Many PR professionals approached the Internet without much knowledge but soon began to integrate online communications into PR program planning.

Most organizational Web sites have gone through several incarnations since the commercialization of the Web. Between 1994 and 1996, organizational Web sites were mostly *informational sites*. Web content resembled electronic brochures that provided descriptive information about the organization. Between about 1996 and 1998, organizations recognized the value of *interactivity*. Organizations added e-mail links, fill-in forms, interactive games, and the ability to conduct non-secured

transactions. Finally, about 1998, the *transactional* potential of e-commerce was recognized. At that point, many organizational Web sites were transformed from primarily information channels to become dual-function channels that perform both communications and distribution functions.

Organizational sites are *sponsored Web sites* that are dedicated to the interests to a single organization that underwrites the costs of operations in order to promote its own interests. Most sponsored sites do not accept third-party advertising but can use advertising space to promote the organization's own products, services, or causes. Most organizational sites operate as communication utilities that serve a variety of purposes, including the needs of marketing, human resources, and public relations.

Corporate Web Pages

Today almost all large and medium-sized organizations operate Web sites to communicate and to build relationships with key external publics. Web sites are important platforms to establish corporate identity and to supply information to media, customers and consumers, and investors.

Online News Rooms

One of the most important uses of the Internet in public relations is to allow journalists to access current news releases, background information, fact sheets, and other materials about the organization. Most major organizations now devote a special section of their public Internet sites to *newsrooms* containing these company announcements and other information. In addition, news archives can be outsourced on the sites of one of the major public relations news wire distribution services, such as Business Wire (<http://www.businesswire.com>) or PR Newswire (<http://www.prnewswire.com>).

In the mid-1990s, many large organizations began to post news releases online on a regular basis. These announcements previously had been distributed by mail, messenger, facsimile, or private wire services. News releases previously were not archived electronically and were not conveniently available to the public-at-large.

Today journalists routinely download Web-supplied releases (in addition to news received via e-mail and the private wire services). Journalists can quickly transfer materials to a newsroom's word processing system, thus making it easier to incorporate supplied materials in stories.

In addition to text, reporters and editors can download other types of files, including photos, audio, and video. Photos reproduced with 300 or more dots-per-inch (dpi) can be printed with sufficient resolution by most newspapers and magazines (600 dpi is preferred). Audio actualities or "sound bites" similarly meet ready-to-broadcast standards. Because of bandwidth restrictions, the use of video files is more limited, although streaming video is being used by organizations with increased frequency. Most editors and reporters now are limited to watching streaming video for their own education, or to preview available video footage that can be downloaded from a satellite. Direct broadcast-quality video downloads are likely to be

used extensively in the future as bandwidth availability increases.

Journalists have adopted the Web and e-mail as basic reporting tools (Hallahan, 1994). Reporters today spend as many as three hours a day on the Internet accessing Web materials and processing e-mail. More than 90% of journalists use the Web regularly. Most larger media organizations provide news workers with online access, although Internet accessibility flags at some smaller media outlets. Significantly, little evidence suggests that the Web will replace traditional reporting tools. One study suggested that corporate Web sites ranked only fourth in preference as a news gathering tool—behind the telephone, personal interviews, and news releases (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003). In part, this is because online newsrooms often still lack materials that journalists want, including basic contact and telephone information.

One problem with online newsroom is that information is accessible to people other than journalists. Early efforts to restrict access by requiring journalists to register as users and to use a password met with resistance and subsequently have been abandoned. Notable exceptions are the newsrooms operated by large public relations agencies concerned about documenting usage for clients. One advantage of controlled access is to allow embargoed materials to be released selectively to reporters who confront early deadlines.

Investor Relations Sites

Investor relations is a PR specialty that has especially benefited from the Internet's ability to deliver large volumes of information on demand. Investor relations professionals produce detailed annual reports, quarterly reports, company profiles, and so on. These materials can be posted online then read or downloaded by investment professionals and individual investors in HTML (hypertext markup language) or .pdf formats. In addition, various government filings, such as 10-K, 10-Q, and other reports to the Securities and Exchange Commission, can be posted online or made accessible with link to the SEC's financial document site (<http://www.edgar.gov>).

Investor relations practitioners also can link or post analysts' research reports and electronic presentations before investment groups. Investors also can access scheduled live Webcasts or view them on-demand later, or participate in audio investment discussions (online versions of telephone conference calls) sponsored by organizations. Such participation is consistent with the SEC's mandate in Regulation FD, adopted in 2000, that organizations make information more widely available to all investors. Organizations are experimenting with the distribution of proxy materials online, and with conducting annual meetings online. The traditional investment "road show" tour undertaken when an initial public stock offering is made is also being replaced with a "virtual road show" where regional analysts and registered representatives can learn about soon-to-be public companies through Webcasts.

Consumer Promotion and Education Sites

Many organizations operate sites targeted to consumers. Not surprisingly, these sites often bear characteristics that

that meld public relations (information and relationship-building) and marketing (purely promotion).

Product Promotion Sites

A growing number of PR- and marketing-sponsored customer sites promote the benefits of products and services by educating consumers about how products might be used. Food companies, for example, feature sites with recipes, cooking and other household tips. Other sites, such as for soft drink manufacturers, feature prize giveaways and redemptions, contests, and interactive entertainment. Many of these especially target young people.

A particular genre of consumer sites is the *fan site*. Movie and other large media companies now routinely post sites about forthcoming productions. Fans can preview scenes or book chapters, download photos and music, read background about the performers or authors, play specially created games, send fan mail, or chat with others who share their infatuation. Some of these sites are grassroots sites created by fans themselves. Fan sites have become integral parts of promotional campaigns for movies, television shows, and books. The goal of most of these sites is to generate "buzz" or word-of-mouth promotion.

Education and Advocacy Sites

Other public relations sites are intended to educate the public on topics of particular concern to organizations. Young people and adults alike can learn about current issues or problems, such as the dangerous of environmental pollution or the value of conservation, through games, exercises, quizzes, and streaming video and audio. Although these sites might provide a valuable learning experience in some instances, the motives of the sponsors are often self-serving. Thus the accuracy and objectivity of these sites are suspect.

Health Sites

Web sites related to health issues are among the most popular types of consumer sites. Health-related sites are sponsored by a wide range of organizations—from commercial health care providers and pharmaceutical and medical device manufacturers to government and advocacy groups devoted to the eradication of particular maladies. Health-related sites have shown themselves to be effective tools for patient education and self-diagnosis, and for the delivery of social support from others through Web-based e-mail exchanges, discussion groups, chats, and so on. The accuracy and objectivity of information on many health sites has been challenged, however, leading to calls for self-regulation and possibly governmental oversight.

Fundraising/Development Sites

Many not-for-profit organizations have incorporated Web sites in their promotional and fundraising efforts to solicit funds. These sites capitalize on the Internet's secured transaction capabilities. Web sites, for example, allow disaster relief agencies to post information on "how to help" almost immediately after devastation occurs. Many advocacy groups also use their sites to promote their causes, enlist members and solicit contributions. Membership

recruitment and fundraising represent two applications of e-commerce technology in traditional public relations functions.

Employee Relations Sites and Intranets

Online communication has dramatically changed employee relations and internal communications, particularly within organizations in which large numbers of employees can access computers. Many employers begin by using the organization's public Internet site as an employee recruitment tool. Once an employee is hired, organizations use closed-access Web-based systems or *intranets* to communicate a wide array of employee relations-related information.

Typical public relations-oriented content on an Intranet includes employee newsletters and updates, memoranda, streaming audio and video clips on organizational developments, employee benefits materials, policies and procedures manuals, guides to employee counseling and assistance programs, employee Q&A bulletin boards, and promotional bulletins on recreational and social activities.

Intranets clearly are not substitutes for one-on-one or group communications at work. But Web sites can provide employees with quick and easy access to frequently asked questions traditionally answered by public relations or human resource departments using other media. Organizations also use intranets as part of knowledge management programs to share organizational intelligence and thus improve productivity (Weitzel & Hallahan, 2003) The advantages are particularly important for organizations that operate in multiple locations (including global organizations) and for employees who travel frequently or telecommute.

Supplier or Distributor Sites and Extranets

One of the newest forms of Web sites in public relations is specifically directed to vendors of materiel as well as wholesalers, distributors, and retailers in an organization's channel of distribution. *Extranets* are extended controlled-access systems similar to an intranet. Most extranets began as outgrowths of earlier data-based inventory control systems intended to facilitate just-in-time deliveries and supply other operations-related information to suppliers or distributors. The advent of Web-interfaces, however, enables organizations to provide business partners with a broader range of content. Examples include information on corporate developments, recognition of performance, and other relationship-building messages.

Government and Political Sites

Government institutions, individual lawmakers and candidates for political office have embraced Web sites as a way to communicate with constituents and prospective voters. Government institutions post a wide range of citizen information online to facilitate their work and to inform the public about government activities. Examples include agendas and minutes for public meetings; notices of impending hearings or rule making; enacted laws, regulations, and ordinances; forms and applications; and

basic questions and answers about government operations. Many use feedback mechanisms, such as e-mail and fill-in forms, to monitor citizen feedback and help citizens resolve problems.

Similarly, lawmakers and candidates have found the Web to be an effective tool to articulate their positions on political issues, to inform supporters about their activities, and to solicit public comments. Ironically, not all lawmakers or candidates necessarily relish their vulnerability to constant constituent challenges or criticisms. Lawmakers are often inundated with e-mail lobbying them to vote a particular way on legislation and often find it impossible to wade through the volume of e-mails received. Campaign organizers also have begun to use the Web as a fund-raising tool in the same way as not-for-profit organizations.

OTHER INTERNET APPLICATIONS

In addition to Web sites, public relations uses a variety of other Internet tools to disseminate information and to build relationships.

E-mail

E-mail allows organizations to send messages to key constituents, both individually and in groups. Broadcast e-mail lists can be purchased from brokers, drawn from organizational databases, or developed through solicitations seeking permission to send information to prospective addressees (permission marketing). In addition to text and graphical messages, audio e-mail and video e-mail allow recipients to link to Web sites to hear or view messages.

Media relations specialists use e-mail to distribute news releases as well as story ideas or "pitches" to reporters and editors. Journalists similarly have found e-mail a valuable way to seek information from sources and to conduct interviews where sources provide written responses to questions.

An important new extension of basic e-mail are *e-newsletters*, or compendia of news and information items distributed periodically to an e-mail list in lieu of a printed publication. Newsletters can be distributed in either text or HTML formats, with links that provide supplemental information. Recipients can scan the contents, select items of interest, and discard others.

Listservs provide another useful group e-mail technology where organizations can send messages to a controlled-access list of recipients. An addressee then can respond to all other recipients.

Discussion Groups, Chats, Online Seminars

Some organizations encourage the use of asynchronous bulletin boards and synchronous (real-time) chat rooms to facilitate discussions on topics relevant to the organization. Companies ranging from software manufacturers to motorcycle manufacturers encourage users and customers to come together online to discuss topics of common interest, to share experiences, and to solve problems collectively. Bulletin boards also are being employed in health communications to link sufferers of various

maladies or their caregivers. Some employers also sponsor chat sessions to solicit and encourage online discussions by employees about new ideas and suggestions for improvements and so on. Sponsored discussion groups and chats are supplemented by a huge number of user-originated groups and chats without official sponsor sanction. About a dozen discussion groups serve the public relations community alone.

An extension of sponsored and user-organized chats are *chat tours* on major Web portal or media sites, such as Yahoo!, AOL, ESPN.com, and MSNBC.com. PR representatives can arrange for clients to "appear" online in the same way clients might make guest appearances on television and radio talk shows. Publicists can book a client, then promote the appearance via online and traditional media. Clients are "trained" on how to conduct the tour and work with a ghost typist, who actually transcribes the guest's oral responses.

Alternatively, *Web events*, such as speeches, presentations, seminars, and workshops, are being used by public relations and marketing departments to educate targeted groups on selected topics. Many scheduled *Webinars* and online workshops employ real-time chats, combined with Webcasts and electronic presentations using software such as Microsoft PowerPoint. Such conferences are even used to train media spokespersons. Alternatively, events can be held at designated host sites, where participants use banks of computers in a room also equipped to receive video feeds via satellite or audio conference calls over phone lines.

File Transfers

Public relations officers for government and other large institutions can supply large files of data, text, or graphics using *file transfer protocols*. FTP permits computer-to-computer delivery of government agency databases, large reports, corporate financial information, photos and multimedia, and promotional games. Anonymous FTP sites (which do not require user identification) can be located by searching specialized search engines. Although traditional Internet and limited-access extranets allow viewing the information, FTP downloads provide savvy researchers with the ability to manipulate and analyze data to their specifications.

Remote Kiosks and CD-ROMs

Organizations also can engage in online exchanges by stationing terminals in kiosks in public facilities. Kiosk terminals normally rely on phone or dedicated connections and allow users to interact with a central system by using a keyboard or touch screen. Kiosks also can operate as stand-alone personal computers.

CD-ROMs allow organizations to circumvent the problems of slow Internet downloads by delivering large files of information on an easy-to-insert compact disk that can be played on a personal computer. Although CD-ROMs are not used extensively, CD-ROMs are ideal to deliver digital information that requires large storage capacity—books, directories and catalogs, annual reports, multimedia presentations, video clips, and interactive games. Although expanded bandwidth might reduce the need to rely on

them in the future, CD-ROMs can be reproduced and delivered inexpensively to "push" information into the hands of users. Miniature CD-ROMs fit in a ordinary business envelope or coat pocket and substitute as electronic business cards for some organizations, complete with multimedia presentations.

ORGANIZATIONAL-PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS ONLINE

Although the distribution of information is important, the Internet's more important contribution to public relations is its ability to establish relationships with users. An *organizational-public relationship* can be defined as a routinized, sustained pattern of behavior among individuals related to their involvement with an organization. Some people would argue that relationships established or maintained primarily online are less robust than relationships established through direct, personal contact. Nonetheless, online relationships can be strategically important to organizations. Many online relationships operate in tandem with offline relationships and thus are part of a total organizational-public relationship.

Potential for Creating Relationships Online

Media research suggests that some users of computers (and other media) do not fully recognize that organizations are the ultimate sources of online communications, that is, people confuse the Internet or a Web site as the creator or source of information. Today's increasingly sophisticated Internet user understands how the Internet operates, however, and that organizations of all types (in addition to individuals) produce Internet content.

Online users constitute important new publics for organizations in cyberspace, and thus have redefined organizational-public relationships and the very nature of organizations themselves. Similarly the inherent interactive features of online communications can foster interaction. This makes online communications not merely a means toward an end (transmitting information), but an end in itself (a relationship builder).

A central concept in the PR field today is the notion that public relations ideally is practiced as a *dialogue* involving two-way symmetrical communication between an organization and its publics. The Internet's inherent interactivity provides the potential for balanced exchanges, the equalization of power relationships in society, and the development of a sense of community. This potential reciprocity is readily evident in online tools such as e-mail and discussion groups. Many organizational Web sites have yet to fully capitalize on online's potential for feedback and two-way exchanges, however. In fact, organizations often fail to respond effectively to even the simplest online inquiry.

Factors Shaping Organization-Public Communications Online

Figure 2 is a useful model for understanding how organizational-public relationships are created online.

The antecedents in the left column represent factors that shape the process, particularly the motivation and ability of organizations and people to enter into organizational-public relationships online.

Organizational Factors

These include the organization's commitment to, purpose, and knowledge about using online media. Organizations have adopted online communications in varying degrees to perform different communications functions. They have also demonstrated varying degrees of expertise and sophistication in adopting new online techniques. More advanced organizations are more likely to use online communications to their advantage in building relationships.

Systems Factors

These include the nature of the technologies used by organization and the hardware and software available to the user. User accessibility to online media is a particularly important factor. As of mid-2002, only about 60% of the U.S. population had access to the Internet. Meanwhile, access worldwide is limited for various political, economic, technological, and cultural reasons. The resulting "digital divide" suggests that online communications are not appropriate, nor effective, for organizations to reach all audiences. System usability also moderates the ability of online communications to nurture relationships. Systems with poor designs, poor navigation, or deficient content are less likely to be used effectively by members of key publics and thus dissuade relationship building.

User Factors

These include a wide range of variables that users, as individuals, bring to the online communications experience. Among factors that moderate organizational-public relationship building online are a person's

- Extent of use of online technology;
- Preexisting relationship, role, and identification with the organization;
- Concurrent, offline communications with the organization;
- Motivation sought and gratifications received (e.g., whether one's purpose is to conduct transactions, interact with others, escape reality, or obtain social support, etc.);
- Skill and confidence (computer expertise, computer self-efficacy, and lack of computer anxiety);
- Knowledge of content (expert vs. novice);
- Involvement in content (relevant vs. inconsequential);
- Attitudes toward the Internet in general, including preference for and assessments of the Internet's credibility as an information source;
- Attitudes toward computing and computers in general; and
- Personality, including but not limited to cognitive ability, cognitive style, personal innovativeness; also age and gender.

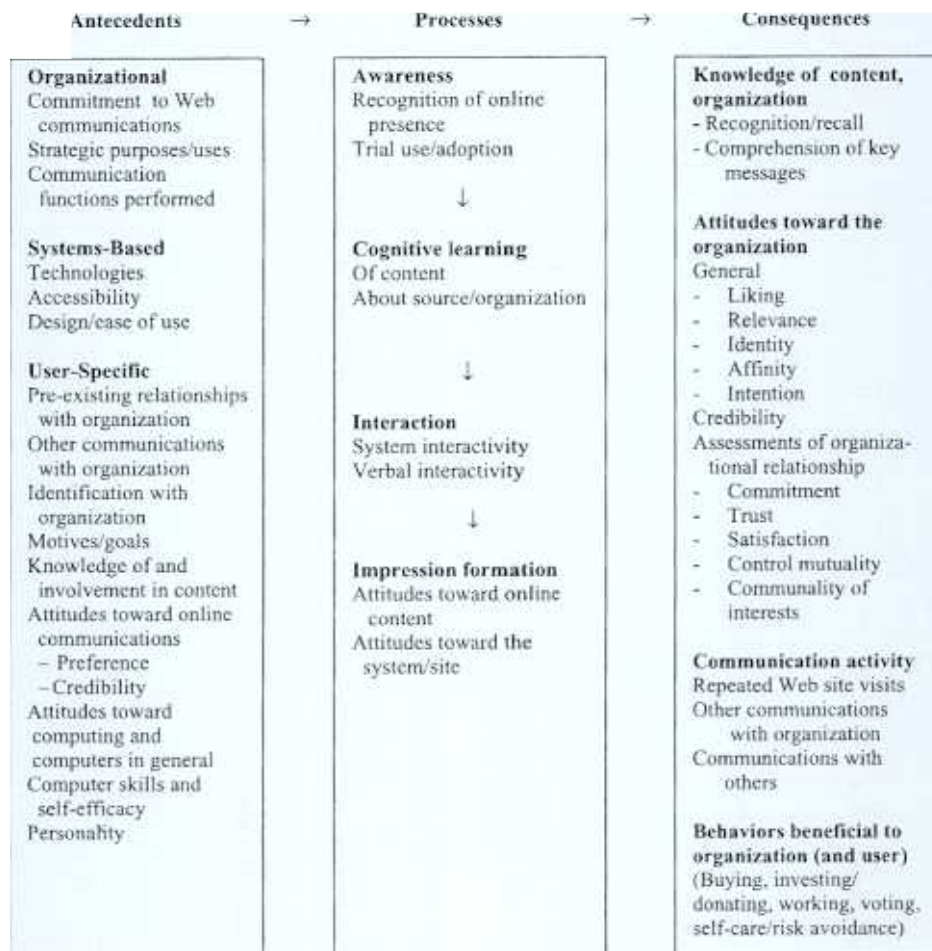


Figure 2: Creating organizational-public relationships online. From Hallahan (2003a)

Processes of Building Relationships Online

Awareness and Adoption

Online relationships cannot be created until people recognize that an organization has an online presence and actually access or try the system. Relationship building thus begins by organizations' promoting and attracting users. Importantly, many users have come to *expect* that organizations have an online presence. A person's acceptance of a new technology such as online communications is determined by perceived usefulness and ease of use—two factors that organizations must promote. Other important factors include the relative advantage provided, simplicity, compatibility with other systems, ease of trial, and ready observability.

Cognitive Learning

Cognitive learning involves processing a minimal level of content and making judgments about the content and the source.

Content learning is facilitated by the simplicity and organization of content and the system itself—the simpler and more intuitive, the better. Source learning involves understanding who the source organization is and making attributions about the organization's intent. For example, is the purpose to *tell* valuable information, or to *sell* a

product or service? Infusing messages with a strong sense of *social presence*, that is, the use of people's faces and names, will facilitate learning and relationship-building processes.

Media richness theory suggests that online communications tools vary considerably in the degree to which they contain nonverbal cues that facilitate understanding. Web sites containing explanatory text and graphics, for example, are comparatively *rich* media that provide contexts for content learning. By contrast, an FTP file containing only data would be considered *lean* because few cues for interpretation of meaning are provided.

Users are posited to develop cognitive schemas or knowledge structures for how online communications should work, based on experience. As a result, users develop expectations about content and rules for how to process information. Violations of these rules by content originators diminish relationship building.

Interaction

Interaction heightens levels of user involvement and can facilitate cognitive learning. *System interactivity* involves the ability of users to modify the format and content of online communications or messages. Hypertext and links on Web sites, for example, allow people to search for

information, to play games, to take quizzes, to complete surveys, or to customize screen content. Similarly, customization features allow users to select and to focus on content of particular personal interest. *Verbal interactivity* involves the ability to create and send messages to others. Users thus are not merely receivers or manipulators of content but become full-fledged *producers* of content through e-mail, bulletin boards, and chats.

Impression Formation

Affective responses involve physical arousal or emotional reactions. Affect is distinct from cognition but combines with beliefs to create attitudes or predispositions, including attitudes toward online content or attitudes toward on online system (such as a Web site). Considerable research in the advertising field suggests that attitudes toward messages (sometimes referred to as attitude toward the ad) moderate the attitudes formed about the topics or objects that constitute the subject of the message (attitude toward the brand). Moreover, users form attitudes toward the online system, such as Web site, referred to as *attitude toward the system (site)*. These reactions or attitudes can moderate relationship formation. A positive experience, which also might be defined as *user satisfaction*, is critical to positive relationship building online.

Outcomes of Relationship Building Online

How can online relationship building be measured?

Knowledge

Successful relationship building online results in users becoming more knowledgeable about online information or the sponsoring organization. Evidence of learning effects can include rudimentary awareness and comprehension measures such as recognition and recall of content.

Attitudes

Relationship building effectiveness alternatively can be measured in terms of positive *attitudes toward the organization* or content sponsor. Attitudes can be measured as the degree to which a user *likes* the organization, thinks the organization's actions are *relevant* to them, *identifies* with the organization, feels an *affinity* (desire to belong), and *intends to act* in keeping with the organization's suggestions. Organizational *credibility* is another important outcome, i.e., the degree to which the organization is perceived as expert, trustworthy or independent. Finally, attitudes can be measured in terms of perceptions about the relationship that exists between the user and the organization. These assessment measures used in public relations in recent years include perceptions about the organization's *commitment to people*, *trustworthiness*, and willingness to share power (*control mutuality*). Relationship quality also can be measured as *satisfaction* and a sense of *communality* with the organization.

Communications Activities

Other important indicators of successful relationship building online include *repeated use* of online sources (such as returning to a Web site because the information or experience is valuable). Effects can be measured

in terms of a user's willingness to communicate with the organization, whether through feedback online or offline. Finally, an important indicator of successful relationship building is the extent to which a person shares information or one's experiences with others—as an advocate for the organization, whether online or offline.

Routinized Behaviors

The ultimate measure of success in relationship building online is the degree to which users engage in routinized behaviors beneficial to the organization. In other words, do users' actions help the organization meet its mission or goals? Do people buy, invest, donate, work, vote, or avoid risky behaviors consistent with the organization's objectives for being online?

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS AND ISSUES MANAGEMENT

Two special types of PR programs in which the Internet has become increasingly important involve crisis communications and issues management. Both involve organizational responses to situations that originate outside the organization's control and focus on preserving organizational-public relationships.

A *crisis* is the uncertainty created following an extraordinary event. An event that could trigger a crisis be as inconsequential as a public official's embarrassing criticism of an organization. By contrast, catastrophic occurrences could include product tamperings, industrial accidents, sabotage, terrorism, or natural disasters. Crises erupt suddenly and often involve concerns about personal safety or loss. In most cases, organizations must respond quickly.

By contrast, an *issue* is a controversy or dispute that impugns an organization's reputation and often involves calls for changes in organizational or public policy. Unlike many crises, issues originate with people or organizations that make claims and seek changes (and possibly restitution) on behalf of a group that claims to be victims of a situation. Most issues are not life threatening per se, although an issue might involve potentially hazardous situations. Issues usually take a long time to incubate before they burst onto the public, media, or public policy agendas.

Crisis Communications

The Internet in Crisis Planning

Crises cannot be predicted or prevented entirely. Organizations try to reduce the prospect of problems by maintaining quality standards in their operations. In addition, organizations develop *contingency plans* for how they would respond to unavoidable crisis situations that might be particularly probable or damaging. These plans include a detailed communications component for which public relations units are responsible.

Online communications now play a central role in most crisis communications plans because Web sites and e-mail are well suited to disseminate timely and consistent information to a wide range of audiences. Indeed, these

publics now *expect* organizations to disseminate crisis information online.

Online Crisis Response Strategies

Among the response actions now commonly found in online crisis communications plans are the following:

- Create a crisis Web page template in advance and immediately substitute it for the organization's regular home page (which should remain accessible through a link on the crisis page).
- Include both the organization's content and technical webmasters on the organization's crisis response team.
- Post online the same information released to the press at the location of a crisis event so that announcements are accessible to other media as well as the public at large.
- Create separate sections devoted to key audiences: employees, customers, investors and donors, neighbors and communities at large, and government officials.
- Develop, in advance, a list of useful links to online resources.
- Establish an employee bulletin board for staff to post information. Bulletin boards can be useful for locating missing employees, spotting rumors, and tracking incidents or problems. (This system should be on the public Internet, not on a restricted-access intranet, so that employees can communicate from any location.)
- Make arrangements in advance to access or create e-mail lists to communicate with company offices or officials, as well as employees, customers, investors, community leaders, government officials, or media personnel.
- Provide for increased processing capacity during peak periods of online queries, especially during the first 24 to 48 hours following a triggering event.

Major disasters involving the loss of life or facilities pose particular problems. In such instances, communities often lose electricity or telephone or cable service, effectively disabling Internet use. Prudent organizations contract with disaster recovery services firms to operate a *hot site*, or backup computer facility. Even when loss of service is temporary, restoration of Web and e-mail capabilities should be given priority.

In major disasters, an online *victim resource center* can be created online to provide information to survivors, as well as the immediate and extended families of all victims. Links can provide help from disaster relief agencies, medical facilities, insurance companies, employee benefit specialists, and posttrauma or grief counselors.

Issues Management

Whereas crisis communications usually involves responses after a triggering event has occurred, public relations can use the Internet to monitor developments and manage its responses throughout the typically long life cycle of an issue. (For discussion of how issues originate and how organizations respond, see Hallahan, 2001b).

Uses of the Internet by Activists

The Internet has been a boon to the creation of issues by activists and activist organizations. An *activist* is an individual who identifies a problem and then organizes others to seek its resolution. Remedies can include direct negotiations with an organization identified as the cause of a problem as well as indirect influence attempts such as boycotts or lobbying for legislative or regulatory changes. The Internet provides a pervasive, relatively low-cost forum for activist groups to access a worldwide audience. Indeed, almost any group can create a Web presence and obtain e-mail access for the cost of retaining a Web hosting service and registering a domain name—only a couple hundred dollars a year.

Activists often use discussion groups and chats to advance their causes. They also can purchase or otherwise obtain e-mail lists of people who might be sympathetic to their cause. E-mails and e-newsletters pertaining to political issues have a somewhat higher rate of user acceptance than commercial messages. Nonetheless, unsolicited messages from activists generally are still considered junk e-mail (spam) by unsympathetic recipients.

Activists use Web sites to post position papers, notices of events, and reports on recent accomplishments in order to reestablish commitment and solidarity among existing members and to recruit new supporters and volunteers. Effective activists encourage online feedback from supporters. Activists also use Web sites to raise money for their cause. More sophisticated activist groups have mastered how to combine database technologies with the Web for grassroots organizing activities. Activist Web sites, for example, can feature maps showing legislative districts so that supporters and sympathizers, acting as voter-constituents, can write letters to appropriate government officials. Sample letters are frequently provided that can be sent as-is or adapted by the sender. E-mail links allow messages to be sent directly to lawmakers' offices or to corporate officials who might be the targets of organizing efforts. In addition to e-mail addresses, smart organizers also provide postal mail addresses and telephone numbers.

Complaint, Attack, and Rogue Web Sites

Activists use a variety of imaginative online techniques to press their causes. Many activist Web sites adroitly use emotionally charged graphics, audio, and video to dramatize the plight of victims and the need for action. Some activists create *complaint sites* or *complaint domains* that are intended to allow people with a gripe against an organization to air their frustrations. Complaints are posted for public viewing or forwarded to the targeted organizations. Most notable among these are various *sucks.com* sites (<http://www.sucks500.com>).

Alternatively, disgruntled former customers, employees, or investors create *attack sites* intended to impugn the reputation of a targeted organization or political candidate. A special variation of an attack site is a *rogue site* in which the site sponsor obtains a domain name deliberately intended to be confused with a targeted organization's site. For example, <http://www.ford.org> was once a thinly veiled and deceptively titled site that attacked Ford Motor Company (<http://www.ford.com>).

The registration of names can be tracked by conducting *whois* searches on one of the major domain registration sites or domain name search engines (e.g., <http://www.namedroppers.com>).

Organization Responses Online

Besides monitoring the development of an issue online, organizations can use the Internet and other technologies to communicate their positions on issues or controversies. One technique involves direct participation in discussion groups and chats, where an identified representative of an organization articulates an organization's position. In some cases, the use of a moderated chat with a sysop might be appropriate, similar to a chat tour.

Other techniques include the use of broadcast and individual e-mails. Broadcast e-mail involves the creation of a tailored list of opinion leaders and or others who have expressed an interest in an issue. E-mail provides a simple but effective way to maintain contact and to provide updates on a situation, such the status of negotiations or pending legislation. Individual e-mails can provide a valuable way for organizations to respond. Nonetheless, it is important to avoid ingenuine, formulaic answers or perfunctory automated response messages that only reinforce perceptions about organizational indifference.

When confronted with an ongoing controversy or issue, many organizations use their corporate Web sites to articulate their position on issues, chronicle their record of performance, and solicit feedback or support. In addition to providing news releases and position statements in their online newsrooms, organizations address issues in separate, permanent sections of their Web sites devoted to specific topics (such as environmental protection) or to the broader subject of corporate responsibility. An increasing number of these pages invite and post public responses and comments.

MANAGING ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations managers face a variety of concerns in maximizing the effectiveness of online public relations.

Content Control

One of the most difficult problems deals with the decentralized *control* of Internet and Web operations in many organizations. Responsibility for day-to-day operation of the system, including specification of hardware and software, usually rests with computer operations departments. This often results in the appointment of dual Webmasters with separate responsibilities for technical support (domiciled in computer operations) and content development (domiciled elsewhere, usually in a user department such as public relations).

Meanwhile, content decisions are often shared by public relations, marketing, human resources, knowledge management and other units that rely on the Internet. These units often have different objectives and priorities, and the resulting competition often leads to conflicts over content control. In particular, what messages will appear in the precious space of organization's front page?

Public relations units must be vigilant to develop a good working relationship with the technical staff. Organizations must establish procedures to ensure timely updates of sites, preferably direct updating by the public relations department itself. Similarly, PR units must be vigilant to ensure that public relations needs and objectives are not relegated to secondary positions by other organizational priorities.

Branding and Promotion

Effective Web sites need to reflect the organization's branding and corporate identity and must be promoted effectively. Many public relations units assume responsibility for maintaining Web content standards as part of their oversight of corporate identity. In particular, public relations must ensure that elements of the corporate identity system—logos, logotypes, colors, type fonts and so on—are used properly and consistently in all online communications.

Branding includes the selection of domain names when new sites are established and obtaining the rights to domain names through a *site registration service*. A good domain name should be short and easy to remember and to spell, and should communicate a key organizational message, if possible (e.g. www.flytoanywhere.com). To avoid problems of rogue sites or *cybersquatting*, organizations often purchase the variations of their domain names, including other suffixes (.org, .net, .info, .biz, etc.) and international extensions (.uk, .fr, .nz, .de, etc.). Organizations with frequently misspelled names also can purchase the misspelled names so errant inquirers are automatically forwarded to the correct Web address.

Most organizations seek to maximize awareness of Web sites by including their Web addresses on printed materials and print ads. One advantage of a very simple address is that the domain name can be used in broadcast promotions and told to people orally without confusion. Effective promotion also includes registration of domain names with the major search engines and effective use of *meta-tags* in all Web documents. These imbedded site descriptors include key words likely be used by prospective users and search engine agent software to locate matching information.

Message Quality

Beyond consistency of branding, PR units often must be concerned with the *quality* of materials that appear on organizational Web sites and standard e-mail correspondence, including materials generated by public relations and by other units. A systematic content review and control process is required to ensure consistency and accuracy of information, as well as conformity to organizational communication strategies.

Other quality issues include assuring that content is well written and follows standards for writing for the Internet. Web and e-mail copy ought to be brief, precise, and vivid because much Web content is scanned, not read completely. Writers must also recognize the importance of linking and layering content to address the varying levels of interests of users. Other quality concerns include making sure that content is accessible by the disabled.

Compliance with disability standards is required for Web sites supported by U.S. government funding.

Organizations also need to be sensitive to *multiculturalism*. Many organizations should consider creating sites in more than one language and to make language options readily available. Using a domain name with a national extension (such as .uk, .fr, .de, etc.) enhances acceptance by users in those and other nearby nations. Similarly, many organizational Web sites created by American or European designers are not well suited for use worldwide because these sites fail to take into account important cultural nuances related to the use of images, page organization/layout, and color. To communicate effectively and to build effective relationships, Web sites must be culturally appropriate.

Usability and User Satisfaction

In addition to content, PR units must be concerned with the functionality of organizational Web sites, discussion groups, and e-mail systems. *Usability research*, an extension of ergonomics, examines whether users can use technology to accomplish desired outcomes easily and with a minimum of errors.

Simple design is a key to usability. Generally, organizations err by employing cutting-edge techniques, such as animations, that distract users or reduce download time. Users should be able to locate information on a Web site intuitively. Pages should be organized simply, logically, and hierarchically. Hypertext links should allow users to find related information quickly and with a minimum of click-throughs. A search function should be included on all sites.

Among key usability concerns are ensuring that systems are compatible with the typical users' systems, speed of use and decision making, ease of navigation, and accuracy-of-use and success-of-search rates. Users must have a positive experience using online technology or communications efforts will fail. Dysfunctional systems generate negative opinions about a site and the sponsor and can lead to abandonment of site use together (Hallahan, 2001c).

Integration

The Internet represents one of many ways that organizations are deploying technology to manage relationships with important constituencies, particularly customers and employees.

Database technologies allow organizations to track transactions and other information. Database interfaces enable organizations to tailor direct mail, e-mail, and Web-based communications using profiling information.

As public relations practitioners examine future uses of Internet technologies, one of the greatest potentials is ability to provide *personalized* information that draws on organizational knowledge about the user's characteristics and past interaction with the organization. Marketers have recognized the value of this kind of relationship building, but the concept of personalization is only beginning to be applied in public relations.

Integration also includes the use of online communications in tandem with the full range of other communi-

cations tools available to an organization. For example, many organizations err by not prominently displaying e-mail, postal address and telephone numbers that can be used by users to reach them. Effective communication cannot be limited to a particular technology. Indeed, public relations communicators must use interactive media in concert with public media, controlled media, events, and one-on-one communication. More needs to be known about how these various tools can be deployed in tandem with online communications.

Finally, integration involves being prepared to adapt current Internet strategies as new devices are added to the personal computer in the online media mix. The advent of wireless telephones with Internet capabilities and other new personal data appliances (PDAs) will require that organizations adapt their online strategies and tactics. Indeed, the devices through which online public relations will be conducted in the second decade of the 21st century are only now in the development stage.

Security

Enlightened public relations principles encourage frank and open communications by organizations. Similarly, the trend toward open-systems organizations emphasizes making information freely and widely available. Organizations run risks by making too information prominently available, however. Public Web sites, for example, are one of the major tools used in competitive intelligence gathering by other organizations. Similarly, release of corporate and personal data can encourage or facilitate corporate espionage and computer hacking. This is why a large portion of online corporate information is protected within the firewalls of private Intranet systems. Organizations must constantly balance the need for user access and openness with the protection of the organization's digital assets (Hallahan, 2003b).

Legal and Regulatory Compliance

The Internet poses various new wrinkles on the plethora of legal and regulatory concerns that already confront public relations practitioners. Examples include avoidance of defamation in cyberspace and of the electronic invasion of customer and employee privacy. Other problems include digital infringement of intellectual property (copyright and trademarks) and the electronic misappropriation of people's images and words (in violation of the person's right of publicity).

Regulatory concerns include truth in advertising, compliance with rules related to political activities (contributions, lobbying, and representation of foreign clients), communications during labor disputes, and prompt and full disclosure of material financial information by publicly traded corporations. Government practitioners also must be concerned with the implications of new technology for making government records and meetings accessible to the public under freedom of information and "sunshine" laws, respectively.

Although the Internet's impact is far reaching, legislative, regulatory, and judicial mechanisms are slow to respond to changes. Online communicators must be sure their activities are in compliance with new regulations

Table 1 Six levels for assessing effectiveness of public relations Web sites.

1. Production
Qualitative assessments to judge compatibility with stated objectives; the adequacy of research or preparation, the appropriateness and completeness of content, and the production quality of messages (writing, design, visual appeal)
2. Usability
Technical configuration of the system, speed of use and decision making by users, ease of navigation, accuracy of use and success-of-search rates.
3. Exposure
Number of users impacted. System-generated data include the number of URLs or pages created, number of files accessed (hits), number of user sessions, click-through rates to secondary pages, number of unique visitors, and number of registered or potential users. Also can be assessed by examining user access logs or downloads based using domain name, domain type, or demographic data.
4. Awareness
Users' learning of content. Proxy measures of awareness might be imputed from tracking users, based on length of visits and downloads/transfers of content (presumably because of interest or value of content). Other measures include familiarity (recognition) with the existence of the site or of specific Web content, recall of use or specific content (user's ability to retrieve information from memory), comprehension (user's ability to explain meaning), and content retention (user's recall of information over time).
5. Attitudes
Changes in people's predispositions toward a topic or organization. As with awareness, length of visits and numbers of downloads or transfers provide a rough measure of positive attitudes because few people return or download materials they do not like. Other measures include the number of people who recognize the importance of topic as relevant to them, who express positive attitudes toward the site, and whose attitudes are altered (formed, reinforced or changed).
6. Actions
Effect on actual behaviors. Actions are relatively easy to measure in an e-commerce context because transactions are conducted online. Possible measures include assessing people's past actions (based on self-reports), or stated intent to take a specific actions, or actual observation of buying, investing, donating, working or voting behavior.

and must be in a position to counsel clients when others engage in activities that might be questionable. Many other legal questions and regulatory questions need to be addressed. These include the ownership and regulation of content in private e-mail and other systems, electronic records retention requirements, the legal status of electronic messages and signatures, and efforts to assess taxes on online activities. These legal issues are particularly difficult because cyberspace crosses legislative and regulatory jurisdictions.

Assessment and Measurement

Public relations must develop viable ways to measure the success of its Internet endeavors to ascertain the effectiveness of their work and understand the contribution of online activities to the organization. Unfortunately, particularly in an integrated campaign context, it is difficult to segregate measures and to isolate the impact of Internet and Web site activities from other organizational communications.

Figure 2 and the section on organizational-public relationships online examine measures of relationship building. Alternatively, six possible measures of the effectiveness of public relations Web sites as a specific types of online communications are illustrated in Table 1. Three of these measures directly relate to the site's content and use: qualitative assessments of the work product, usability of the system, and exposure generated. More sophisticated measures rely on surveys or otherwise obtaining measures

of user awareness, attitudes and actions (see Traditional Public Relations earlier in the chapter).

Somewhat more difficult to compute, particularly when responses may occur offline instead of online is the *return on investment* (ROI) of conducting online public relations. Yet public relations must address the question of how online information and relationship-building efforts contribute to attainment of the organization's goals (financial, sales, production, etc.). Practitioners must be able to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of such efforts and the consequences if these activities were not undertaken.

SOCIETAL ISSUES

The advent of online public relations poses a variety of professional and societal concerns for contemporary public relations practitioners.

User Concerns About the Internet— A Looming PR Issue

As the Internet becomes more pervasive and people become more dependent on online communications, people's expectations about and dependence on Web sites, e-mail, and other Internet technologies will rise. Organizations need to make sure that their Internet support is both dependable and responsible. Dependability involves the system being accessible to users by providing sufficient system capacity and software and system reliability.

Problems with downtime or reliability of information can create public relations crises in their own right.

More broadly, however, users expect organizations that communicate and conduct business online to act in an ethical and socially responsible manner. Successful organizations need to be vigilant in observing cultural values, norms, and mores. Among key values are respect for the individual, truthfulness, and freedom of choice. Organizations must be sensitive to issues such as privacy, accuracy, security, and the importance of giving people options for how they interact with an organization. To do otherwise is to misuse online technology. In 2001, the Arthur Page Society, an organization of top corporate PR practitioners, outlined four principles for ethical communications online that have been endorsed by about a dozen professional organizations. These tenets include presenting fact-based content, being an objective advocate, earning the public's trust, and educating the profession on best practices.

Quality of Organizational–Public Relationships in the Internet Society

Perhaps the bigger challenge is determining the right mix of tools for how organizations should interact with employees, customers, investors and donors, community leaders, government officials, and the media. Clearly, the Internet is a powerful and effective medium to communicate information, to respond to queries, to facilitate the exchange of ideas, and to build relationships.

Some organizations view the Web and related technologies as cost-efficient channels that can reduce the costs of transactions and control exchanges with customers and others. Yet as the Web and other Internet tools gain prominence, organizations must carefully consider the proper use of online communications. For example, pressing people to interact *only* with organizations online is not prudent, witnessed by the failure of banks to force customers to use automated teller machines. Similarly, the Internet makes it clear that organizations, at least from the audience perspective, can no longer *control* communications. Rather, organizations now *guide* communications involving key constituents, who are increasingly empowered to be come active participants in the conversation.

As suggested earlier (in the section titled Online Public Relations), the Internet is not a panacea for all communications or public relations needs of an organization. Organizations also run the risk of becoming slavishly committed to technology. Online communications must take its proper place in the communications activities of organizations. Misuse of the technology poses the risk of reducing, not enhancing, the quality of communication between an organization and its key publics.

Advocates point to the ability of the online communications to build community and to collapse boundaries created by time and space. Yet critics suggest that the Internet has isolated individuals by making people content to interact with others in cyberspace while forgoing important social contacts. Although the debate will undoubtedly continue, online communications are changing both structural and functional relationships in modern society. Public relations professionals and their client organizations must be learn more about the process and effects of

online communications and be sensitive to these changes in order to nurture organization–public relationships and to take maximum advantage of online technology.

GLOSSARY

Attack site A Web site set up by a disgruntled activist, employee, customer, or investor that features negative content about an organization, political figure, or cause.

Branding Development of a unique identity that enables audiences to identify an organization, product, or Web site. A critical foundation for Web site promotion and traffic building.

Cyberactivism Use of online communications by organized groups to effect changes in public or organizational policies or practices.

Cyberscanning Process of environmental scanning applied to the Internet to identify potential concerns or controversies that might affect an organization.

Cybersquatting Purchase of the domain name registration of a Web site by an opportunist who later seeks to sell the rights to a party willing to pay for the use of the name.

Chat tour Use of public chat rooms to promote particular clients, such as book authors. Guests on tour answer questions from online participants.

Crisis communications The response to an unexpected triggering event that interrupts an organization's normal operations. Internet technology now plays a central role in crisis responses.

Fan site Web sites that build consumer interest in cultural or recreational activities, such as movies, television programs, pop music, or professional sports. Sites can be sponsored by the producers or started by enthusiasts themselves. Typical content includes information, photos, multimedia, discussion groups and chats, and links.

Interactivity Ability of users to make choices, select or customize content, play games, respond to surveys, or communicate actively with others while online in real time. Interactivity heightens levels of message processing. System interactivity involves interaction with the technology only; verbal interactivity involves producing and sending messages to others.

Issues management Responses by an organization to disputes or controversies that challenge the organization's principles or practices.

Media richness The degree to which a communication provides nonverbal cues for understanding a message. Media that provide a lot of context for message understanding are deemed rich media; those with few cues to facilitate understanding are considered lean media.

Online newsroom The section of an organization's Web site intended for journalists. Typically contains news and feature stories, background information, and downloadable multimedia.

Organizational–public relationship A routinized, sustained pattern of behavior among individuals related to their involvement with an organization. Public relations strives to build positive relationships between organizations and its publics.

Public relations Management staff function that facilitates communication between an organization and its key publics: employees, customers and consumers, investors and donors, community at large, and government.

Rogue site A Web site with a domain name similar to the URL (uniform resource locator) of another entity intended to distract unwitting users; sometimes a special form of attack site.

Usability The functionality of a Web site that enables users to find information quickly and accurately in a manner users find satisfying. Site usability is a necessary condition for messages to be effective.

Sponsored Web site A site that is subsidized by an organization to provide information about the organization, its products, services, candidates, or causes, in contrast to a *portal site*, which is operated as a gateway to the Internet, and a *news site* that supplies users with information from various services. Sponsored Web sites do not charge for access; portal and media sites can charge for their services.

Webcasts Use of streaming video and audio to show a live presentation to online users in remote locations.

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FURTHER READING

Web Sites

PR-education.org (<http://PR-education.org>) A portal to public relations education on the Web. Includes several online guides to books, articles, Web sites, and other resources on all phases of public relations. Includes a comprehensive bibliography on Public Relations and Technology.

Online Public Relations Course (<http://www.online-pr.com>) An introductory online public relations course developed by James L. Horton of Robert Marston Associates, New York.

The Institute for Public Relations (<http://www.instituteforpr.com>) A growing collection of research briefs and reports related to the Internet and management issues in public relations.

Pew Internet & American Life Project Online (<http://www.pewinternet.org>) Reports about Internet research, plus links other studies and Internet statistics.

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