

# Online Public Relations

Kirk Hallahan, *Colorado State University*

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>497</b>	Processes of Building Relationships Online	507
Nature of Public Relations	497	Outcomes of Relationship Building Online	509
Traditional Public Relations	498	<b>Crisis Communications and Issues Management</b>	<b>509</b>
Online Public Relations	498	Crisis Communications	510
<b>Using Sponsored Public Relations Web Sites</b>	<b>500</b>	Issues Management	510
Organizational Web Pages	500	<b>Managing Online Public Relations</b>	<b>511</b>
Online News Rooms	500	Content Control	511
Consumer Promotion and Education Sites	501	Branding and Promotion	512
Employee Relations Sites and Intranets	502	Message Quality	512
Supplier or Distributor Sites and Extranets	502	Usability and User Satisfaction	512
Government and Political Sites	502	Integration with Other Organizational	
<b>Using Third-Party Sites: Search Engines and</b>		Communications	513
<b>Social Media</b>	<b>503</b>	Security and Risks	513
Search Engines	503	Legal and Regulatory Compliance	513
Social Media	503	Assessment and Measurement	513
Blogs, News Aggregators, and Community		<b>Societal Issues and Ethics</b>	<b>514</b>
News Sites	504	User Concerns about the Internet—A Looming	
E-Mail, Instant Messaging, and Text Messaging	505	PR Issue	514
Podcasts, Vodcasts, and Web Events	506	Quality of Organizational–Public Relationships	
Other Digital Promotion Applications	506	in the Internet Society	515
<b>Organizational–Public Relationships Online</b>	<b>506</b>	Consequences for Public Relations Practice	
Relational versus Transactional Focus	506	(Four Propositions)	515
Potential for Creating Relationships Online	507	<b>Glossary</b>	<b>515</b>
Factors Shaping Organizational–Public		<b>Cross References</b>	<b>516</b>
Communication online	507	<b>References and Suggested Readings</b>	<b>517</b>

## 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, not-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 two-way 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 not the only 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 in two ways: by providing counsel and by orchestrating communications programs.

## Counsel

Public relations provides *counsel* on social problems and opportunities that confront organizations. This counsel includes feedback based on formal and informal research 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.” A report issued by a leading organization of senior corporate communicators argued that the chief communications officers in organizations must assert leadership by acquiring and spreading mastery of new media skills, while at the same time helping corporations to develop appropriate policies and guidelines for their use (Arthur W. Page Society 2007, 29).

Online technologies have dramatically enhanced the capability of PR practitioners to conduct research, counsel organizations, and gain credibility and power within the organization. *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, forums 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 web sites and blogs and conducting keyword searches on search engines. Organizations also hire professional *web monitoring services* that compile daily reports about web site, blog, 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 organizations, 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, believe, or care for themselves or others by avoiding risks.

### Traditional Public Relations

Traditional public relations involves advancing the organization as a whole. In major businesses, this is sometimes referred to as *corporate relations*. Specializations within the field are often organized around key publics or constituencies: *customer or consumer relations* (sometimes referred to as *marketing public relations*), *investor relations* (corporations) or *donor/member relations* (not-for-profit organizations), *community relations*, *government relations*, and *employee relations*. In addition, almost all public relations departments are responsible for *media relations* (incorporating organizational and product/services publicity), which can be used to reach all of these constituencies. Some manufacturing organizations also have special programs directed to *suppliers or vendors* in the supply chain (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 normalize patterns of interaction and 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 and thus potentially threaten relationships. Organizations strive to minimize the disruptions caused by crises 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 involving others, such as social activists or disgruntled employees, who challenge 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 (Hallahan 2001a, Figure 36.1).

Public relations traditionally has relied 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. Practitioners often augment publicity-generating efforts with *controlled media*, which are communications 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 at 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 continues to be important 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.

Today 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 *engagement*, made possible by online media's interactive character. Web 2.0 technologies have been recognized for their unique ability to enable organizations to involve members of the organization's publics in dialogue and conversations and to otherwise engage them through games and entertainment somehow relevant to the organization. Online content can be updated instantaneously by organizations and accessed by users 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, from anywhere in the world where Internet access is available. In addition, content can be *personalized* to the inquirer using *cookies*, *user profiling*, and *database technologies*, and *customized* by users to suit their own needs or interests.

Interactive media have reshaped the use of traditional public relations media by allowing organizations to communicate directly with key publics. Although some experts argue that organizations have become less dependent upon public media with the rise of the Internet, public media (newspapers, magazines, radio, and television) remain vital tools when organizations want to create broad public awareness quickly. Public media also remain critical for reaching the still-sizable proportion of nonInternet users in the general population (more than 25 percent of the U.S. population and a much larger percentage of the population in other parts of the world—particularly many parts of Asia, Africa, and South America).

Interactive media also have made organizations less dependent on controlled media. Web sites and e-mail, for

**Public Relations Media: An Overview**

<b>Media Group</b>	<b>Key Strategic Use</b>	<b>Special Challenges for Successful Use</b>
<b>Public Media</b> 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
<b>Interactive Media</b> Sponsored and third-party web sites; search-engine referrals. Social media: blogs, news aggregators, and community news sites; social networking sites; virtual world sites and games; e-mail, text messaging; podcasts and vodcasts, web events.	Respond to queries Enhance involvement and engagement through education, entertainment, and conversation Conduct transactions such as registrations, subscriptions, contributions, or purchases	Promoting access and use Facilitating easy navigation and location of information Providing current and relevant content on demand
<b>Controlled Media</b> Brochures, CDs/DVDs, annual reports, newsletters and other periodicals, books, direct response, point-of-purchase displays, advertising specialties.	Provide detailed, documented promotional information Facilitate actions (such as providing forms to complete)	Designing attractive and engaging materials Assuring distribution to target audiences
<b>Events</b> 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 Prompt collective action	Guaranteeing attendance by targeted audiences Heightening participation and involvement levels
<b>One-on-One Communications</b> Letters, telephone calls (inbound and outbound), personal visits, and meetings; soliciting/personal selling, consumer affairs/customer care contacts, community outreach, lobbying.	Negotiate disputes, resolve conflicts, obtain commitments	Delegating authority to negotiate on behalf of organization Fostering positive personal dynamics between parties

**Figure 36.1:** Five Major Groups of Communication Media  
 Source: Hallahan (2001a).

example, have reduced the direct and incremental costs of printed matter distributed via literature racks, personal visits, postal mail, or package delivery services. Many traditional printed materials have been transformed into electronic publications: e-newsletters, e-zines, and e-books. Yet, interactive media are not likely to replace print communication altogether. Similar to public media, controlled media will continue to be used in situations when it is possible or valuable to “push” information into the hands of audiences in offline settings—instead

of waiting for audiences to be “pulled” into a web site, online forum, or blog.

Online communications can replace some events by creating opportunities for people in remote locations to come together online. Examples include forums and chats, and webcasts and web conferences. Although these technologies are well developed, they are only beginning to be widely deployed and their potential is less recognized.

The Internet provides additional options for one-on-one communications between organizational representatives

and individual members of constituencies. In particular, personal e-mails and text messages can complement personal meetings, telephone calls, and postal mail to facilitate and speed up exchanges. This may become increasingly more important as more people purchase wireless phones and personal data appliances (PDAs) that can deliver mobile-optimized web content as well as e-mail and text messages.

## USING SPONSORED PUBLIC RELATIONS WEB SITES

Web sites remain the anchor for most online public relations initiatives—the principal platform for information and other exchanges with key publics. Indeed, many other digital promotion efforts strive to drive traffic to specially designed web site *landing pages* where users can receive information, subscribe to an organization's e-publications, download materials, play games, or conduct transactions such as signing up for events or donating to a cause. (These kinds of financial transactions on public relations-oriented sites directly parallel the purchasing transactions possible on marketing-oriented e-commerce sites—only the purposes of the transactions differ.)

When organizations first experimented with web sites in the mid-1990s, their initial crude attempts were usually produced by “techies” in computer operations departments. Many computer specialists—and their bosses—quickly realized that technical staffs were ill-equipped to deal with content issues. Public relations units then 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 with little or no technical knowledge but quickly began to learn and 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 unidirectional *informational sites* that functioned as electronic brochures to publish descriptive information. Between about 1996 and 1998, organizations recognized the value of online *feedback* as organizations added e-mail links, fill-in forms, and the ability to conduct non-secured transactions. By 1998, the *transactional* potential of e-commerce was recognized, and web sites evolved to facilitate communications as well as the distribution of products and services online. Today, with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, many organizational web sites have been transformed into truly *interactive* platforms that enable conversations *between* organizations and constituents and the sharing of constituent-generated content (even videos) *among* constituents.

In contrast to third-party sites operated by media companies and others seeking to generate revenue from web content (also known as *monetizing* content), most organizational sites are *sponsored web sites* that are primarily dedicated to advancing the interests of the organization. Organizational sites operate as *communication utilities* that serve a variety of organizational purposes and

support the needs of marketing, operations, finance, and other units in addition to public relations. The costs of operation are generally borne by the organization, and most sponsored sites do not accept third-party advertising. However, an increasing number of sites sponsored by trade associations, professional societies, and advocacy groups defray the costs of their web operations through affinity programs with other web sites or by accepting complementary (noncompeting) advertising through advertising networks and programs such as Google's AdSense and Yahoo's Publisher Network.

## Organizational Web Pages

Today almost all large and medium-sized organizations operate web sites—and even small retailers and organizations feel compelled to have a web presence. Public relations generally is responsible for the general descriptive information about the organization on these sites (typically in a section labeled “About Us”). Media relations units typically manage that portion of a web site devoted to news about the organization, while investor relations units at publicly traded companies typically are responsible for news and information specifically targeted to the investor and analyst community.

## Online News Rooms

One of the most important uses of the web in public relations is to disseminate news and information about the organization to journalists, bloggers, and the public-at-large. Most major organizations now devote a special section of their public web sites to *newsrooms* or *media rooms* containing news releases, feature stories, background information, and other materials about the organization. Alternatively, these news archives also can be outsourced to one of the major public relations news wire distribution services, such as Business Wire ([www.businesswire.com](http://www.businesswire.com)) or PR Newswire ([www.prnewswire.com](http://www.prnewswire.com)).

In the mid-1990s, many large organizations began to post news releases online on a regular basis. These announcements were previously distributed by mail, messenger, facsimile, or private wire services. News releases previously were not archived and thus were not generally available to the public-at-large. Today journalists routinely download web-supplied releases (in addition to receiving them 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 images, audio, and video. Photos reproduced with 300 or more dots-per-inch (dpi) can be reprinted with sufficient resolution by most newspapers and magazines (600 dpi is preferred by magazines). Audio actualities or “sound bites” similarly meet ready-to-broadcast standards for radio. Because of bandwidth restrictions, the use of broadcast-quality video files by television stations is more limited, although streaming video is being used by organizations with increased frequency. Most TV news producers and reporters now are limited to watching streaming video for their own education,

or to preview available video footage that can be downloaded via 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 percent 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 and Hallahan 2003). In part, this is because online newsrooms still often lack basic materials that journalists want, including basic contact and telephone information.

Bloggers also rely on information from organizations and have pressed organizations to provide information in formats that better meet their needs. This led to the advent of the *social media news release*, a nontraditional format for news releases. SMNRs include a headline, key facts, quotes from newsmakers and/or outside experts, and links to image, audio, and video resources. Easy-to-use links also allow readers to tag, social bookmark, or rate stories using third-party sites such as Technorati, delicious.com, Reddit.com, and Digg.com. SMNRs are particularly popular among clients in the high-tech arena, along with streamlined *social media newsrooms* that cater to the bloggers by providing the same kind of information so that bloggers can write their own synopses and commentaries on news events.

Many organizations themselves now incorporate blogs on their corporate web sites as a frequently updated, more informal way to speak out on topics important to them and their constituents. This trend follows the explosion in blogging among individuals and advocacy groups, and the emergence of blogs as forums for opinion leaders. Often the chief executive officer or another prominent company official is the most appropriate spokesperson to blog. However, for a variety of reasons—including concerns about the unintentional disclosure of competitive or material information, as well as the considerable time required to maintain a blog—senior managers of only about one-tenth of Fortune 500 companies speak out through personal or company blogs.

One problem with online newsrooms and social media newsrooms is that information is accessible to everyone—not just to journalists or bloggers. Early efforts to restrict access by requiring journalists to register and to use a password met with resistance and subsequently have been abandoned. 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 public relations specialty that has especially benefited from the Internet's ability to deliver large volumes of information on demand. Investor

relations professionals produce and distribute detailed annual reports, quarterly reports, company profiles, and background materials. These materials can be posted online, then read or downloaded by investment professionals and individual investors as HTML (hypertext markup language) or PDF (portable document formats) documents. In addition, various government filings, such as 10-K, 10-Q, and other reports to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, can be posted online and also made accessible via links to the SEC's financial disclosure site ([www.edgar.gov](http://www.edgar.gov)).

Investor relations practitioners also can link to 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 (following a change in SEC policies in 2007) and with conducting annual meetings online. The traditional investor "road show" tour undertaken when a company makes an initial public stock offering also is being replaced with the "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 use the Web to target customers or consumers directly. While some organizations incorporate customer information in their main sites, many operate one or more *microsites*—web sites with separate web addresses that target specific audiences, feature specific products, or highlight special promotions. Not surprisingly, these sites meld public relations (information and relationship-building) and marketing (purely promotion) functions, and can be overseen by public relations, marketing, sales, development, operations, or some combination of these units.

### 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 tips, and other household information. Other sites, such as for soft-drink manufacturers, feature prize redemptions and giveaways, contests and sweepstakes, printable coupons, music downloads, and interactive entertainment. Many of these sites target web-savvy young people, but others focus on niche audiences with highly specialized interests, such as collectors, hobbyists, and owners of lifestyle products (e.g., Harley-Davidson motorcycles).

A particular genre of product promotion site is the *fan site*. Movie, music, and other large media companies now routinely post sites about forthcoming releases. Fans can preview scenes or book chapters, download photos and

music, read background about the artists, 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, books, music and other entertainment fare. The goal of most of these sites is to encourage *viral marketing* where users pass on e-mail and links to friends in order to generate “buzz” or word-of-mouth promotion prior to the release of new works.

### 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 dangers of environmental pollutants or the value of conservation, through games, exercises, quizzes, animations, and streaming video, audio, and interactive discussions. Although these sites might provide a valuable learning experience in some instances, the motives of the sponsors are often self-serving. Thus the completeness 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 organizations ranging from commercial health-care providers and pharmaceutical and medical-device manufacturers to government agencies 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-screening, and for the delivery of social support from others through web-based e-mail exchanges, discussion groups, and chats. 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 incorporate web sites in their promotional and fundraising efforts. 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 strategies applied in traditional public relations.

### Employee Relations Sites and Intranets

Online communication has dramatically changed employee relations and internal communications, particularly within organizations where large numbers of employees can regularly 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—and to facilitate communication among employees as well.

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. An increasingly popular application is to deliver online training to employees through interactive games (also known as “serious games”) where employees are encouraged or required to complete particular instructional modules.

Intranets clearly are not substitutes for one-on-one or group communications at work. Yet web sites, blogs, forums and employee chats can provide employees with quick and easy access to FAQs—frequently asked questions traditionally addressed 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 through collaboration. The advantages are particularly important for organizations that operate in multiple locations (including global organizations) and for employees who travel frequently or telecommute. Intranets now allow employees to work in collaborative virtual teams.

### Supplier or Distributor Sites and Extranets

One of the newest forms of web sites in public relations is specifically directed to vendors as well as wholesalers, distributors, and retailers in an organization’s channel of distribution. *Extranet* systems 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 broad 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 citizen information online to facilitate their work and to inform the public about government activities required by law. E-government includes agendas and minutes for public meetings; notices of impending hearings or rule making; enacted laws, regulations, and ordinances; forms and applications; basic questions and answers about government operations; and even tax collections. Many use feedback mechanisms, such as e-mail and fill-in forms, to monitor citizen feedback and to 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 contact or criticisms online. Negative e-mails and web site postings, similar to negative political television commercials, have become commonplace. Lawmakers are often inundated with e-mail lobbying them on how to vote on pending legislation and often find it impossible to wade through the volume of e-mails received. Campaign organizers also now use the web as a fund-raising tool in the same way as not-for-profit organizations. Online political fundraising was firmly established in 2004 by U.S. presidential candidate Howard Dean and by political advocacy groups such as MoveOn.org and achieved new levels of sophistication with Barack Obama's successful campaign in 2008.

## USING THIRD-PARTY SITES: SEARCH ENGINES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

A major paradigm shift in online public relations occurred in 2003 to 2005 with the rise of *search-engine marketing* (SEM) and *social media*. As a result, organizations were forced to look beyond their own organization-administered web activities (such as their own web sites) to venues outside of their direct control. In particular, these involved capitalizing on search engines and involvement in social media venues.

### Search Engines

With more than half of all web searches initiated on search engines, online public relations professionals have recognized that their online success is dependent upon designing and promoting materials that will capture the attention of *web spiders*, the robotic software agents that crawl the web to identify and catalog available content for search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, and Bing.

Online public relations professionals routinely use search engine marketing (SEM) techniques similar to marketers and other web content producers. In the case of organic (unpaid) searches, *search-engine optimization* (SEO) helps to ensure that web sites, blogs, and news releases will appear in the most advantageous position—near the top or at least on the first page—of *search-engine results pages* (SERPs). SEO techniques for web sites and blogs include the inclusion of *keywords*, that is, those words likely to be used in searches, in headlines, metatags, and text. Other tactics involve maximizing links from other sites through reciprocal *link exchange* and *affinity* programs, because the number of links to a particular site is an important component of the algorithms used by search engines to determine the relevance of a web site or blog. News releases similarly are routinely optimized by featuring the organization's name as the first word in a news release's headline and by including as many keywords as possible in the text. Keywords ideally should represent 2 to 4 percent of the text of a news release and should be scattered throughout the text, but also should be especially prominent near the top of the story.

Public relations practitioners historically are averse to paid advertising and thus rely heavily on search-engine registrations and offline publicity and promotion to build traffic to web sites and blogs. However, many web-savvy

practitioners have embraced *paid inclusion*, where search engines such as Yahoo! charge a fee in exchange for the immediate consideration of a new web site or blog. (Importantly, actual inclusion in organic search listings is based on merit and not guaranteed.) Some practitioners also advocate use of paid *search advertising*, in which links to web sites or blogs appear as a "sponsored link" or "sponsored result" on search engine results pages, or as *contextual ads* on third-party web sites that are part of a search engine's advertising network. Search ads are generally four lines of type, with a 25-character headline, a 70-character description, and the URL for the web site or blog. Because search ads appear as text, many users do not perceive them as advertising. Search ads are priced using a bidding system (where advertisers commit to a daily maximum expenditure) and might be a worthy expenditure to drive traffic to a new web site or blog or to jump-start a special promotion.

### Social Media

#### Origins of Social Media: Usenet Groups, Bulletin Boards, and Chats

Asynchronous *bulletin boards* and synchronous (real-time) *chat rooms* existed in crude DOS-based forms on the Internet well before the commercialization of the World Wide Web in the 1990s. However, with the advent of browser technologies such as Netscape and Internet Explorer, organizations quickly adopted forums (then known as bulletin or discussion boards) and chats as ways to facilitate discussions on topics relevant to them. These exchanges were usually conducted using forums separate from the organization's own web site, such as Usenet or Yahoo! groups. Organizations ranging from software manufacturers and motorcycle manufacturers to health-care providers encouraged users and customers to come together online in *virtual communities* to discuss topics of common interest, to share experiences, and to solve problems collaboratively. Some employers also sponsored chat sessions to solicit and encourage online discussions by employees about new ideas and suggestions for innovation and improvements. Sponsored discussion groups and chats were supplemented by a huge number of user-originated groups and chats without any official sponsor. An extension of sponsored and user-organized chats were *chats tours* on major web portal or media sites, such as Yahoo!, AOL, ESPN.com, and MSNBC.com, in which PR representatives of clients could arrange for clients to "appear" online in the same way clients might make guest appearances on television and radio talk shows.

These early initiatives have been augmented with the emergence of advanced interactive Web 2.0 programs that provide far greater functionality in how participants can interact. Examples of these social media include blogs, social networking sites, wikis, and collaboration sites, and virtual-world sites and games. Organizations can now purchase inexpensive software to run their own forums or chats. (For a review, see Pavlik 2007.) Importantly, all of these communications tools represent venues where topics relevant to organizations can be discussed. Most lack the formal structure and style commonly associated with traditional organizational communications and

fundamentally represent *conversations* in which participants are free to comment, tag (categorize), or rate their assessments of content. The impact of social media on organizational public relations has been three-fold: First, social media have created a limitless cybersphere where organizational topics are discussed, necessitating the investment of greater resources if an organization chooses to monitor and possibly participate in (or respond to) what's being said. Second, audiences have become increasingly fragmented into microsegments, which might or might not be influential in terms of their impact on the organization overall. Third, the focus of public relations activities has shifted from creating carefully crafted and controlled messages to *monitoring, facilitating, and participating in conversations*.

### Blogs, News Aggregators, and Community News Sites

Blogs (also known as web logs) are web sites devoted to sharing information and expressing opinions in a conversational and less formal format than an organizational web site. Most are operated by individuals with a passion about a particular topic, and the most successful blogs focus on particular topics such as technology or politics. Importantly, only about one-fifth of extant blogs are active, that is, updated within the past ninety days. Bloggers have taken their place alongside journalists as important arbiters of public opinion in modern society, and the viewpoints expressed by prominent bloggers are often monitored by and reported on by journalists, politicians, and other opinion leaders—including other bloggers. Importantly, most blogs operate by posting pithy, provocative ideas and then encouraging readers to respond through threaded comments. Readers can easily copy and create links to blog postings on their own web sites, blogs, and e-mails through the use of blog-generated *permalinks*. These trackbacks allow readers to easily share interesting blog posts with others—and thus tap the viral nature of the medium.

Separately, a wide array of nontraditional organizations now aggregate and repackage news from third-party media sources as well as announcements from organizations. Through the monitoring and linking of news reports, these quasi-journalistic organizations essentially have usurped the news selection process traditionally performed by the press. Examples of *news aggregators* include the news pages on major search engines such as Google and Yahoo! as well as specialty sites such as Slashdot.com, which is devoted to technology news. Some aggregators such as Reddit.com and Digg.com operate as *community news sites* whose members nominate and vote to recommend the most notable stories worthy of the attention of members. Links to these sites—as well as social bookmarking sites such as delicious.com—are now routinely included on many blogs and web sites to facilitate the referral process. Distribution of this tidal wave of continually updated information from blogs and web sites has also been made highly efficient through syndication software such as RSS and ATOM as well as *news reader software* that users can install on their computers to capture and catalog updates.

### Social Networking Sites

Social networking media have emerged as highly popular venues for web users to meet others and to share experiences, recommendations, photos, videos, stories, or personal information. More than 100 major social networking sites now operate worldwide. Although SNSs initially were popularized by young people on MySpace and Facebook, a growing number of adults have become involved through sites such as LinkedIn, which stresses developing business and professional contacts. Other SNSs are devoted to a growing array of special interest topics, such as diet, pets, and parenting.

Particulars vary by site, and programs are continuously being upgraded and modified. However, organizations can use SNSs to promote themselves through profiles (similar to those created by individuals), sponsored pages and organized groups, messages sent to “friends” and group members, photos and videos, promoted events, specialized applications and “gifts,” and discussions about organization-related topics in forums and live chats. Some site services, such as Facebook’s ill-fated Beacon, have attempted to use viral marketing notices to alert friends whenever a community member takes an action (unless the user chooses to opt-out of the service). These notices are intended to solidify the bonds among members and to increase page views on the site. Paid advertising programs, now offered or in development on many social networking sites, allow organizational members to target ads to community members based on their demographics and/or online behavior.

Media sharing sites such as YouTube (video) and Flickr (photos) are among the most valuable types of social networking sites used in public relations. In addition to providing a venue for individuals to express themselves creatively, these sites provide convenient, inexpensive, and easily accessible venues for the distribution of organization-produced or sponsored multimedia productions. Organizations of all types can use these sites to promote themselves, to create “buzz” through file and link sharing, and to engage viewers through their comments left on the site. Major media companies, for example, routinely post compressed video clips on sites such as YouTube, Google, and Yahoo!, including movie trailers, webisodes of TV shows, music videos, and behind-the-scenes interviews and features on artists. Organizations such as the National Geographic Society similarly have created their own channels and built large playlists. However, any organization or cause can generate buzz about its activities through images and videos—as long as these materials incorporate the essential ingredients of entertainment, oddity, inspiration, instruction/education, or human interest.

Numerous for-profit organizations promoting products, services, causes, or candidates use social networking sites as part of campaigns to create awareness, interest, and, most importantly, engagement. Sponsored pages on social media venues can serve as substitutes for campaign microsites posted on the Web and feature contests, downloadable music and images, games, and other incentives to drive traffic to an organization’s own web site. YouTube recently launched a goodwill effort in which nonprofit organizations can gain exposure through public service



announcements randomly interspersed across the various categories on the site.

### Wikis and Public Collaboration Sites

Similar to social networking sites, wikis or public collaboration sites allow organizations (as well as individuals) to post, update, and vet knowledge about particular topics. “Wiki” was coined from the Hawaiian term for “quick.” The best-known example is *Wikipedia*, now published in 10 languages; its flagship English edition contains more than three million articles on nearly every conceivable topic, complete with references and online links. Wikipedia’s parent organization, the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation, sponsors eight related sites ranging from a user-generated dictionary to a news site. Various other major user-generated content sites, such as *wikiHow.com* and *wikiAnswer.com* supply user-generated answers to commonly asked questions from the public. These are augmented by topic-specific wikis hosted on advertising-supported *wiki sites* (also known as *wiki farms*) such as *Wetpaint.com* and *Wikia.com*.

### Games and Virtual World Sites

Electronic games played online (as well as digital games played on video consoles or hand-held devices) represent an increasingly important avenue for organizations to promote products, services, and causes in an entertainment environment. Public relations uses of games include sponsorship of *advergaming*, which are created by game developers for sponsors to promote particular ideas. For example, the U.S. Army underwrote the cost for “America’s Army,” a popular fast-action war game intended to allow young Americans to explore military careers. Other approaches include *product placements*, where products or messages are subtly embedded in the game for a fee, and *sponsorships*, where organizations pay to provide purely entertainment games to users as a relationship-building gesture without any embedded message. (Although generally not considered a public relations tactic, organizations also can pay for *dynamic advertising* messages to appear in designated areas—such as billboards—of computer and video console games that connect to the Internet.)

*Virtual world sites* similarly represent entertainment-focused venues, but differ from online and video games because of their emphasis on interacting with others versus “winning” a competition. These sites also can be distinguished from social networking and wiki sites by their focus on playful interaction among participants using *avatars* or a caricatures created to represent themselves to others. Many virtual world sites feature graphically rich (often three-dimensional) environments where inhabitants can create their own settings, assume a distinct identity, change the appearance and personality of their avatars, and interact with others in real time.

Among the most popular virtual world sites are sponsored product promotion sites targeted to children. Examples include “Webkinz” ([www.webkinz.com](http://www.webkinz.com)), Disney’s Club Penguin ([www.clubpenguin.com](http://www.clubpenguin.com)) and Mattel’s “Barbie Girls” ([www.BarbieGirls.com](http://www.BarbieGirls.com)). Other sites targeted to adults create opportunities for brand and product placement by enabling organizations to purchase

real estate or whole islands, to construct/occupy designated retail spaces, or to display products and services in showrooms or galleries. Although Second Life ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)) is the most widely publicized, there are nearly four dozen major VWSs, including There.Com and Kaneva ([www.kaneva.com](http://www.kaneva.com)). Importantly, evidence suggests that excessive commercialism can lead to negative reactions by virtual-world inhabitants. This was illustrated in Summer 2007 in a series of shooting attacks against commercial participants in Second Life by a group of disgruntled vigilantes (avatars) calling themselves the Second Life Liberation Army.

### Other Web- and Wireless-Based Distribution Techniques

In addition to web site-based activities, public relations employs a variety of other Internet tools to disseminate information and to build relationships:

### E-Mail, Instant Messaging, and Text Messaging

E-mail allows organizations to send messages electronically 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. In these *permission-marketing* efforts, recipients opt-in to receive mailings. 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 (“pitches”) to reporters and editors. Journalists similarly have found e-mail a valuable way to obtain information from sources and to conduct interviews where sources provide written responses to questions. Listservs represent yet another useful group e-mail tool where organizations can send messages to a controlled-access list of recipients. In turn, list members can initiate responses or new messages to the listserv group at will.

An important extension of basic e-mail involves *e-newsletters*, or compilations of news and information items distributed periodically to an e-mail list in lieu of a printed publication. Newsletters can be distributed as text, HTML, or PDF (portable document formats) documents, with links to web sites that provide additional information and enable recipients to take action. Newsletters provide vehicles for regular, periodic communications, and are not considered unsolicited junk mail (*spam*) because recipients usually have a relationship with the organization and are given the opportunity in advance to opt-in or opt-out of mailings. Some newsletters are packaged as *e-zines*, which are e-publications featuring a paginated format similar to a traditional magazine. E-mails also can be used to promote offers for longer-length *white papers* or *e-books*.

Although slower to be adopted in the United States than in Europe or Asia, *instant messaging* using computers and *text messaging* using cell phones (known more generally as SMS—*short-message service*) have gained increased acceptance as a public relations tools. This reflects the

widespread adoption of wireless telephones, which are now owned by more than 90 percent of people in the United States—a bigger percentage than those who have computer access to the Internet. Text messages are viewed as more informal and conversational and less obtrusive than e-mails.

A small but growing number of PR professionals maintain *buddy lists* with key journalists who cover their beats. However, practitioners generally avoid inundating journalists with unsolicited *spin* messages (the instant message equivalent to spam). The better use of IM and text messaging in public relations involves maintaining contacts with employees, key customers, and vendors when quick responses are critical. Consumers have demonstrated keen interest in signing up to receive IM or text message alerts when organizations have urgent news or information to share. Alternatively, new *microblogging* services such as Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)) enable organizations to send short (140-character) updates to subscribers of the wireless messaging service. Use of Twitter mushroomed in 2008–2009 to more than 6 million users.

### Podcasts, Vodcasts, and Web Events

Besides text, many organizations capitalize on the multimedia capabilities of the Internet to distribute presentations in the form of podcasts (audio) and vodcasts (video). Podcasts and vodcasts follow formats similar to radio and television shows, respectively, and operate much like blogs in that they focus on the expression of personal opinion in addition to being used for instructional and educational purposes. Both can be produced inexpensively using audio recording software (podcasts) or digital web cameras (vodcasts) that can be installed on an ordinary personal computer. More professional video programs involve using camcorders or professional-quality digital cameras. Programs are uploaded to servers by producers and then downloaded and played on-demand on recipient's personal computers or portable digital media players equipped with podcatcher client software. The availability of podcasts/vodcasts can be promoted through e-mail announcements containing web links or as feeds through syndication systems similar to those used for blogs. Many podcasts feature an accompanying blog that serves as an archive of shows, contains show notes and background information, provides links to topics or people mentioned in the show, and allows listeners to ask questions or post comments.

Alternatively, scheduled *web events* can be used to educate targeted groups on selected topics. *Webcasting* can be used for audio but generally involves the one-way streaming of live video or recorded video files. Similar to commercial television stations, corporations and other large organization often *simulcast* webcasts when they distribute corporate video productions over their own proprietary video networks. *Webinars* involve online presentations that are usually supported by a slideshows and lead by a featured speaker who controls communication during the event. The moderator and attendees can view a list of attendees and communicate through a telephone connection, a web-based chat board, or both. *Web conferences* are virtual meetings where people can interact

more freely than in a webinar, by using web conferencing software. A wide range of formats and tools can be used, depending on the number of people and the number of locations involved. Webconferencing tools can include two-way audio and video, one-way audio/video streaming, and the sharing of desktop applications, files, and controls. Large-group formats can be accommodated through the use of large-screen projection systems, video satellite feeds, and telephone hook-ups between multiple venues.

### Other Digital Promotion Applications

**FTP:** Research organizations, government agencies and other large institutions often supply very large files of data, text or graphics to interested users using *file transfer protocols*. Typical applications include graphic-intensive files, financial reports, and databases that a user might wish to manipulate and then use to analyze data according to his or her own needs.

**Kiosks:** Organizations can engage people online by stationing remote kiosks in public facilities. Kiosk terminals typically use touch screens or standard keyboards connected to a central server through phone, over-the-air, or dedicated broadband connections.

**CD-ROMs** allow organizations to circumvent the problems of slow Internet downloads by delivering large files of information on compact disk. CD-ROMs are ideal to deliver digital records that require large storage capacity—books, directories and catalogs, annual reports, multimedia presentations, video clips, and interactive games. Full-size (120mm) and “mini” (80mm) CD-ROMs can be reproduced and delivered inexpensively and are particularly useful when organizations want to “push” digitized information into the hands of users.

**Digital Billboards** are electronic displays featuring animations or video that are used to advertise products or promote organizations, ideas, or causes. Examples range from modest monitors in shopping malls and office lobbies and outdoor signs to spectacular electronic boards on the side of buildings in the hubs of major cities, such as Times Square in New York. Digital billboards can be controlled through an Internet connection and thus represent a significant potential extension of online public relations, with applications ranging from organizational announcements and political campaign messages to public service announcements.

## ORGANIZATIONAL–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS ONLINE

### Relational versus Transactional Focus

Many organizations, particularly those involved in e-commerce or those seeking ways to improve operating efficiencies, view the Internet as a channel to offer better customer service by providing 24/7 access to the organization's products and services. For many of these enterprises, the Internet represents a *self-service technology* that differs little from vending machines or automated tellers. SSTs offer automated, cost-efficient tools to reduce personnel and facility expenses by encouraging users to conduct routine transactions themselves.

In public relations, responding to information queries, resolving routine problems, and processing registrations, subscriptions, or contributions are all examples of *transactional* uses of the Internet. However, 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 by 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 (Hallahan 2008).

### Potential for Creating Relationships Online

Early research suggested that some users of computers did not fully recognize that organizations are the ultimate sources of online communications, that is, people confused the Internet or a web site as the creator or source of information. However, today's increasingly sophisticated Internet user better understands how the Internet operates and that organizations (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 features of online communications can foster interaction. This makes online communications not merely a means toward an end (transmitting information), but an end in its own right.

A central concept in public relations today is the notion that public relations ideally is practiced as a *dialogue* involving two-way symmetrical communication between an organization and its publics (Grunig 2001; Kent and Taylor 1998). 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, forums and chats, and social networking sites. Many organizations have yet to fully capitalize on online's potential for engagement and conversation. Indeed, some organizations fail to even respond effectively to the simplest online inquiry.

### Factors Shaping Organizational-Public Communications Online

Figure 36.2 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 for, and knowledge about using online media.

Organizations have adopted online communications to perform different communications and distribution 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 particular online tools used by the organization and the hardware and software available to the user. User accessibility to online media is a particularly important factor. Today, only about 75 percent of the U.S. population has access to the Internet. Meanwhile, access worldwide is limited by various political, economic, technological, and cultural factors. 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 online organizational-public relationship building are a person's:

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

### 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 interact online. Relationship building thus begins by organizations' efforts to reach and engage users. Importantly, many users have come to *expect* that organizations have an online presence and expertise. A person's

## Organizational—Public Relationships in Cyberspace

Antecedents Related to . . .	Processes Based upon . . .	Consequences Measured in . . .
<b>Organization</b> Commitment to web communications Strategic purposes/uses Communication functions performed  <b>Systems</b> Technologies Accessibility Design/ease of use  <b>User</b> Prior use of technology Pre-existing relationships with organization Other communications with organization Self-identity Motivations and goals Knowledge of and involvement in content Attitudes toward Internet/web communications in general —Preferences —Credibility Attitudes toward computing and computers in general Computer skills and self-efficacy Personality	<b>Awareness</b> Recognition of organization's online presence Trial use/adoption  <b>Cognitive processing</b> Message learning Source/organization learning with organization  <b>Interactivity</b> System interaction Verbal interaction  <b>Impression formation</b> Attitudes toward online content (message) Attitudes toward sources (organization spokesperson or third-party advocate/evangelists) Attitudes toward system/site	<b>Knowledge of content, organization</b> Recognition/recall Comprehension of key messages  <b>Attitudes toward the organization</b> General —Liking —Relevance —Identity —Affinity —Intent Assessments of performance —Commitment —Trust —Satisfaction —Control mutuality  <b>Communication activity</b> Repeat online involvement Other communications with organization Communications with others (serving as an advocate or evangelist)  <b>Behaviors beneficial to organization (and user)</b> Buying, investing/donating, working, voting, self-care/risk avoidance, adoption of beliefs

**Figure 36.2:** Model of the Formation and Maintenance of Organizational—Public Relationships

Source: Adapted from Hallahan (2008).

acceptance of new communications technologies is largely determined by the usefulness of the information and ease of use of the system—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 nature and organization of content and the system—the simpler and more intuitive, the better. Source learning involves gaining knowledge about the organization 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* (the prominence of people's faces

and names) has been shown to facilitate learning and relationship-building processes.

Media richness theory suggests that online communications tools vary considerably by the degree to which they contain nonverbal cues that facilitate understanding. Organizational web sites and social networking pages that contain explanatory text and graphics, for example, are comparatively *rich* media that provide contexts for content learning. By contrast, an FTP-delivered database 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 the structure and nature of content and rules for how to process information. Violation of these rules in creating content can disrupt users' processing, diminish satisfaction, and thus reduce relationship-building effectiveness.

## 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, take quizzes, complete surveys, or customize screen content. Similarly, customization allows users to select and to focus on content of particular personal interest. Other examples of system interactivity range from using applications software on social networking sites to the creation of unique avatars and environments on virtual world sites.

*Verbal interactivity* entails the ability to create and send messages to others. People important to an organization are no longer merely receivers or manipulators of content but have become full-fledged *producers* of content. People can respond to e-mails or post comments in forums, chats, blogs, or the "walls" of Facebook pages. People can also bookmark, share and rate online content, and share recommendations about organizations, products, and services with others on various community-based sites designed to facilitate communication among members. The vitality of user-generated content is the very essence of Web 2.0 technologies.

## 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, sources and systems. Considerable research suggests that *attitudes toward messages* (referred to in advertising as *attitude toward the ad*) moderate the attitudes formed about the topics of the message (referred to in advertising as *attitude toward the brand*). Similarly, attitudes toward and attributions made about a perceived source can be instrumental. Growing evidence suggests that online communicants respond more favorably to comments and recommendations made by online peers in venues such as forums and chats and social networking sites than to self-serving messages known to have originated in organizations. This suggests the importance of organizations maintaining their own credibility online, but also enlisting and encouraging online evangelists (journalists, bloggers, and other influential third-party people who will tell their stories). It also underscores the importance of transparency and of delivering positive experiences online and offline in order to minimize negative comments by disgruntled customers, employees, investors, neighbors or others. Finally, users form attitudes toward the online system, such as a web site, blog, or game (referred to as *attitude toward the system*). These reactions or attitudes can moderate relationship formation. A positive experience (which also might be measured as *user satisfaction*) is critical to positive relationship building online.

## Outcomes of Relationship Building Online

How can online relationship building be measured?

### Knowledge

Successful online relationship building results in users becoming more knowledgeable about the ideas communicated online and/or about the sponsor of those ideas.

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), or *intends to act* in keeping with the organization's goals. Organizational *credibility* is another important outcome, that is, the degree to which the organization is perceived as expert, trustworthy, independent, and not operating out of self-interest. Finally, attitudes can be measured in terms of *perceptions about the relationship* that exist 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* (dependability), and willingness to share power in the relationship (*control mutuality*). Relationship quality also can be measured as *satisfaction* and a sense of *communality* with the organization (Hon and Grunig 1999).

### Communications Activities

Other important indicators of successful relationship building online include *repeated engagement* in online communications (such as return visits to a sponsored chatroom or social networking page). Continuing involvement suggests the content or experience was valuable. Effects can be measured both in terms of a user's willingness to *communicate with the organization* and to *communicate with others*, that is, serve as an evangelist for the organizations, its products, services, candidate or cause.

### 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 and the user. In other words, do users' actions help the organization meet its mission or goals? Do people buy, invest, donate, work, vote, believe, or engage in self-care and avoid risks in keeping with the organization's mission and purposes for being online?

## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS AND ISSUES MANAGEMENT

Two special types of PR programs where 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 potentially stressed organizational-public relationships. Both have received increased attention as potential risks for organizations (Hallahan 2009).

A *crisis* is the uncertainty created following an extraordinary event. An event that could trigger a crisis can be as inconsequential as a public official's casual, albeit embarrassing, criticism of an organization. By contrast,

catastrophic occurrences could include product tamperings, industrial accidents, sabotage, terrorism, management malfeasance, or natural disasters. Crises erupt unexpectedly and generally create concerns about personal safety or loss. As such, 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 policies. Unlike many crises, issues originate when people or organizations make claims and seek changes (and possibly restitution) on behalf of a group that claims to be victims of a circumstance. 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 public, media, or public policy agendas.

## Crisis Communications

### The Internet in Crisis Planning

Crises cannot be predicted or prevented entirely. However, organizations strive to reduce their vulnerability by maintaining quality standards in their operations. In addition, organizations develop operational *business recovery* or *contingency plans* for how they would respond to unavoidable crisis situations. These plans usually include a detailed *crisis communications plan* for which public relations units are responsible and the creation of a *crisis response team* that includes senior public relations professionals. Today, crisis teams routinely include both content and technical web masters and other online communication specialists who augment information distributed through public and other media.

### Online Crisis Response Strategies

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

- **Notifications:** Organizations should solicit employees, customers, community members, and others to sign up (opt-in) to receive emergency notifications via cell phone text messaging. They should also plan in advance how they might access extant e-mail lists to communicate with organization offices or officials, as well as employees, customers, investors/donors, community leaders, government officials, or media personnel.
- **Crisis web sites:** Prudent organizations create a crisis web page template in advance and immediately substitute it for the organization's regular web site(s) whenever a crisis of sufficient magnitude occurs. (The organization's main site or sites should continue to be accessible through a link or links on the crisis page.) Importantly, the design for crisis pages (also known as *dark sites*) should be optimized for display on mobile phones and PDAs. The same information released to the press at the location of a crisis event should be posted so that announcements and updates are accessible to other media as well as the public-at-large. Of particular importance, crisis sites should be updated as frequently as practicable to provide the very latest information. Separate sections can be devoted to key audiences: employees, customers, investors, and

donors, neighbors and local communities, and government officials. Organizations should also create, in advance, a list of useful links to online resources such as emergency response agencies, government regulators, trade groups, and others who can answer questions or lend assistance. Delete sites that might not be applicable under given circumstances.

- **Forum or social networking page:** Organizations should establish in advance an official employee forum for staff to share information. These bulletin or discussion boards have proven useful in past crises for tracking incidents or problems, locating missing persons, and spotting and responding to rumors. A crisis response forum should be on the public Internet, not a firewall-protected intranet, so that employees can communicate from any location. A pre-existing group on a social networking site can serve the same function. However, SNSs will be mostly be used by members who have already joined them; in an emergency people won't take the time to sign up or and can't wait for permission to join a group (if required). The value of SNSs in crisis situations was demonstrated in spring 2007 when students used the Virginia Tech network on Facebook to communicate with friends and others in the aftermath of the tragic shootings at the school.

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 access. Prudent organizations contract with disaster recovery services firms to operate a *hot site*, or backup computer facility. These backup sites also can provide extra processing capacity during peak periods of online queries, especially during the first 24 to 48 hours following a triggering event. Even when loss of service is temporary, restoration of Web, e-mail, and related computing capabilities should be given priority.

In major disasters, an online *victim resource center* can be created to provide information to survivors, as well as the immediate and extended families of all victims and their friends. Links can provide help from disaster relief agencies, medical facilities, insurance companies, employee benefit specialists, and post-trauma 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. *Activists* are individuals or organizations that identify a problem and then mobilize 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, low-cost platform for claims-makers to access a worldwide audience. Indeed, a group can create a Web presence as easily as establishing a group or page on a social networking site. However, most activists will also establish their own public web site and create their own e-mail capability to reach a broader audience. All that is required is retaining a Web hosting service and registering a domain name—activities that cost only a couple of hundred dollars a year.

Activists often use forums 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 and then encourage mail recipients to use viral techniques to forward messages to friends. E-mails and e-newsletters pertaining to political issues enjoy 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 and social networking 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 the Web to raise money for their cause. Most sophisticated activist groups have mastered how to combine database technologies with the Web for grassroots organizing activities. Activist web sites, for example, often feature *hot 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 cause. 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 sites containing "...sucks.com" at the end of their names.

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* where the site sponsor obtains a domain name deliberately intended to be confused with a targeted organization's site. For example, Ford.org was once a thinly veiled and deceptively titled site that attacked Ford Motor Company (Ford.com). The owners of names can be tracked easily by conducting a *whois search* on one of the major domain registration sites or domain name search engines (e.g., www.namedroppers.com).

### Organizational Responses Online

Besides monitoring the development of issues online, organizations can use the Internet and related technologies to communicate their positions on issues or controversies. One technique involves direct participation in forums, chats, and blogs, where an identified representative of the organization articulates an organization's position. In some cases, the use of a moderated chat with a sypop 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 as the status of negotiations or pending legislation. Individual e-mails can provide a valuable way for organizations to respond to comments or queries. However, it is critical to avoid 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 posting 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. Others create topic-specific microsites exclusively devoted to a particular issue. 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 and doing so in an ethical manner (Hallahan 2006).

### Content Control

One of the most challenging problems in many organizations deals with the decentralized *control* of Internet and Web operations and content. Responsibility for day-to-day operation of the system, including specification of hardware and software, usually rests with information management departments. This often results in the appointment of dual web masters 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 can lead to conflicts. In particular, what messages will appear in the precious space on the front page of an organization's web site?

Public relations units must be vigilant to develop and maintain good working relationships with technical staffs. Organizations must establish procedures to ensure

timely updates of sites, preferably direct updating by the public relations department itself. Similarly, PR units must ensure that public relations needs and objectives are not lost amidst other organizational priorities.

Outside the organization, the rise of various social media has created a cacophony of voices that can speak out on topics related to organizations. Whereas public relations traditionally has focused on creating carefully crafted and targeted messages with key messages, maintaining control over what is being said about an organization in cyberspace is nearly impossible. As a result, public relations managers—and the clients they serve—must recognize they are now principally participants in a larger conversation that is taking place in cyberspace. At best, they can expect to *guide* the discussion. Their imperative is to determine the extent to which—and how—they can protect the interests of the organizations.

## Branding and Promotion

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

Branding includes the selection of web site 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, easy to remember and spell, and should communicate a key organizational message, if possible (e.g., [www.voteforjones.com](http://www.voteforjones.com)). To avoid problems of rogue sites, or *cybersquatting* (others buying and then attempting to resell desirable web domain names), 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, blogs, and social networking sites by including their web addresses on printed materials and print ads. One advantage of a very simple address is that web site domain names also can be used in broadcast promotions and spoken to others without confusion. Effective promotion also includes search engine optimization (see earlier discussion) through the effective use of keywords in headlines, metatags, and text.

## Message Quality

Beyond consistency of branding, PR units often must be concerned with the *quality* of online materials, such as web sites, blogs and e-mail, or official content on social network site profiles or pages. Systematic content reviews and control processes are 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, grammatically correct, and follows standards for writing for the Internet. Web, e-mail, and blog copy ought to be brief, precise, and vivid because much web content is scanned, and not read completely. Writers must also recognize the importance of linking and layering content to reflect 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 ([www.section508.org](http://www.section508.org)).

Organizations also need to be sensitive to *multiculturalism*. Many organizations should consider creating web 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—and many social networking sites such as My Space—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.

Special consideration also needs to be given to the establishment of policies, procedures, and content standards related to blogs. The conversational language, insider jargon, cryptic references, and breezy style of many blogs make them an interesting read for knowledgeable readers or “insiders.” However, comments posted by readers on blogs can confuse international audiences. Although independent bloggers seldom have such concerns, organizations that sponsor blogs need to be cautious about potentially negative, unintended consequences. To effectively build and maintain effective relationships, online communications must be culturally appropriate.

## Usability and User Satisfaction

In addition to content, public relations units must be concerned with the functionality of organizational web sites, forums and chats, e-mail, and related communications. *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. Organizations frequently err by employing cutting-edge techniques, such as animations and rich media, which can distract users or reduce download or search time without enhancing message effectiveness. Users should be able to locate information intuitively. Web 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.

Key usability concerns involve 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 the sponsor and can lead to abandonment of online interactions altogether (Hallahan 2001c).



## Integration with Other Organizational Communications

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

Database technologies allow organizations to track transactions and other information and enable organizations to tailor e-mail and web-based communications using user profile information.

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

Integration also entails the use of online communications in tandem with the full range of other communications tools available to an organization. For example, many organizations err by not prominently displaying e-mail or postal addresses and telephone numbers on their web site or in e-mail communications. Opportunities to communicate should not be limited to a particular technology. Instead, public relations communicators should 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.

Finally, integration involves being prepared to adapt current Internet strategies as new devices are added to the online media mix. In particular, 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 twenty-first century are only now in the development stage.

## Security and Risks

Enlightened public relations principles encourage frank and open communications by organizations. Similarly, the trend toward open-systems organizations emphasizes *transparency*, that is, making information about an organization freely and widely available. Yet, organizations can run unnecessary risks by making too much information so readily available. Public web sites, for example, are one of the major tools used in competitive intelligence gathering by other organizations. Similarly, the 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 firewalls on private intranet systems.

New media pose new threats for organizations that did not exist previously. These range from the rapid spread of unfounded rumors to the unintended disclosure of proprietary corporate and private user data. Organizational systems can become subject to malicious disruptions and other actions from attackers, hackers, lurkers, rogues and thieves.

As a result, practitioners must weigh the tradeoffs between open and restricted access to information. Organizations must protect their *digital assets*, which now represent a critical component of their reputational assets. Practitioners thus must understand the dark side of cyberspace in order to provide advice concerning the prevention, containment and adroit response to cyber threats (Hallahan 2004).

## Legal and Regulatory Compliance

The Internet poses various new wrinkles on the plethora of legal and regulatory concerns that already confront organizations. 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 rights (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 media and 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 these changes. Online communicators must be sure their activities are in compliance with new regulations and must be able to counsel clients when others engage in questionable activities. 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 units develop viable methods to measure the success of the organization's online endeavors in order 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 online activities from other organizational communications.

Figure 36.2 and the section on organizational-public relationships online examine measures of relationship building. Alternatively, six possible measures of the effectiveness of online public relations initiatives are illustrated in Figure 36.3. Three of these measures directly relate to 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,

<b>1. Production</b>
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).
<b>2. Usability</b>
Technical configuration of the system, speed of use and decision making by users, ease of navigation, accuracy of use, and success-of-search rates.
<b>3. Exposure</b>
Number and nature of online users reached: Principal system-generated exposure data include the number of <i>page views</i> (for web pages, e-mail, wikis, blogs), <i>impressions</i> (for online ads), <i>keyword volume</i> (for organic search engine searches) and <i>downloads</i> (for podcasts, vodcasts, and audio/video files that permit downloading). Various other secondary measures are possible depending on the medium. For example, web site measures might include: the number of different files accessed, number of user sessions, duration of visits (stickiness), click-through rates to specified links, number of unique visitors, and number of repeat or registered users. Audience characteristics can be imputed based on available data such as: referring links; the visitor's domain name and domain type, the visitor's nation of origin or IP address; matches to available demographic data; and patterns of online behavior that can be tracked.
<b>4. Awareness</b>
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).
<b>5. Attitudes</b>
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 to 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).
<b>6. Actions</b>
Effect on actual behaviors: Online actions are relatively easy to identify based on records such as registrations, subscriptions, queries, downloads, comments, referrals (sharing information with others), and purchases/contributions. Other possible measures include assessing people's past actions (based on self-reports), or stated intent to take a specific actions, or actual observation of their buying, investing, donating, working, or voting behavior.

**Figure 36.3:** Six Levels for Assessing Effectiveness of Online Public Relations Activities

and actions (see "Traditional Public Relations" section early in this chapter).

Somewhat more difficult to compute, particularly when responses 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 AND ETHICS

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 Internet technologies will rise. Organizations need to make sure that their Internet initiatives are both dependable and responsible. Dependability involves systems being accessible to users by providing sufficient system capacity and 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 can interact with an organization. To do otherwise is to misuse online technology. In 2001, the Arthur W. Page Society identified four principles for ethical communications online, which 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 (Hallahan 2006).

## Quality of Organizational–Public Relationships in the Internet Society

Perhaps the bigger challenge is determining the right mix of tools for how organizations ought to 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 through conversations, and to build relationships.

As the web and other Internet tools gain prominence in the mix of communications tools, organizations must carefully consider the proper use of online communications. For example, pressing people to interact *only* with online branches of organizations might not be wise, witnessed by the failure of banks to force retail customers to use automated teller machines exclusively. Similarly, the Internet makes it clear that organizations, at least from the audience perspective, can no longer *control* communications. At best, organizations now *facilitate* communications involving key constituents, who are increasingly empowered and emboldened to become active participants in the conversation.

As suggested earlier, the Internet is not a panacea for all communications or public relations needs of an organization. Organizations also run the risk of becoming slavishly and unquestioningly 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 artificial boundaries created by time and space. Yet critics suggest that the Internet also has isolated individuals by making people content to interact with others in cyberspace while forgoing important face-to-face contacts. The result is a potential loss of *social capital*, that is, the social ties that glue a society or community together. 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 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.

## Consequences for Public Relations Practice (Four Propositions)

The impact of new information technologies on modern public relations practice is extensive. In that regard, Hallahan (2007) offered four propositions:

1. Online public relations activities cannot be segregated from an organization's other uses of Internet technology. Indeed, what might have been a distinct set of activities of organizational activities are increasingly indistinguishable from routine operational activities conducted online. Public relations must become more

integrated into the working technological systems of organizations; systems and work design can no longer be delegated to systems or user analysts/managers without consideration of public relations implications.

2. Public relations must redefine itself as a result of technology. The critical question is whether practitioners are charged merely with producing, distributing and promoting messages that take advantage of the new technology. Or, should the focus of public relations be to advise managements at all levels about how to enhance organizational-user relationships in an online environment—regardless of whom in the organization might produce a particular online message? This suggests that the counseling function and oversight (versus “management”) of reputation and relationships are even more important than in the past.
3. New technologies are not the solution to all organizational communications problems. The uncritical adoption of new media places a heavy burden on organizations with limited resources while the potential return on investment remains unproven. Just because a new technology is available—or others have rushed to adopt it—might not be an appropriate reason to pursue it. Organizations must invest in new media selectively and strategically.
4. Technology poses new challenges to public relations and client organizations. The speed and flexibility with which information can be shared with critical stakeholders is obviously an ideal application of new media. Yet speed has placed new, unintended burdens on organizations. Constituents have developed dubious and often unrealistic expectations about organizations' abilities to staff and deploy resources to provide information on demand—often when verifiable facts are fragmentary at best. What it will take for organizations to fully cope with these heightened expectations is yet to be fully understood.

## GLOSSARY

**Attack Site:** A web site set up by activists or a disgruntled employee, customer, or investor that features negative content about an organization, political figure, or cause.

**Blog:** Web site posting opinions on current topics where readers can respond and comment. Organizations can establish corporate blogs, but most bloggers are individuals with a passion about a particular topic. Bloggers have assumed a role alongside journalists as arbiters of public opinion. See *social media*.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**E-Mail:** Correspondence sent via the Internet or wireless to an individual or a group of recipients (bulk e-mail).

**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:** Anticipation of and responses by an organization to disputes or controversies that challenge the organization's policies 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.

**News Aggregator:** Independent web site not affiliated with traditional media organizations that compiles, categorizes and sometimes rates news stories.

**Online Newsroom:** The section of organizational web sites intended for journalists. A typical virtual newsroom 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.

**Podcast/Vodcast:** Streaming audio (podcasts) or video (vodcasts) file distributed via the Internet or wireless, enabling individuals or organizations to express opinions or communicate information.

**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 to distract unwitting users; sometimes a special form of attack site.

**Search-Engine Optimization (SEO):** Content design technique so that web sites, blogs, news releases and

other online communications appear in prominent (high) positions among the regular or organic listings on search engine results pages (SERPs) and are thus more likely to be selected by users searching for a particular topics. SEO tactics include prominent inclusion of keywords in headlines, metatags and body copy and maximizing the number of links from referring sites or blogs—factors used by search engine algorithms to judge the relevance of web content to a search term.

**Short-Message Service (SMS):** Umbrella term for text messaging distributed via the Internet or wireless communications. A less formal avenue of correspondence than e-mail; used by an increasing number of organizations.

**Social Media:** Collective term for a collection of Web 2.0-based technologies that foster interaction and conversations via the Internet and wireless communications. Includes blogs, community news sites, social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook, YouTube), and virtual world sites such as Second Life.

**Social Media News Release (SMNR):** A streamlined format for distributing organizational news primarily directed to bloggers. Content typically includes a headline, a list of key facts, one or more quotes, and links to image, audio, and video resources.

**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 both *portal sites*, which are operated as a gateway to the Internet, and to news sites that supply users with information from various services. Sponsored web sites do not charge for access; portal and media sites can charge for their services.

**Syndication:** Automatic distribution of updated content on news and organizational web sites and blogs to subscribers utilizing news-reader or podcaster software.

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

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

**Wiki:** Term for public collaboration sites where users can create, edit, and vet knowledge and information on various topics. Most prominent example is Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)).

**Virtual-World Site:** An entertainment-oriented web site featuring 3D graphics where users create avatars and interact with others in a virtual space. Many virtual world sites allow organizations to become inhabitants or sponsors; for example, Second Life ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)).

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