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## A Model for Assessing Web Sites as Tools in Building Organizational-Public Relationships

**Abstract:** *This essay draws upon previous theorizing in public relations (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997; J. Grunig & Huang, 2000) to outline a model of antecedents, processes and consequences of using web sites to build and maintain organizational-public relationships. A variety of organizational, systems and user factors influence the process. Users become aware of and access a site, learn about content and the source, interact with the system and possibly other people, and form attitudes about the content and system. The effects or consequences of online communications can be measured terms of a user's knowledge of content or the source, attitudes toward the organization, subsequent communications activities, and engagement in behaviors that benefit the organization.*

Can web sites be used to create organizational-public relationships?

Online communications have emerged as a major avenue for organizations to communicate with key publics. At the same time, the idea of organizational-public relationships has been identified as a potentially useful focus for understanding public relations practice.

This essay examines the nature of relationship building in a mediated communications environment on the World Wide Web, and outlines an approach for how researchers and practitioners can better understand the potential of online communications in public relations. It begins by examining the nature of online communication as an organizational communication tool. It then reviews the literature and extends current conceptualizations of relationship building in public relations. Finally, it outlines a

typology of elements in the relationship building process involving the web that serves as a framework for how theorists and practitioners might approach the study of online communications in particular and relationship building more generally.

## RELATIONSHIPS ONLINE

Web sites and related Internet technologies (web sites, e-mail, discussion groups, live chats, etc.) enable organizations to communicate with users on demand, 24-hours a day, seven days a week (Cooley, 1999; Hume, 2001; Lordan, 2001; Pavlik & Dozier, 1996; Springston, 2001; Wright, 1998, 2001). One estimate suggests that online customer-to-business contacts will increase from 11% of all contacts in 1999 to 32% of such contacts in 2002 (Dr. Jon Anton, Center for Customer Driven Quality, Purdue University, cited in Cooper, 2001, p. 111).

Some early writers argued that the Internet should only be used as a promotional tool (Seybold, 1996). Others have viewed the Internet largely as a valuable research resource (Gaddis, 2001; Porter, Sallot, Cameron & Shamp, 2001; Thomsen, 1995). However, the *relationship-building* potential of online technologies was quickly recognized with the widespread adoption of the Internet by the public-at-large in the 1990s (Esrock & Leichty, 1998, Heath, 1998; Johnson, 1997; Kent & Taylor, 1998; O'Malley & Irani, 1998). High-tech and dot.com companies were particularly enthusiastic about the potential for online communications (High tech PR, 2001; Major, 1995; Newell, 2000; Park & Berger, 2002; Weill, 2001). Rheingold (1993) popularized the notion that the Internet overcomes limitations created by time and space to create *virtual communities*. Hagel and Armstrong (1997; Armstrong & Hagel, 1996) extended the idea into the commercial arena by suggesting organizations could create communities of online customers.

Others have recognized the potential for relationship building online. In discussing how web sites ought to be evaluated, for example, Phillips (2001, p. 87) suggests "The most obvious question is whether the site changes relationships." Spararo (1998, p 10) coined the phrase *net relations* as "the intersection of traditional direct marketing, public relations and the Internet." Net relations involve direct

communication of information to audiences through e-mail, as well as using online writers to reach them and attracting audiences to web sites where information resides.

Drawing on structuration theory, Cozier & Witmer (2001) suggested that the Internet can create new publics and thus can redefine the very nature of an organization. Separately, Kent & Taylor draw upon theories of interpersonal dialogic communication to contend that the interactive features found on web sites can foster relationships through dialogue between an organization and publics. Thus online communication is not a merely means to an end (i.e. a tool for the transmission of content), but an end in itself that cements relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Kent, Taylor & White, 2001; Peng, 2000).

Researchers argue that the adroit use of Internet technologies, particularly the incorporation of interactive and user retention features in web sites, can help foster relationship building in various contexts, including advertising (Philport & Arbitter, 1997), consumer promotions (Zufryden, 2000) and business-to-business relationships (Reber & Fosdick, 2002). The Internet's inherent facility for *two-way communication* provides hope for balanced exchanges in discussions about issues (Heath, 1998) allows development of a true sense of community (Badarocco, 1998) and potentially can equalize inequities in power relationships in society (Coombs, 1998). The Internet also can be important tool for maintaining relationships in crises (Hearit, 1999; Perry & Taylor, 2002).

Little evidence suggests that practitioners in the late 1990s fully recognized the Internet's potential as a relationship-building tool, or approached the Internet very deliberately (Aikat, 2000; Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Johnson, 1997; Hill & White, 2000; Ryan, 2000; White & Raman, 1999; Wright, 1998, 2002). Flanagin (2000) found many organizations were prompted to adopt new communications technologies as a result of social or institutional pressures, organizational visibility, or the organization's leadership position in the field. Furthermore, it's clear that web sites and online communications are yet to meet their full potential. Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that many organizational web sites come up short on content and features that foster feedback (Callison, 2002; Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 1999, 2000; Flynn, 2001; Ha & James, 1998; Nielsen, 2001; Rewick, 2001; Shaw, 2002; Taylor, Kent &

White 2001). Meanwhile organizations are not always effective in responding to user feedback (Galea, 1999; O'Connell, 1998; Taylor, Kent & White, 1998; Weber, 1996).

Contradictory evidence exists about the potential to create online relationships. Kraut, Lundmark, Patterson, Kieser, Mukopadhyay & Scherlis (1998) launched an ongoing debate when they reported early research findings showing that Internet uses reduces social involvement. Generally, the imposition of technology has been shown to threaten the quality of close interpersonal relationships (Barnes, Dunn & Glynn, 1999; Lea and Spears, 1995). However, Parks (1996) suggested that computer-mediated communication can enhance commitment, interdependence and understanding between parties. Other research suggests the imposition of online communications actually can form structural bonds that link individuals and strengthen existing commercial relationships between individuals and organizations (Steinfeld, Kraut & Plummer, 1996). [See footnote 15 for a review of the contradictory findings concerning relationships in online chats.]

Meanwhile, organizations are turning to technology with increased frequency as a tool to enhance relationships. Sisodia and Wolfe (2000, p. 526) describe a shift under way in the information technology field away from emphasizing *information management* to focusing on *relationship management*. These authors view new media technologies as “an agent of surrogacy” to be enlisted to help organizations recreate the operating styles of yesterday when organizations diligently cultivated individual relationships. Technology is being used by organizations to establish dialogue (Sisodia & Wolfe, 2001, pp. 551), to become more intimate with customers (Barnes, 2001; Gordon 1998; Treacy & Wiersemsa, 1993), and to create community (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997).

Early research in public relations pertaining to the Internet examined relationship building indirectly by interviewing practitioners about organizational strategy (Hill & White, 2000; Johnson, 1997; White & Ramen, 1999) and by content analyzing the presence of relationship-building components in web sites (Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 200; Ho, 1997; Hoffman & Novak, 1995; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Liu, 1997; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001; Park & Berger. 2002, n.d.; Vattyan & Lubbers, 1999). Other research has focused on the role of web sites in fostering culture and organizational effectiveness

(Murgolo-Poore, Pitt & Ewing, 2002) and relations with journalists (Callison, 2002; Hachigian & Hallahan, in press; Middleberg & Ross, 2002). More recently, researchers have begun to examine relationship building impact of web sites directly. Len-Rios (2002; Len-Rios & Cameron, 2001; 2002) used rules theory to demonstrate that effective relationships are contingent upon web sites following rules that meet user expectations. She found that compliance with expectations is a necessary condition for creating an effective online relationship. Meanwhile, Jo and Kim (2002; Jo, Kim & Jeong, 2001) showed the importance of interactivity on relationship building, but found that inclusion of multimedia elements are not essential.

One of the pressing questions for public relations researchers and practitioners pertains to the *quality* of relationships that can be created on a web site or online in general. If it is assumed that organizational-public relationships operate at a lower threshold than face-to-face or other person-to-person interactions, relationships primarily established or maintained online probably will be more limited and weaker than other kinds of multiplex relationships. Nonetheless, the creation of even a weak relationship might be beneficial.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL-PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS**

Understanding relationships has been suggested as a framework for theory and research in public relations (Ferguson, 1984), for conducting applied research (Broom & Dozier, 1990), for dealing with customers (McKenna, 1990), and for understanding how organizations negotiate and manage their external environments (Botan, 1992, 1997). Establishing quality relationships also has been delineated as the basis for excellence in the field (Grunig, Grunig & Ehling, 1992, p. 86) and for defining the field itself (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994; Hutton, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

### **Previous Public Relations Research on Relationships**

Broom, Casey & Ritchey (1997) provided the catalyst for the current interest in the *relationship* construct when they synthesized the academic literature to identify *antecedents*, *processes* and *consequences* of organizational-public relationships. Grunig & Huang (2000) later recast ideas developed

in the IABC-sponsored Excellence Study (Grunig, 1992) to fit Broom et al.'s three-phase model, labeling their parallel components *situational antecedents*, *maintenance strategies*, and *relationship outcomes*. Whereas Broom, Casey & Ritchey (1997, 2000) focused on relationships as a *state* that exists between an organization and publics, Grunig and Huang (2000) emphasized relationships as a *process*. Indeed, relationships can be examined from both perspectives.

Four principal programs of relationship research have ensued. Grunig & Huang's relational outcomes were represented in six benchmark measurements developed by Hon and Grunig (1999). Huang also adapted and extended the scale for use in Eastern cultures in a study of conflict and relationships involving government (Huang, 2000). Separately, Ledingham and Bruning (2000) spearheaded a program of applied community- and customer-based research that differentiated between three different types of relationship scales: *professional*, *community* and *personal*. Their research shows that positive relationships can serve a variety of purposes, including the retention of customers in the banking and telephone industries and students in a college (Bruning, 2002). Finally, Kim (2002; Kim & Jo, 2002) launched a separate research program focused on customer applications that incorporated the role of reputation and loyalty. Their previously cited work on web sites uses their same measures.

Despite the construct's potential usefulness, researchers have yet to adequately define *organizational-public relationship*. Bruning and Ledingham (1999, p. 160), for example, defined an organizational-public relationship as the "state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and other cultural well-being of the other entity." In a postscript to their seminal 1997 article, Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000, p. 18) explain that organizational-public relationships are "represented by patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange and linkage between an organization and its publics." The authors go on to suggest these patterns have properties that are "distinct from the identities, attributes and perceptions of the individuals and the social collectivities in the relationships" (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 2000, p. 18).

Contrary to Broom, Casey & Ritchey's (2000) admonition, other researchers have defined relationships in terms of *perceptions* by one of the parties (usually the public) of the other (usually the

organization). Huang (2000), for instance, defines organizational-public relationships specifically as the degree to which an organization and public trust one another, agree on who has the rightful power to influence the other, experience satisfaction with one another, and are committed to one another. Kim (2002, p. 804) justifies this approach based upon the use of perceptions in interpersonal relationships research. Hon & Grunig (1999) note that other methods of assessing relationships are possible: coorientation research, studies comparing gaps in perceptions, and third-party evaluations. Hon & Grunig (1999, p. 16) add the study of perceptions "... does not observe or measure a relationship *per se*, but a researcher can learn a lot by starting there."

Most research to date has concentrated on the development of valid and reliable measures of perceptual constructs deemed appropriate indicators of relationship quality. In all four of the principal streams of investigation, the researchers concur that perceptions of organizational *trustworthiness* and *commitment* are critical in relationships (although Kim and Jo later found commitment highly correlated with trust and suggested the two might be combined). *Satisfaction* with organizational performance is a component of three of the sets of criteria, while *control mutuality* and organizational *involvement* were on two of the researchers' lists. Notably, satisfaction, commitment and trustworthiness also have been identified as foundations for marketing relationships (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999) Other indicators of relationships include the presence of *communal* versus *exchange relationships*, *investment*, *face- and favor-saving gestures*, *reputation* and *loyalty*.

In examining the research to date, more needs to be done to understand how relationships are formed, including the role of communication. For example, Broom, Casey & Ritchey (1997, 2000) refer to the importance of the "communication linkage" and suggest that relationships are created through exchanges, transactions, communications and other interconnected activities. Grunig & Huang (2000) also discussed communication as *maintenance strategies* used by organizations. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) argued that communication is a strategic tool for achieving relationship management goals. Wilson (1994, p. 63) states that the purpose of public relations "is to facilitate positive communication between an organization and its publics (and) that requires building relationships."

## A REDEFINITION OF ORGANIZATIONAL-PUBLIC RELATIONS

The approach outlined in this essay departs significantly from previous theorizing in public relations about relationships to focus on the relationship building process (rather than measures) and by suggesting that the study of relationships now turn to specific techniques or tools that might be used by practitioners. To be of practical value, practitioners need to know how relationships are formed, maintained and assessed. The use of media is of particular relevance to organizations, which must rely upon an array of different communications tools--public media, controlled media, interactive media, events and one-on-one communications--to create public relationships (Hallahan, 2001a). Although Toth's (2000) focus was on interpersonal communications, this approach is consistent with Toth's argument that communication is at the core of the relationship process.

This study positions the study of web sites within the context of relationship building in public relations, but also the field of *social informatics*, or the study of the social aspects of computerization. Social informatics examines influences on how people work with technology and in turn their social relationships (Preece, 2001).

Although a relationship is, in fact, a relational term (Chaffee, 1991) that can be examined by incorporating the efforts and responses of both parties to engage in a meaningful relationship, such an approach defies easy operationalization.<sup>1</sup> This researcher concurs with the focus that has been placed on measuring relationships from the perspective of individuals because it is the individual in an organizational-public relationship that really matters. Although organization's can develop mission statements, goals and objectives, strategies and tactics that strive to foster positive relationships, it is the individual who ultimately decides whether to enter into and to remain in a relationship with an

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, no studies have been conducted that have examined potential benchmarks of a relationship--such as trust, commitment, control mutuality, satisfaction, and communal relationship-- from the perspective of the organization. In part, this is because large complex organizations can possess only the most generalized approaches to relationship building and maintenance (as stated in mission or vision statements or in periodic statements of corporate philosophy). In practice, however, the actions of organizations and the attitudes of the agents who act on the organization's behalf reflect divergent relational approaches. Moreover, an organization's relational attitudes toward publics--such as trust, commitment, control mutuality and satisfaction--will be different for different constituencies and individuals. Organizations—for good reasons—do not treat all publics and members of those publics equally.



organization. This essay departs from previous approaches by arguing that prior efforts to define organizational-relationships have been too narrow--driven by the desire to develop snapshot measures using surveys based on perceptual assessments of organizational performance. In fact, a relationship is a more complex construct that must take into account the full gamut of *psychological processes at work within individuals*. Public relations researchers need to broaden their approach to measuring relationship quality.

In this vein, organizational-public relationships ought to be defined as the *routinized, sustained patterns of behavior by individuals related to their involvement with an organization*.

The elements of this definition merit elaboration.

Behavior refers to what a person *knows* and *feels* and *does*—incorporating the *cognitive, affective*, and *conative* dimensions of behavior found in the psychology literature. To date, public relations researchers have focused entirely on people's attitudes and assessments of organizations. Recent theorizing by Donaldson & O'Toole (2000, 2002, p. 102) suggests that relationships are multidimensional and can be categorized based both perceptions and actions.<sup>2</sup>

Routine suggests that these behaviors are part of everyday life and not necessarily planned or contemplated (Duck & Pittman, 1994).<sup>3</sup> Organizations are often more interested in seeking out organizational-public relationships, and people are less concerned because these relationships serve special purposes and represent only narrow dimensions of their lives. By comparison to people's other

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<sup>2</sup> Donaldson and O'Toole's typology suggests relationships can be high or low in *beliefs* in the relationship and in the kinds of *actions* taken. The resulting typology include *bilateral* relationships (high social belief, high economic action), *opportunistic* relationships (low social belief, low economic action), *recurrent* relationships (high social belief, but infrequent action) and dominant or hierarchical or *dominant* relationships where high levels of action are demanded by one partner of the other while social beliefs are low.

<sup>3</sup> Duck and Pittman (1994, p. 692) suggest that *relationshiping* involves: 1) information gathering, 2) negotiation of the relationship form, 3) maintenance of relationships in a social net, 4) processing of information relative to knowledge of relational objectives and norms, 5) changes in communications due to the passage of time 6) and coping with errors, moods and changes in life purposes

relationships, such as family and friends, organizational-public relationships involve *weak* ties<sup>4</sup> and can involve a variety of different types of bonds.<sup>5</sup>

Sustained denotes that behaviors are repeated (Czepiel, 1990, p. 15) and maintained as long as the benefits derived from a relationship are deemed *sufficient*. Organizational-relationships are established by organizations to manage their dependency on external resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) or because such relationships are more efficient than market mechanisms (Williamson, 1985).<sup>6</sup> Both organizations and publics will exit relationships if the perceived benefits do not exceed the perceived costs (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959; Blau, 1964). While relationships are generally beneficial, not all publics important to an organization will have or even desire a long-term relationship with it (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997; Botan, 1997; Hallahan, 1999a). Organizations establish and sustain relationships with a continuously changing base of individuals through a series of stages that include 1) access, 2) exchange, 3) mutuality, and 4) supportive behaviors (Caution: biz relationships..., 2001).<sup>7</sup> Importantly, individuals generally control the decision to remain in a relationship.<sup>8</sup> Their decision can be moderated by various psychological and sociological variables that have not been recognized in public relations. These include: variety-seeking or

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<sup>4</sup> Wellman and Guila (1999; Preece 2001) contend that relationships can be either strong or weak, and that weak ties can be valuable. Weak ties exist primarily for information exchange, making new contacts, and becoming aware of new ideas and are relatively easy for individuals to maintain.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon (1998) suggests at least seven types of bonds exist in relationships involving organizations: structural, brand equity, attitudinal, personal, information and control, value, and zero option bonding

<sup>6</sup> Organizations incur costs in establishing relationships. These include *investment costs* (prospecting, identifying needs, modifying offers, monitoring performance and *opportunity costs* (foregone relationships with other customers, resisted or failed relationships (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Other models of stages in relationship formation, maintenance and termination have been suggested. . Gordon (1998) suggests, for example, that customers progress through a series of relations—from prospect, tester, shopper, account, and patron to advocate (p. 100-102). Tomlinson (2000) cites Knapp's (1978) stair-step model that suggests interactions involve initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, bonding, differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating. Wilson (2000) suggests the process includes selection, defining purpose, setting boundaries, creating relationship value, and relationship maintenance. Ledingham suggests 5 phases of coming together as: introducing, exploring, escalating, assimilating and fidelity. The coming apart process involves contrasting, spiraling, idling, evading and discontinuance.

<sup>8</sup> In the case of buyers and sellers, Dywer, Schurr & Oh (1987) point out that some relationships are seller maintained, some buyer maintained, and some bilaterally maintained. Although many relationships are formed because of a commitment (*dedication-based relationships*), others continue because alternatives are not available or too costly (*constraint-based relationships*) (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997).

satiation, the availability of superior alternatives, a striving for independence/freedom of choice, a need for privacy, avoidance of conflict, and high exit barriers that foster resentment (Hennig-Tharau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2000; for a review of other variables, see Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995).

Involvement pertains to exposure to and to all forms of interaction with an organization. This approach follows Vasquez's (1994) argument that organizational-public relationships should be defined as the *linkage* between organizations and publics. Importantly, organizational-public relationships differ from interpersonal relationships. Organizations are what Coleman (1982) calls *unnatural persons* whereas people are *natural* persons. Although organizations strive to create *personas* and speak with a *voice*, a person's expectations about organizational behavior differ from expectations about other individuals. Relationships with organizations are often limited in scope and for specific purposes (usually *exchange relationships* versus *communal relationships*; Hon & Grunig, 1999). As a result, people often have different expectations and attribute the motives of organizations differently than they do in relationships with people. The newsletter *pr reporter* suggests people remain at arm's length because of latent mistrust, want to define the relationship on their own terms, and desire the relationship to be friendly, service-oriented and unobtrusive (Caution: biz relationships..., 2001). Thus, many organizational-public relations are asymmetric and involve people with only low levels of involvement (Hallahan, 1999a). Organizations have an advantage in many relationships with individuals because of their ability to control the nature and terms of the exchanges involved and their ability to control much of the constitutive communication that creates the relations (Shotack, 1977). Importantly, public relations is *not* the only unit responsible for relationship building in most organizations. Marketing, sales, operations and various other units are also involved in creating organizational relationships (Copulsky & Wolf, 1990; Goonross, 1991).

### **MODEL FOR ASSESSING ORGANIZATION-PUBLIC RELATIONS ON THE WEB**

Against this backdrop, this essay outlines a model for how public relations theorists and practitioners might conceptualize online communications as a particular form of relationship building. In

so doing, it borrows and extends the framework suggested by Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997) and Grunig and Huang (2000) by identifying the *antecedents*, *processes* and *consequences* of web site use. The model is summarized in Fig. 1.

--Figure 1 about here--

## ANTECEDENTS: FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE WEB SITE USE

In focusing on a particular tool of relationship building, it is necessary to identify particular variables that will influence the general relationship building process. These will vary considerably based on the tool under analysis. In the case of web sites, these include organizational, systems and user factors.

### Organizational Factors

**Organizational commitment to technology.** Web sites provide the ability to communicate with publics 24-hours-a-day, seven days a week, virtually anywhere in the world where Internet access is available. Importantly, organizations can choose whether to use this option at all. Some organizations are highly committed to the web and have invested significant resources to creating a web presence, while others have adopted a more measured approach.

**Strategic purposes.** Some organizations now rely upon web sites as their *exclusive* contact with key publics (e.g. dot-com companies), while others use online communications as part of *integrated* media mix to achieve organizational objectives. Organizations can use the web as a distribution channel, a service channel or an information channel. (see also McNaughton, 2001). Berger and Park's (2000) survey of public relations practitioners suggests that *efficiency* benefits (cost effectiveness, speed, and expanded options) and *control* benefits to the organization (bypassing media gatekeepers, enhancing surveillance capabilities, capturing user data, monitoring stakeholder activities) are as equally important to organizations as the relationship building benefits that might accrue. Thus, the philosophy adopted by an organization very much can influence the effectiveness of the web as a relationship building tool.

**Communication content functions** Hallahan (2001a) proposed that interactive media are especially useful when employed by organizations to a) respond to inquiries from users, and b) heighten

the levels of a user's involvement by taking advantage of the interactivity inherent in web sites. The adroit deployment of web sites to respond to queries and heighten involvement thus can enhance relationship building, whereas the misdirected use, such as to merely create broad public awareness, will dampen effectiveness.

Organizational-public relationship building through web sites can be facilitated by creating content that people will view, listen to, react to, or interact with. These messages can vary in terms of their content, including their relevance, timeliness, completeness, accuracy, and complexity.<sup>9</sup>

### Systems Factors

**Technologies—Hardware and Software.** Web sites generally involve the integrated presentation of text, image and audio files with varying levels of sophistication. The relationship building potential of web sites will be moderated by the types of technologies employed by site sponsors as well as the hardware and software technologies available to users. In addition, web sites can incorporate a variety of tools that are especially valuable in relationship building, including e-mail, discussion groups, and bulletin boards. *Media richness theory* suggests that media technologies also vary based on the quantity and quality of non-verbal cues that can be carried in the medium (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986; Trevino, Lengel & Daft, 1987). Web sites featuring multimedia (photos, streaming video, audio, etc.) in addition to text are comparatively rich and thus can contribute to relationship building if used appropriately (Jo & Kim, 2002; King & Xia, 1999).

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<sup>9</sup> Online communication's unique features lend themselves to organizational-public relationship building probably more than any other form of mediated communication. However, it should be argued that *any* form of communication is used to foster relationships—whether in interpersonal or mediated forms. The nature of those relationships, and the processes used to create them, will simply differ. This argument is consistent with tenets of *medium theory*, which suggest that technological nature of every communication medium determines both the process and content of communications. McLuhan (1964) suggested that media represent "extensions" of people's nervous systems that connect them to world. Media serve as filters for how they experience the world. This is probably even truer for online communications than the broadcast media about which McLuhan wrote.

**Access and Extent of Use.** The extent of web use by individuals remains a critical issue. User adoption of the World Wide Web remains fragmentary, despite exponential growth in the past decade. Today, users represent less than two-thirds of the U.S. population (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2001). Access around the world is further limited for various political, economic, technological and cultural reasons (Franda, 2002). For certain audience groups, such as working professionals, the Internet is a viable--and perhaps preferred--communications conduit. However, the limited penetration and skewed user profile (the "digital divide") continues to limit the web's value as a universal relationship building tool for organizations that are trying to reach out to poorer, less literate, less computer-savvy individuals or individuals in lesser-developed nations.

**Design/ease of use.** Web sites vary considerably based on their functionality or usability, or the degree to which the technology can be used easily and satisfactorily. Usability thus moderates a web site's potential relationship building capability. Functional web sites must be simple and intuitive, thus enhancing a user's speed and success when locating information or communicating (Hallahan, 2001b).

### **User Factors**

**Pre-existing relationships and attitudes toward organization.** Among the many user factors that will influence online relationship building is the already-existing relationship between an individual and organization, including the individual's knowledge, attitudes and past actions. These relationships can range from formal and structured (based on contracts, employment, memberships, other commitments, etc.) to informal and unstructured (such as a mere familiarity based upon publicity or advertising exposure). Individuals who are already knowledgeable and favorably predisposed toward an organization are more likely to access an organization's web site. Particularly important is an individual's perception about the *credibility* of the organization as information source, i.e. whether the organization is perceived as *expert* (knowledgeable, competent), *trustworthy* (acts consistently, dependably) and *independent* (acts objectively, without regard to self-interest).

**Prior/concurrent Communications.** The effectiveness of a web site will be moderated by the frequency, quality and recency of other contacts with the organization. Individuals who have come into

contact with an organization offline are more likely to respond favorably to the web site experience—as long as their expectations are met. (A special case might be where a user established a relationship with an organization exclusively online. However, as the recent experience of the dot-com merchandisers has demonstrated, users are more likely to solidify relationships with organizations when they have multiple points of contact.)

**Identification with organization/self-identity.** Closely related to the prior relationship is the degree to which is an individual knowingly *identifies* with the organization. Identification can involve whether the person recognizes that he or she is a *stakeholder* in the organization, i.e. the organization's actions can impact on his or her life. More specifically, identification can be based on the individual recognizing that he or she has a *role* in the organization, such as an employee, customer, investor, donor, neighbor or government official. Identification also can be based on *personal interest* in the organization and what it does (such as musician interested in the symphony). Perhaps the highest level of identification involves developing one's sense of *self* in terms of their relationship to an organization or community, such as a baseball fan (Civin, 2000; Hickman & Kuhn, 1956; Josselson, 1992; Wood 1995).

**User orientations and goals.** Users are drawn to web sites by different motives or purposes and seek different gratifications (Springston, 2001). To the degree a user's needs or interests are met online, organization-public relationships can be solidified. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) suggest that one or more of five key motives drives Internet use: interpersonal utility, the passing of time, information seeking, convenience and entertainment. Armstrong and Hagel (1996) suggest that online communities are organized 1) to conduct transactions, 2) to interact with others with similar interests, c) to escape reality through fantasies or the creation of alternative personas, or 4) to obtain social support from others who have encountered similar life experiences. Gollwitzer (1996) uses the psychological construct of *mind set* to explain online use. Goal-oriented users focus on collecting or processing information (*deliberative mind-set*) or facilitating actions once a decision has been made (*implemental mind-set*). By contrast, experiential users strive to satisfy their curiosity (*exploratory mind-set*) or merely focus on the pleasurable sensory elements (*hedonic mind-set*).

**Users' knowledge of and involvement in content.** A critical factor that influences the relationship-building potential of a web is how an individual relates to a site's content. In addition to having different motives, users vary based upon knowledge about the content and their motivation to process it. In terms of knowledge, users can range from experts to novices. *Experts* are able to understand complex ideas and terms, while *novices* depend on peripheral and heuristic cues on a site to guide them through understanding. In a similar way, users vary based on their involvement and will exert varying degrees of effort to process information. Individuals for whom information is highly relevant or important will dwell on content and spend time effortfully and systematically to find desired information, while less involved individuals require quick easy answers (Chaiken, 1980; Hallahan, 1999a, 1999b; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

**Attitudes toward web sites in general.** Research on attitudes toward the Internet suggests that perceptions related to source preference and credibility vary. Preference involves perceptions about web sites as a desired way to achieve a particular goal or task, compared to other ways, such as dealing with a real person in the phone, in person or by letter. Research suggests that preference for and satisfaction with other self-service technologies is highest when the technology helps users solve a problem or offers a relative advantage compared to other ways of obtaining the same benefit (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree & Bitner, 2000; see also Barnes, Dunne & Glynn, 2000.) Because web sites are comparatively new, some users remain uncomfortable and certain about the credibility of the web as an information source. Overall, research suggests the Internet enjoys about the same level of credibility as television, radio and magazines--although newspapers tend to score somewhat higher than all other forms of media (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 1998).<sup>10</sup> However, in the absence of confidence, relationship building online becomes more difficult.

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<sup>10</sup> Regrettably, most recent credibility research pertaining to web sites confounds assessment of the web as a source with the content and message sponsor (e.g. Burbules, 2001; Fogg et al., 2001; Fogg & Tseng, 1999; Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Alternatively, attitudes toward online communication might be imputed by examining the quality of online communications based on the presence of particularly features considered to give credence to the communications tool. For example, Katerattanakul & Siau (2001).operationalized credibility based upon intrinsic



**Attitudes toward computing and computers in general.** Closely intertwined with attitudes specific toward web sites, attitudes toward computers in general can influence relationship building online. Individuals differentially embrace computer technology and vary widely in their belief that technology contributes to communications and to the quality of life (Postman, 1992; Stoll, 1995). More specifically, individuals exhibit varying *attitudes toward computers in general*. (Kowlowsky, Lazar & Hoffman, 1988; Loyd & Gressand, 1984, 1985; Pope-Davis & Twing, 1991). Obviously, people with negative views toward computing are less likely to find online communications satisfying and thus less prone to develop online relationships.

**User skill and confidence.** One of the greatest limitations of web sites is that it requires users to sign on—a deliberate action that is more complex than other forms of media, such as watching television or scanning a newspaper. Web users often are seeking information and must develop skills and confidence in their ability to locate information. Skills are abilities gained through practice and experience. Confidence relates to *self-efficacy*, or one's sense of being capable of performing a task. Computer self-efficacy (CSE) and technology self-efficacy (TSE) lead to generally higher levels of motivation and expertise in using a computer (Compeau & Higgins, 1995; Cassidy & Eachus, 1997; Jerusalem & Schwartz, 1981). A lack of self-efficacy often manifests itself in *computer anxiety* (Heinseen, Glas & Knight, 1987; Loyd & Gressand, 1984) and can distract attention, inhibit processing and therefore reduce relationship-building opportunities.

**Personality.** Other user-related antecedents include an array of psychological and sociological characteristics based on individual differences among users. These include cognitive ability, cognitive style, gender and age (for review, see Eveland and Dunwoody, 1998). A personality factor that is particularly interesting is personal *innovativeness*, or being a *change leader*, which has been shown to lead people to take advantage of new media (MacEvoy, 1997; Rogers, 1995).

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information quality, contextual (task) quality, representational (format) quality and accessibility. This approach closely parallels the approach found in much usability research (Nielsen, 2000).

## PROCESSES OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING USING WEB SITES

Relationship building on the web can be conceptualized as involving four inter-related processes involving awareness, cognitive processing, interactivity, and impression/attitude formation.

### Relationship Building Based on Awareness

Relationships on the web begin with a prospective user's recognition of an organization's online presence and trial use of the technology.

**Recognition of online presence.** Organizations seeking to build relations through web sites must begin by making people aware of their online presence. Organizations use media advertising, imprint their web and e-mail addresses on letterhead and collateral, and encourage people to visit their sites. Other methods include the creation of e-mail solicitations (also known as permission marketing: Godin, 1999), online event, promotions and attractions, contests, sweepstakes, discounts and coupons (Chase Shulock & Hanger, 2001; Palmer & Griffith, 1998). Such exposure efforts have shown to pay off terms of placing an economic value on the addition of Internet channels (Geyskens, Gielens & Dekimpe, 2002). Importantly, many people now *expect* organizations to provide avenues of online communication, consistent with their (sometimes unrealistic) expectations about an organization's savviness in dealing with technology (Kanoleas & Teigen, 2000).

**Trial use/adoption.** Once prospective users are aware, they cannot really experience an online relationship until they actually use try the system at least once. This is a critical step in the process. The *technology acceptance model* (TAM) adapts Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) *theory of reasoned action* and posits that acceptance of computer technologies by users is determined by ease of use and perceived usefulness (Davis, 1989; Davis, Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1989). Ha and James (1998) argue that internet technologies lend themselves to easy adoption based on Rogers' (1995) criteria for characteristics of

innovation that facilitate adoption. Web sites thus offer a relative advantage and are simple, easily tried, easy observable, and compatible with people's knowledge of print and visual communications.<sup>11</sup>

### **Relationship Building Based on Cognitive Processing**

Once a user accesses an online communications system, some minimal level of cognitive processing of online content is required. These including minimal learning of content and learning about the source.

**Content learning** involves attention to, comprehension and mental elaboration of the content, which the user in turn stores in memory. Importantly, the depth or extent of cognitive processing is not hypothesized to be a critical factor in relationship building, although the more extensively a user attends to a message and elaborates upon it, the more extensive the network of associations created in a person's memory (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984). In strictly cognitive terms, the depth of a relationship can be defined as the complexity and extensiveness of these cognitive associations in memory. Similarly, accuracy of content learning is not deemed necessary. People use processes of selective attention, exposure and retention to make sense of web content, based on their interests as well as their knowledge and involvement. Message learning can occur based on reading the simplest text messages. However, message learning also can involve processing of multimedia components (audio, visual, and video) which are becoming commonplace on web sites.<sup>12</sup> Acquisition of content is a frequently used measure of web effectiveness (Sundar, 2000; Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000).

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<sup>11</sup> Rogers (1995) argues that adoption rates are critical for the diffusion and adoption of interactive technologies. In particular, technologies such as online communication must attain a critical mass, after which earlier adopted influence later adopted, and in turn later adopters influence earlier adopters in a process of reciprocal interdependence or a forcing quality. The result is an S-shaped adoption curve that is slower in the introductory phases, but then escalates at a rate faster than for non-interactive innovations once adoptions reach between the 5% and 20% adoption levels (Rogers, 1995, pp. 314-315, 324).

<sup>12</sup> Research by the Stanford Poynter Project (Johnson, 2001) and by usability researchers (Nielsen, 2000), suggest that text is the primary modality in online communications. Web site users, for example, focus first on textual content and only then pay attention to graphical depictions. One study suggests that one in five users of newspaper web sites ignore photos and graphics altogether (Johnson, 2001). Researchers have found somewhat conflicting results for the importance of visuals in online communications. For example, enhanced web site atmospherics can lead to increased browsing (Dailey & Heath, 2000) and animations can increase memory for ads

**Source learning.** A second dimension of learning relates to the source of the content and to the motives users attribute to the source. Interestingly, evidence users suggest that cannot always identify sources of web content. In ways similar to their response to mass media, some people often treat computers as social actors (Deighton, 1999). Reeves and Nass (1996) argue that people use computers in social and natural ways--as if the devices are human and as if the technologies were the “source” of the content. Reeves and Ness found that people rarely connect the fact that there are people or organizations behind computers, unless there are problems. Indeed, interactions with computers are actually more satisfactory when users *don't* think about the people behind them. People- and organization-related thoughts only fatigue and frustrate users.<sup>13</sup>

Little evidence exists about whether people clearly identify organizations as being the sources of web sites. However, organizations can help users make the connection with an organization by incorporating appropriate cues in a site's content. *Social presence theory*, which was developed in the study of teleconferencing, suggests that messages vary in the degree to which they are imbued with cues that allow users to develop a sense of interpersonal warmth or affection toward a source (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976). Social presence theory also has been defined as the degree to which individuals

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(Heo & Sundar, 2000) but not news story content (Sundar, Edgar & Mayer, 2000). Downloading time can have a titillating effect Sundar, Kalyanaraman & Wagner (2000). However, excessive graphics can distract learning and decrease usability and site use satisfaction (Heller, 1990; Nielsen, 2000). One explanation relates to people's limited processing capacity (Lang, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Although Reeves and Nass' (1996) argument isn't readily intuitive to organizations that are actively striving to communicate with key publics, it is an important question for public relations researchers concerned with building organizational-public relationships. It is consistent with arguments that online media are impersonal and inauthentic *pseudocommunities* (Beniger, 1987), where people lose or transform their own identities (Turkle, 1995). A user's ability to relate to the source is confounded by the distance and suspension of reality sometime associated with online communications. *Telepresence* is sometimes used to define a person's sense of presence in mediated communication, versus their presence in real life. As Steuer (1992) observes, an individual whose perceptions are mediated by communication technology necessarily perceives two separate environments, and telepresence occurs when the perception mediated by the technology takes precedence over the unmediated perceptions (see also Coyle & Thorson, 2001). Other researchers suggest that people easily can become wrapped up in the experience of using online communications and so escape reality. Researchers use the term *flow state* to describe an episode when life is heightened, an individual becomes deeply involved, and the person's mental energy is highly focused on a particular activity or experience (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2000). The effect is for people to sometimes lose their wits about what they are doing and whom they are dealing with.

perceive one another as real people and perceive their resulting interaction as a relationship (Wood & Smith, 2001). The presence of cues that suggest a human presence also is thought to enhance content learning through increased attention to and possibly more elaborative processing of content.

In learning about sources, users try to understand the meaning of messages and, in particular, the motive or intent of the source. Attribution theory suggests that users attempt to impute explanations about the actions of others. In the case of a web site, for example, users might ask whether an organization is trying to *tell* users important information or try to *sell* them something. Similarly, expectancy theory suggests that people bring expectations when using an organization's web site. Whether those expectations are confirmed (or disconfirmed) will lead to judgments about the authenticity of the communications and intent of the organization. Similarly, users assess sources in terms of perceived *commonality* of interests, values and goals (Page, 2001), or what Burke (1950) called *consubstantiality*. Web sites need to incorporate user-friendly cues that identification with the users and telegraph shared meanings and understanding. Otherwise, once a user is satisfied he or she has made a correct judgment about the source, cognitive processing stops (Chaiken, 1980).

### **Relationship Building Based Upon Interactivity**

The notions of message and source learning outlined above make no assumptions about a user's use of the interactive capabilities inherent in a web site. Users can learn content or about sources simply by accessing the front page of a site without taking any further action. However, interactivity has become increasingly sophisticated and important element compared to the web's early years (Ha & James, 1998; Palmer & Griffith, 1998), and can play a critical role in web use (Morris & Ogan, 1996; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997; Newhagan & Rafaeli, Rogers, 1995). Interactivity has already been acknowledged as an important element in public relations (Springston, 2000; Jo & Kim, in press; Jo, Kim & Jeong, 2001) and in advertising and marketing communications (Ghose & Dou, 1998; Haeckel, 1998; Harvey, 1997; Liu, 1997; Morris-Lee, 2000; Philport & Arbitter, 1997).

Springston (2000) described interactivity is the “extent that a user can make choices and respond to a program. Alternatively, Steuer (1992) defined *interactivity* as the ability to alter the form and content of online communications in real time. Importantly, *interaction* is the essence of the communication process. *Symbolic interactionism* theory (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) treats relationships as social acts that involve gestures and responses as well as the interlinkages of smaller accompanying actions. As a result of interactions, people derive *meanings* that are used to interpret events or situations. Mead contends that people treat themselves as objects and respond to their own actions by developing perceptions about themselves.

Interactivity offers benefits to both organization and users.<sup>14</sup> Research suggests that the shift of control from a content originator to a content receiver can facilitate learning by enhancing elaboration (Eveland & Dunwoody, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2002). But greater elaboration might not apply to users who rely primarily on visual (versus verbal) information (Bezjian-Avery, Calder & Iobucci, 1998; Scholsser, 2000). Interactivity also serves as a motivational factor that encourages users to construct their own messages, to compare information, and to become more involved in the process (flow) of communications (Schlosser, 2000). Interactivity is important in the relationship building process because it allows the user a) to *control* online content, and b) to become a *producer* of messages to others (see also Cho, 1990; Ha & James, 1998; Jo & Kim, in press).

**System interactivity.** *System interaction* represents the ability of users to modify the format and content of web content. No human contact is involved. Hypertext and links on web sites allow people to search for additional information or to play games, take quizzes, or complete surveys. Options provided in discussion groups enable individuals to change topics or chat rooms, or to talk privately with particular discussants while excluding others. The critical component in system interactivity is providing *choices*.

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<sup>14</sup> Cross and Smith (1995, also cited in Roehm & Haugtvedt, 1999) suggests benefits to organizations including additional channels for selling, targeting of messages, measurability, ubiquity of messages, customer dialogue and loyalty. Benefits for users include: convenience, fewer irrelevant messages, availability, access to peers' dialogue, informed decisions, speedy response, information (ads) on demand, new sources of information, and product satisfaction.

Miller & Slater (2000, p. 165) note interactivity also integrates web sites into consumer interests—thus web sites are a form of publishing, not advertising.

The higher the level of system interactivity, the more challenging an online communications system can be to use. In addition to principles of functionality (Hallahan, 2001b), web site sponsors must recognize that users develop expectations in the form of cognitive schemas rules related to organization of mental rules for processing online content. Violation of conventions or customs by organizations or others can mar the experience of using a system and reduce potential relationship building (Len-Rios, 2002; Len-Rios & Cameron, 2001, 2002).

Two of the important aspects of system interactivity are customization and personalization. *Customization* enables users to design their own screen content and to include only content categories deemed relevant. Thus, users control the message they see. By contrast, *personalization* involves delivery of *user-specific* content in response to prompts (questions asked by the system) or user intelligence stored in the system's database when a user is identified using cookies or similar technologies). The ability of organizations to tailor information and to give answers or information specific to an individual can obviously make web sites a powerful relational building tool (Horton, 2001; Roehm & Haugtvedt, 1999).

**Verbal Interactivity.** *Verbal interaction* involves the capability of users to produce and send messages to others—the web site sponsor, participants in a discussion group, or friends. Verbal interaction is a higher-order form of interactivity that requires users to compose their own ideas in writing (or speech) and possibly engage in verbal dialogue (Roehm & Haugtvedt, 1999).

Verbal interactivity is the foundation for two-way communication online. Duck (Duck & Pittman, 1994) suggests that relationships are constructed and enacted through the presentation of rhetorical visions in daily conversations, so as to recognize the commonality that exists between them. Thus, verbal interactivity provides a mechanism for relationship enhancement.

McMillan (2002; McMillan & Dowes, 2000) identified a four-part model to identify the kinds of interactions that can occur between an organization and a public--based on the direction of communication (one-way or two-way) and the level of receiver/user control (high versus low). *Mutual*

*discourse* (two-way, high receiver control) represents the highest level of dialogue possible online and consists of exchanges where traditional sender/receiver roles are indistinguishable--users are equal participants in a dialogue. This is the type of verbal interaction commonly found in chat rooms, bulletin boards, etc. *Responsive discourse* (two-way, low receiver control) occurs when the organization (not receiver) retains primary control over communication, resulting in asymmetric exchanges. On many web sites, such as e-commerce sites, users can make these kinds of selections electronically and/or send messages. In turn, the organization can acknowledge receipt of the order online or via e-mail. McMillan notes that customer support websites and websites that solicit volunteer participation in not-for-profit causes capitalize on responsive dialogue. *Feedback* (two way, high receiver control) is a limited form of communication but still allows users to participate, although the role of the sender and receiver are distinct. Typical feedback tools include e-mail links that allow users to communicate with organizations, as well as fill-in forms and surveys (which can include open-ended response in addition to simple check-off boxes). *Monologue* (one way, low receiver control) essentially resembles the traditional sender/receiver model where websites simply distribute content. The only feedback that organizations can obtain is through research or inspection of web access logs to identify the number and type of users.

Verbal interactivity, more clearly than system interactivity, involves users developing impressions and forming relationships with other people online. Research on communications between web site users and organizations is virtually non-existent, except for evidence that organizations are often not responsive (Galea, 1999; O'Connell, 1998; Taylor, Kent & White, 1998; Weber, 1996). At best we must rely on the growing--albeit contradictory--interpersonal research about how individuals interact with others in online chats.<sup>15</sup> This question is probably the number-one issue that must be addressed in understanding the roles of web sites in public relations.

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<sup>15</sup> Research focusing on the interaction among individuals in online chats and discussion groups suggests:  
 --Minimal social context cues provide little guidance to users about who they should communicate with, the appropriate content, or regulation of what users should or should not disclose, leading to feelings of anonymity, reduced-self regulation of behavior and reduced self-awareness (*social influence model*: Sproull & Kiesler, 1986)  
 --Users are motivated to develop affiliations, impressions and relationships with others and will do so without regard to hindrances imposed by a particular medium, although mediated interactions take more time to develop



## Relationship Building Based on Affective Responses

In addition to cognitive leaning and interactivity, individuals can be aroused or develop emotional or affective responses to content—feelings of exhilaration, empathy, outrage, etc. These often translate into the formation of attitudes, or predispositions toward particular object that can predict behaviors (*theory of reasoned action*: Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In the context of web sites, users are posited to develop at two sets of distinct attitudes with consequences for relationship building.

**Attitudes toward the online content (ATOC)** involve assessments of the actual content or messages encountered in the online experience. Perhaps the simplest dimension of ATOC is a general *liking* of the message, which can be measured using simple adjectival descriptors (good, attractive, pleasant, appealing, exciting etc.) versus their adjectival antonyms (bad, ugly, unpleasant, unappealing, boring, etc.). Research in advertising shows an important moderating link between liking a message (attitude toward the ad, *Aad*) and liking a brand or topic featured in the message (attitude toward the brand, *Abrand*) (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Mackenzie, Lutz & Belch, 1986; Stevenson, Bruner & Kumar, 2000).

An alternative measure of attitude toward the content pertains to assessments of message *quality*, defined as the quantity, completeness, accuracy, relevance and usefulness of content to a user. If web content is deemed insufficient, frivolous or without practical value, it is unlikely that meaningful

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relationships than face-to-face interactions (*social information processing theory of communication in computer media communication*: Walther, 1992)

--Users who interact with visual anonymity tend to lose their personal identity in favor of a social or group identity, assume group norms, and generalize perceived attributes of certain group members to the group as a whole, resulting in less discriminating, more positive assessments of others (*social identification/deindividuation [SIDE] theory*: Postmes, Spears and Lea, 1998).

For a further discussion, see Wallace (1999).

--Users sometimes experience intimacy, affection and interpersonal assessments of their communication partners that exceed those that occur in face-to-face activities (*hyperpersonal communication theory*: Walther, 1996)

--The importance of social presence cues might be limited to short-term conditions. In one study, the presence of visual images of communication partners had a positive effect on social attraction among new, unacquainted participants. However, among long-term online participants who became acquainted without social presence cues, affinity actually declines when photographs (visual cues) were introduced (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001)

relationships can result. Importantly, while liking content is largely an affective measure, assessments of message quality rely on a combination of affective and cognitive judgments. One early study of message quality, for example, found that the mere number of links and pages provided a reliable measure of quality (Amento, Terveen & Hill, 2000).

A third factor is *believability*, or the users' assessment of the verisimilitude of a particular message, or the degree to which a message "rings true," or is consistent with the user's online or offline experience. Content lacking in believability, in general, is less likely to create positive relationships (except if the purpose of the message is strictly to entertain, in which case users approach web content with different expectations and rules for processing).

**Attitude toward the site (ATOS).** In addition to assessing particular online message, users also formulate attitudes based on their experience in a web site—separate from their attitudes toward specific content. A user, for example, might love the content found on a music site, but find it difficult to use. Attitude toward the site is related directly to a user's ability to command the interactive capabilities of the system of the system. Chen and Wells (1999; 2001) have adapted the general idea of *Aad* to websites, resulting in the *attitude toward the site (Asite)* construct. The researchers suggest attitude toward a site can be measured by asking users about ease of use, interest in returning, satisfaction, comfort levels using the site, return on time invested, and how the site compares to others (also see Stevenson, Bruner & Kumar, 2000). Separately, Eighemy (1997) suggested that important attitudes relate to enjoyment, the presence of clear metaphorical structures that made the information value clear, and efficiently executed design. Nielsen (2000) suggests that pleasantness of experience is a key criterion. All of these approaches address *user satisfaction*, or the degree to which a user responds favorably (versus unfavorably) to the web site experience. Importantly, satisfaction is a function of user *expectations* and can be measured using metrics such as success in completing a particular task, speed of completion, the lack of errors, system reliability or dependability, and the degree to which the experience was pleasing. Proficient or experienced users might be more tolerant of systems problems, but also can become more quickly

dissatisfied if their expectations are not met or rules for use are violated. Less experienced users might tolerate their own inabilities, but are also likely to abandon a site they judge too challenging.

### **CONSEQUENCES OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING ON THE WEB**

The previous section on processes suggested that relationship building on the web involves: recognition of an organization's online presence, trial use, learning about message content and the source, interactivity with the system and possibly with other people, and the formation of attitudes toward the online content and the system itself.

What are the outcomes of using online communications and potential measures for assessing them? Consequences can be assessed based upon: learned knowledge about the content or sponsor, attitudes toward the organization, communications actions by users, and engagement in behaviors beneficial to the organization.

#### **Knowledge About Content and the Organization**

Previous approaches to measuring organization-public relationships have largely overlooked the fact that publics need to possess some minimal knowledge, comprehension or understanding about an organization as a necessary condition for a relationship to exist. In the case of learning about an organization on the web site, this might include familiarity with an organization's name, mission, newsworthy activities, services or benefits, or key facts that the organization wants to share with users.

Knowledge of an organization derived through learning on the web can be measured using many of the traditional forms of cognitive measurement. These include recognition and recall, as well as thought-listing procedures that measure the number and valence of discrete ideas that people can retrieve from memory on either an unaided or aided basis (du Plessis, 1994; Petty, Ostrom & Brock, 1981).

#### **Attitudes toward the organization (ATTO).**

**General attitudes.** Although attitudes toward particular messages or use of the system are important, the acid-test attitudinal measure for understanding relationships involve the attitudes or impressions that users form about the organization and/or the product, service, candidate or cause it represents. Advertising researchers label these general attitudes toward the organization as *attitude toward the brand*, or *Abrand* (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Generally, if positive attitudes are assumed to lead to mutually beneficial behaviors, the existence of positive attitudes toward an organization is a necessary condition for a relationship building as well.

Web sites that generate positive assessments of a sponsoring organization clearly contribute to relationship building, contrasted with those that generate only neutral or negative responses. At least five different attitudinal measures might be appropriate in a given circumstance. *General liking* of the organization involves the degree to which an individual develops a positive (versus negative) predisposition toward the organization: *good v. bad, positive v. negative*, etc. *Relevance* measures the degree to which an individual thinks an organization's actions have consequences or are important in their lives (involving): *important to me v. not important to me, impacts my life v. doesn't impact my life*. *Identification* involves the degree to which an individual believes an organization shares similar interests and values and thus the individual might develop the sense an organization is similar to him or her: *similar to me v. not similar to me, values are like mine v. values are not like mine*. *Affinity* analyzes the degree to which an individual wants to become affiliated formally with the organization as an employee, customer, investor, supporter etc.: *would like to join v. would not like to join*. *Intent* predicts the degree to which an individual states future plans to take a particular action related to the web content, e.g. *want to/willing to/desire to/hope to/intend to/probably will* purchase a product (or use a service, vote for a candidate, change risky behaviors, etc.)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Behavioral intent is an extension of affective measures that bridges pure affect and pure affect. The utility of behavioral intent is rooted in Ajzen & Fishbein's theory of reasoned action and theory of planned action (See Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Sheppard, Hartwick & Warshaw, 1988).

**Assessments of organization's performance.** Assuming that an online user has sufficient experience to form a more advanced opinion about the organizations, the various perceptual messages suggested previously by public relations researchers are also appropriate (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). These include assessments of an organization's *trustworthiness* and *commitment*, and the individual's perceptions about *control mutuality* and *satisfaction* (see Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; for a discussion of trust, see Friedman, 2001; Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis & Cessana, 2000).<sup>17</sup>

Web sites raise particularly interesting issues for several of the measures recognized by researchers in recent years. For example, the creation of a satisfactory *exchange relationship*—in which a user seeks and an organization provides—information might be sufficient for a public relations-based relationship to exist online. A communal relationship might be unnecessary (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Similarly, *control mutuality* could be problematic. In general, it would be argued that control mutuality is only relevant in situations where people have high involvement in a topic or within an organization. Among inactive publics, such as those that engage merely in exchange relationships, a desire for control mutuality is not necessary. Nor is it probable that individuals have any expectations about power sharing. However, the mere presence of interactive components serves as heuristic cue that organizations care. System interactivity suggests the organization is willing to share control of a web site relationship. The inclusion of verbally interactive feedback mechanisms signal users that the organization welcomes efforts to influence them.

## Communications Consequences

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<sup>17</sup> The general attitudinal measures suggested above purposefully focus on the predispositions of individuals to *enter in to* or to *maintain* relationships with organizations and are appropriate in the early stages of a relationship. These are proposed as more general alternatives to more advanced assessments of an organization's performance, which resume a relationship is established. The validity and reliability of these measures might be threatened in the specific context of measuring relationships created online in instances where people have only minimal contact or experience with an organization or where contact is primarily online. In the later case, however, it would be important to separate effects that are connected to the online experience versus an individual's overall assessment of the organization. For example, an individual might have a highly satisfying online experience but find this or her expectations unmet offline.

A third behavioral outcome involves analyzing how people communicate as a result of their web experience. At least three aspects are important to consider:

**Repeat visits.** To sustain a relationship, individuals and organizations must interact with organizations periodically. A one-time web site encounter does not, in itself, constitute an organizational-public relationship. However, the repeated use of a web site, or follow-up use of e-mail or discussion groups, provides a heuristic measure of a user's level of connectedness. Revisiting a site can be the result of various factors, including the quality of information and the level of interactivity. Both of these have been shown to lead to positive attitudes and behavioral change (O'Malley & Irani, 1998). For that reason, savvy web site sponsors strive to get users to return to sites by continually adding new or updated content and by offering incentive and reward/loyalty/continuity programs (Chase, Shulock & Hanger, 2001). Various technologies, including site and discussion group logs, enable organizations to track web site use unobtrusively.

**Other communications with organization.** Importantly, frequency of interaction is not limited to online contacts. Most users do not live separate online and offline lives. (Notable exceptions might involve people who go online to escape reality or to engage in fantasies using other identities.) Besides online communications, users of online communications can solidify their relationships with organizations through one-on-one communications, attendance at events, consumption of printed or other controlled media, or attention to publicity and advertising in public media. Organizations can encourage such communication by providing opportunities and incentives for such communications on their sites. Examples include listing points of contact, offering online coupons good for redemption in retail locations, online offers for videos and printed materials to be sent to the users, and online invitations to events. Organizations strategically misuse online communications when they attempt to restrict contact with users to online communications and fail to provide a full array of options for people to interact with them.

**Communication/information sharing with others.** Finally, an important potential measure of the power of web sites involves the degree to which users *share* information about their web experience.

Such exchanges can occur in conversations with families and friends, staff members of the organization, or any others with whom an individual comes in contact. Such communication can also occur online, through e-mail, discussion groups, chats, blogs (personal web logs). *Viral marketing* employs the online version of word-of-mouth advertising by making it easy for individuals to share e-mail or website postings--through "e-mail a friend" links (MacPherson, 2001; Silverman, 2001). Organizations also can employ techniques such as digital postcards and software passalongs for users to forward to others (Chase, Shulock & Hanger, 2001). To the degree that users engage in such information sharing activities, relationships are reinforced and the user becomes assumes a particularly valuable role--as an advocate for the organization. Advocacy is probably the highest-level indicator of a strong relationship (Gordon, 1998).

### **Behaviors beneficial to the organization**

The ultimate measure of organizational-public relationships is the user's engagement in behaviors that help the organization attain its mission. These exchanges involve the behaviors that organizations typically attempt to influence among publics: buying, investing or donating, working, voting or the promotion of personal wellbeing/avoidance of due risk. Engaging in such behaviors also benefits individuals by fulfilling their needs, wants, concerns or interests.

Importantly, these exchange relationships also can occur offline or online. With increased frequency, organizations operate only in an online environment. For them, building and maintaining an online relationship is critical and easy to track. For other organizations, it is becoming increasingly common that some combinations of exchange relationships occur online and offline.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Although many organizations strive to become the exclusive or primary furnisher of particular products and or services to individuals, engagement in behaviors beneficial to an organization is not conceptualized here as being tantamount to loyalty. Being *loyal* connotes faithfulness, such as to a sovereign or another person to whom such allegiance is due. Oliver (1981) defines loyalty in an organizational context as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future." Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) describe *brand loyalty* as an intention of repeat purchasing involving no switching behavior. To develop a relationship with an organization does not require a commitment or loyalty to the exclusion of all other organizational relationships. Indeed, in part due to the relatively low level of ties in organizational-public relations, individuals can engage in relationships with multiple organizations in the same category. While being the exclusive or primary source of a particular benefit is an ideal adopted by many organization managements, exclusivity is not a necessary for condition for relationship building to be successful. For discussion of online loyalty, see Newell (2000).

## IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

This essay presented a model outlining key issues that public relations theorists and practitioners must address to fully understand and investigate the web as a tool of relationship building. The ideas presented represent a potentially robust research agenda involving an array of contributory, moderating and mediating variables. In addition to specifying specific variables important to understanding the impact of web sites, a secondary goal was to broaden researchers' thinking about relationship building.

Antecedents or factors that influence the process are rooted in the organization, the system used, and characteristics of users. The process itself involves individuals becoming aware of and actually using web sites, learning, interacting with the system and with other people, forming attitudes toward the content and the site. The outcomes or consequences can be measured in terms of the user's knowledge or familiarity with the content and organization, attitudes toward the organization, subsequent communications activities, and engagement in behaviors that benefit the organization.

This essay extends previous research by focusing on the particular antecedents, processes and measurable outcomes or consequences of using a web site to build relationships online. But it also raises important issues for future discussion as researchers pursue relationship management/building as a framework in public relations.

In particular, the present discussion suggests that psychological processes and the individual's behaviors before, during and after their interactions with organizations should be the focus of research on organizational-public relationships. By redefining organizational-public relationships as *routinized, sustained patterns of behavior by individuals related to their involvement with an organization*, this essay argued that relationships involve cognitive and conative dimensions beyond the affective dimensions that have been addressed to date. To relate positively to an organization, an individual must be (reasonably) informed, possess positive attitudes, and engage in behaviors conducive to the organization. These

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behaviors can involve communicating with others as well as actions that help a organization achieve its purpose—buying, investing, donating, working, voting, etc.

The model outlined here suggests that the process of relationship building is a complex one. Nonetheless, building online relationships is both possible and potentially desirable in today's high-tech environment where organizations continue to deploy technology in new and innovative ways. Cooper (2001) observes organizations are incorporating technology in relationship management programs in at least three ways: as collaborative technologies that allow interactions, as operational technologies that administer back room functions, and as analytical technologies that assist in data analysis. Online communications thus are taking a place along side other self-service technologies, customer service/call centers (Cooper, 2001; Rosenberger, 2001), databases (CRM and the Internet, 2001; Petrisson & Wang, 1993), and data mining techniques (Bejou, 1997; Copulsky & Wolf, 1990). In the resulting *relational enterprise*, Cooper (p. 118-119) argues that the goals are to respond, resolve, satisfy and please (even wow) people served by an organization.

As organizations further embrace online communications in the coming years, public relations practitioners and managements will want to better understand the relationship building potential of web sites by creating user-centered sites. Prudent organizations will want to optimize their use of the net to both disseminate information and cement relationships. As one industry analyst aptly noted, "Information itself offers value only when presented in the context of relationships" (M. Schrage, quoted in Sisodia & Wolfe, 2001, p. 552).

Organizations that want to use web sites effectively for relationship building must strive to optimize use of interactivity and the other web site capabilities. Beyond interactivity, online communications must be designed in ways that people find usable, trustworthy and satisfying. Phillips (2001) aptly suggests that public relations web sites should be secure, trustworthy, convenient, private, fast and fun. Yet, content also be timely, accurate, relevant, pleasing, and engender identification, affinity and action.

Authenticity is a particularly important challenge in an era where mistrust of organizations is rampant and web sites are still relatively new. Sisodia & Wolfe (2001, p. 560) contend the lack of authenticity only makes a mockery of attempts to operate in a one-on-one, relationship building mode. To be authentic, organizations need to be responsive and truthful, and demonstrate integrity, reliability and competence. Openness and self-disclosures that might expose an organization's vulnerabilities also underscore authenticity (Duck & Pittman, 1994). In addition, users are particularly concerned with security and privacy (Tedeschi, 2002a, 2002b). Organizations wanting to cultivate positive relationships must be particularly vigilant to recognize these concerns.

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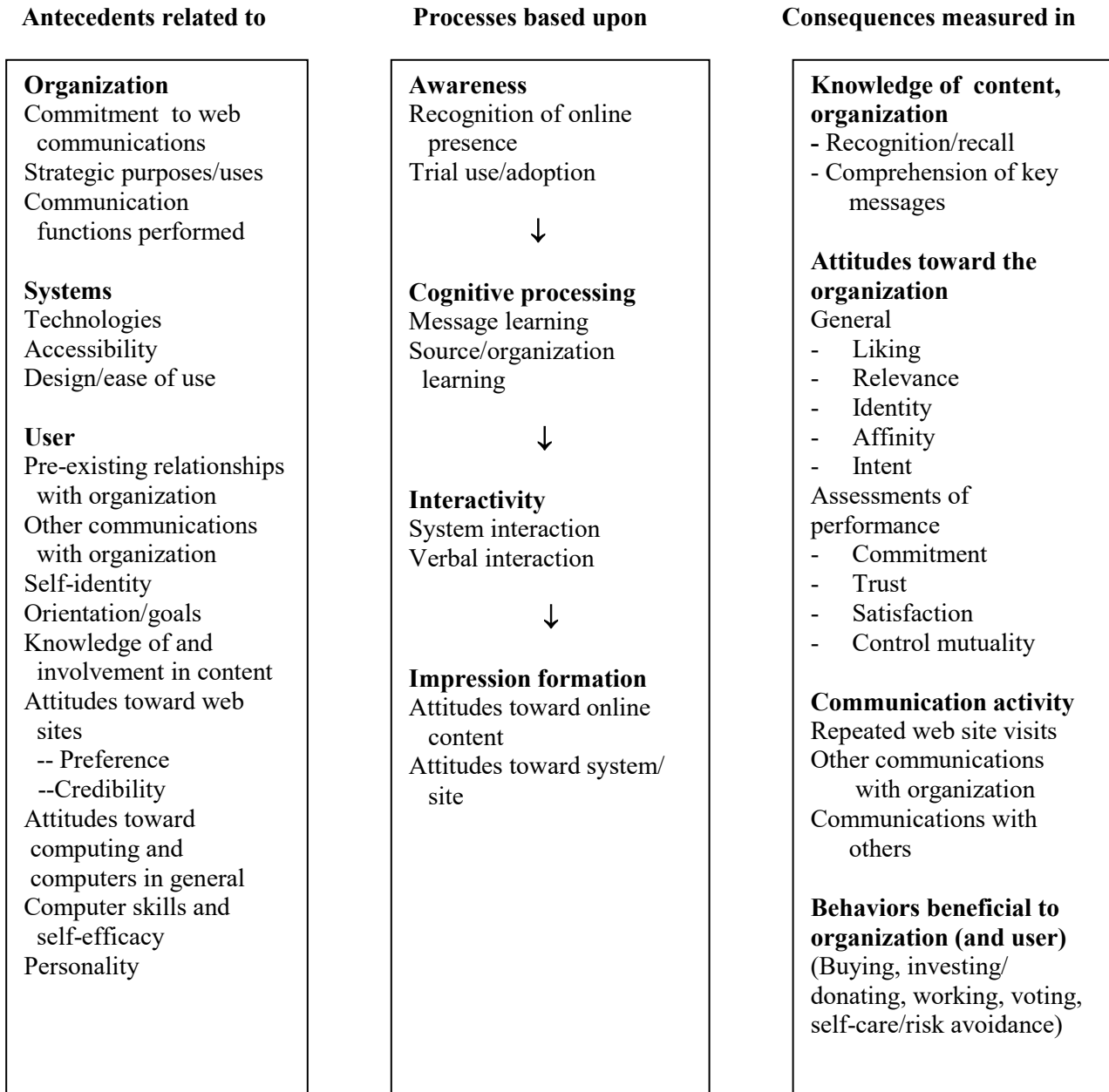
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Fig. 1

**ANTECEDENTS, PROCESSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF  
ORGANIZATIONAL-PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS CREATED ON WEB SITES**



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