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The Role of organizational web sites in public relations

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THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL WEB SITES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Manisha Kamat

May 2002

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kenneth Plowman", written over a horizontal line.

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APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL WEB SITES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

by

Manisha C. Kamat

This thesis addresses the role of organizational Web sites as tools of public relations on the Internet. It integrates theoretical and practical guidelines into 40 features that pinpoint how Web sites can become tools of excellent dialogical communication on the Internet.

The press agency model of communication, the mixed-motive model, the theory of dialogic communication, and systems theory form the theoretical basis of this thesis. Other literature reviewed includes the concept of critical mass, the concept of convergence, a brief history of the Internet, theoretical concepts related to the Internet, elements of Web design, and related studies conducted by other researchers.

A content analysis of 250 companies in the Fortune 500 database, based on 40 features, was conducted. It revealed that the interactive potential of organizational Web - sites for dialogical communication on the Internet is largely unused as of date.

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Table of Contents

Chapter		Page No.
I	Introduction	1
	Significance	2
	Scope	3
	Definitions and Assumptions	4
	Theories and Basic Precepts	4
	Method Used	5
	Results	5
II	Literature Review	7
	Defining Public Relations	8
	Models of Communication	8
	Theory of Dialogic Communication	9
	The Systems Approach	11
	The Internet	13
	Theoretical Concepts Related to the Internet	16
	Uses of the Internet in Public Relations	21
	What Elements Make a Web Site an Ideal	
	Public Relations tool?	24
	Related Studies	26
	Summary and Research Questions	28

Chapter	Page No.
III Method	33
Strengths of Content Analysis	33
Weaknesses of Content Analysis	34
Variables Involved	34
Research Design	36
IV Results	39
V Conclusion	60
Discussion of Findings and Impact on Practice	60
Impact on Practice	68
Limitations	69
Future Questions	70
VI References	71

List of Tables

Table Title	Page No.
Table1 Presence of Dialogic Loop Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics	40
Table 2 Presence of Dialogic Loop Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics	42
Table 3 Presence of Usefulness of Information Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics	45
Table 4 Presence of Usefulness of Information Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics	49
Table 5 Presence of Generation of Return Visit Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics	52
Table 6 Presence of Generation of Return Visit Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics	54

Table Title	Page No.
Table 7	
Presence of Ease of Interface Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies	
Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics	55
Table 8	
Presence of Ease of Interface Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies	
Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics	57
Table 9	
Presence of Conservation of Visitors Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies	
Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics	58
Table 10	
Presence of Conservation of Visitors Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies	
Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics	59

THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL WEB SITES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Chapter I

Introduction

The history of public relations reveals that it has always adapted itself and responded to changes in society and technology. The technological advances in the last decade opened up the doors of the Internet to the public by allowing access to the World Wide Web. The Internet by its very nature is a mass medium and also intensely personal at the point of use. With the size of the Web increasing in content and in the number of its users, it cannot be ignored as a communication tool for reaching the publics. It follows, therefore, that public relations in theory and practice must adapt itself to this innovation in some way to achieve excellence in communication.

The purpose of this study is to examine the potential of organizational Web sites as two-way communication tools. Dialogic communication and building relationships with publics forms the basis of excellent public relations. The interactive potential of Web sites as tools for two-way dialogic communication therefore needs to be examined more closely. However, there is a conspicuous lack of definitive guidelines that can help organizations construct Web sites capable of being ideal public relations tools. The proposed study attempts to define such guidelines.

The literature review covers the communication theories relevant to public relations and also reviews literature relating to the nature and functions of Web sites.

The purpose of the review is to explore the role of the Internet—particularly Web sites—in public relations. From these sources, the author has attempted to create a set of characteristics that can help define a Web site as a tool of communication. A content analysis of corporate Web sites was conducted using these characteristics as criteria.

Significance

Various studies have examined the relationship between organizational Web sites and public relations. However, from the public relations point of view, there is a lack of definitive procedures underlining the desirable characteristics in a Web site. The guidelines emerging from this study contributed to the existing body of evolving literature on public relations and the Internet. This study translates the applicable theories to a set of practical guidelines. Keeping the relevant theories in public relations and new media as a point of reference, this author has distilled 40 defining features for organizational Web sites. These features can serve as a checklist for making a Web site the ideal communication conduit on the Internet. Incorporating these features into the organization's Web site can assure the communications professional of an efficient addition to the existing arsenal of tools.

If the organization is considered to be an integral part of the community, it bears the responsibility of generating and sustaining dialogue with its publics for the greater good of all involved. Having a Web site that enables such actions would help in this process. In the current competitive economy, knowledge and speed of response provide an edge over competition for organizations. A Web site that speedily circulates

information through the organizational system and its environment is a definite advantage. The study also tests the hypothesis that financially larger organizations have Web sites that are excellent tools of public relations. For organizations that have not included the characteristics mentioned in this study, implementing them would help them better utilize their Web sites. The set of criteria used for evaluating Web sites can serve as guidelines for organizations both large and small. This research examined if organizations are currently fully exploiting the potential of their Web sites.

Scope

This study was carried out in a limited time frame of three months from January 2002 to March 2002. As organizations and their Web sites are continuously evolving, the present study is inadequate to draw conclusions about specific organizations. The Web sites of the first 200 and the last 50 companies included in the Fortune 500 rankings were examined. Inclusion in the Fortune 500 implies a high level of fiscal success. The Web sites studied represent organizations that have ample resources at their disposal. This study left outside its purview the smaller organizations that do not have a high turnover.

Due to time constraints, this author did not examine the efficiency of the feedback loops in the Web sites examined. This study does not reveal whether organizations respond effectively to comments and queries received through their Web sites. Also, this study did not inquire whether the information collected through cookies is put to any use by organizations. No information was collected on whether organizations have dedicated, trained staff members to exploit the Web site as a two-way communication tool.

Definitions and Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, this author focused on one definition of public relations. Throughout, the study used Grunig and Hunt's (1984) definition of public relations as "management of communication between an organization and its publics."

The study used the definition of two-way communication expressed by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000) as a concept emphasizing "communication exchange, reciprocity, and mutual understanding."

This author assumed that the open systems view is best suited for all organizations. It was also assumed that the organization's Web site is like an organism, a whole system in itself.

Theories and Basic Precepts

The press agency model of one-way communication practiced by P.T. Barnum is overviewed, as it is applicable to organizational Web sites today. The mixed-motive model (Plowman, Briggs, and Yi-Hui Huang, 2001) combining features of both two-way models was useful to explain the possibilities of public relations practiced through the Web site. The holistic systems approach (Bertalanffy 1968; Laszlo, 1996) with its emphasis on interconnectedness of systems was relevant to understand the dynamics of the organizational web site and its potentials. The theory of dialogic communication (Pearson, 1989; Kent & Taylor, 1998.) was used to further develop the rules essential to integrate dialogic communication into Web sites.

The concept of critical mass (Rogers, 1995, 1997) and the concept of convergence

(Rogers, 1986) were discussed as well as this author found them interrelated to the other theories already considered. These concepts are directly connected to the World Wide Web and the organizational Web sites that are integral to it. The four new models of communication proposed by Holtz (2000) were discussed to understand the nature of Web sites and to distinguish them from other forms of media. This author also examined information on elements of a Web site (Nielson 1999, Hallahan 2001) that could make it an excellent public relations tool. Finally, a summary of recent studies concerning Web sites and public relations was presented in this literature review.

Method Used

After drawing out the features desirable in a Web site based on the existing literature, these were tested on organizational Web sites. The author set out to find if organizations were aware of the desirability of these features and whether they were implemented by existing Web sites that had the financial capacity to do so. The Web sites of companies included in the Fortune 500 rankings were chosen for a content analysis. This non-intrusive method was most suitable for observing the presence/absence of these features of Web sites.

Results

The results of the content analysis indicate that organizations were largely on the right track in building Web sites that are informative, easy to navigate, and that are “sticky” enough. (A sticky site is one at which a user spends a large amount of time.) They lacked in providing sufficient dialogic loops and in providing features that can help

generate return visits. The hypothesis that larger organizations would have better dialogical Web sites than smaller organizations was not supported by the observations. The features observed in Web sites did not have any bearing on the size of the organization. These findings reaffirmed that the Internet assures a level playing field for communication irrespective of the size, type, or location of an organization. However, a lot still needs to be done before organizational Web sites can reach their full potential as ideal communication tools.

Chapter II

Literature Review

This effort aims to review the literature pertaining to public relations and the Internet, focusing on the public relations functions of corporate Web sites. The literature reviewed for this purpose includes the press agency model, the mixed-motive model coined by Plowman et al. (2001), the theory of dialogical communication (Pearson, 1989; Kent & Taylor, 1998) and the systems concept of management as discussed by (Bertalanffy 1968; Laszlo, 1996). The next stage in this literature review presents background information pertaining to Internet usage in the form of known statistics. In the context of the Internet as a new medium, it was thought relevant to examine the concept of critical mass (Rogers, 1997; Williams 1988) to establish the importance of this technological advance as a sufficient criterion warranting changes in the theory and practice of public relations.

The paper also reviews research and literature related to Web sites, and literature related to changes in the traditional models of communication—the discussion of the concept of convergence by Rogers (1986) and the four new models of communication including many-to-many, receiver-driven, access-driven, and market sample of one as proposed by Holtz (1999). This author also examined information on elements of a Web site (Nielson 1999, Hallahan 2001) that could make it an excellent public relations tool. Finally, a summary of recent studies concerning Web sites and public relations is presented.

Defining Public Relations

Before delving into the theories related to public relations, it is necessary to choose a definition of public relations from among the many in use.

Grunig and Hunt (1984, p.6), while emphasizing its management function, defined public relations as the “management of communication between an organization and its publics.” According to Grunig (1996), this definition encompasses the different public relations functional areas. This author used the above definition for relating the applications of Web sites to public relations.

Models of Communication

Press agency. The press agency model, exemplified by the 19th century press agent P.T.Barnum, performs the propaganda function. This is a one-way model, where communication flows one way from the organization to its publics through the media (Grunig and Hunt, 1984.) This model is not yet extinct. Remnants of this model can be seen in Web sites that simply carry messages from the organization and provide information to its publics without offering any feedback loops. Sites where feedback loops are nominally present but not actively used also follow this one-way model.

Mixed-motive model. Plowman et al. (2001) contributed a new model that includes comprehensive strategies for day-to-day practice of public relations and can be especially useful in conflict resolution. The mixed-motive model they proposed covers both the symmetrical and asymmetrical models. It contains the nine tactics of contention (one party forcing its position on another party), avoidance, accommodation,

compromise, cooperation, unconditionally constructive, win-win/no deal, principled, and mediated/cultural. The ultimate aim of these tactics is to build relationships with the various publics of an organization.

While conflict resolution/negotiation is a managerial function, organizational Web sites can be used to mirror managerial decisions in the information they present, the way it is presented; in the way feedback from publics is acted upon, and in the way dialogue is/is not conducted. The various tactics that public relations professionals can use on a daily basis can also be translated to the organization's Web site. For example, these could be reflected in the commentaries by management and in the updated news and information available on the site. The Web site can thus be involved in the process of negotiating solutions.

Theory of Dialogic Communication

Pearson (1989) stated that despite structural constraints, public relations practitioners are responsible for creating conditions conducive to dialogue. This is essential because dialogue is the requirement for ethical corporate conduct that affects an organization's publics. He stressed the importance of interorganizational communication systems that come to solutions through participant satisfaction. In this connection, Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested that Grunig's concept of symmetrical communications, which is procedural in nature, could be better understood through dialogic communication, which is product rather than process. This product could be obtained by implementing the five principles explained by them.

Cutlip et al. (2000, p.4) stated, “The two-way concept emphasizes communication exchange, reciprocity, and mutual understanding.” According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), the two-way symmetric model implies a dialogue, where both the public and the organization are equally likely to persuade each other to change attitudes. Even if they don’t change their attitudes and behaviors, the public relations effort can be said to be successful as long as their communication ensures mutual understanding of their positions. The two-way symmetrical model combines sophisticated research techniques used in the two-way asymmetrical model, with a symmetrical worldview to achieve a balance where communicators negotiate mutually beneficial solutions that involve reciprocal, symbiotic action from both publics and the organization.

Kent and Taylor (1998) defined dialogic communication as any “negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions.” They recognized the potential of Web sites as excellent tools of public relations, “The Web provides public relations practitioners an opportunity to create dynamic and lasting relationships with publics, however to do so requires that dialogic loops be incorporated into Web pages and Webbed communication.”

This study uses the five principles of dialogic communication explained by Kent and Taylor (1998)—dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface, and conservation of visitors—to derive desirable characteristics in the organizational Web site. The interactive, dialogical potential of Web sites makes them easy tools of two-way asymmetrical communication if they employ staff skilled in sophisticated research techniques.

Web sites offer numerous possibilities for information gathering and audience research as pointed out by Wilcox & Nolte (2000), Gaddis (2001), Witmer (2000), and Holtz (1999). It is up to organizations to exploit these capabilities only to benefit themselves or to strive for mutual understanding with publics through continuous dialogue.

The Systems Approach

Systems theory is based on the assumption that there are universal principles of organization, which are true for all systems. Bertalanffy (1968) contended that organisms are open systems that cannot exist in a vacuum. They cease to exist if they cannot carry out exchanges with the environment. The world comprises of interconnected systems.

The systems approach emphasizes the interaction and connectedness of the different components of a system irrespective of their composition. (Laszlo, Ervin, 1997) It points the direction to a worldview that is natural and holistic.

Cutlip et al. (2000) examined the systems approach to organizational management, which views an organization as a system. They liken the open systems approach to public relations to the two-way symmetric model. The open systems approach uses public relations to get input from the organization's environment and to use it to bring about changes in the organization, as well as its environment. It involves identifying specific publics that affect and are affected by organizational changes, and being sensitive to them. At the same time it also involves research skills essential to monitor internal forces at work within the organization. Public relations in an

open system has the ability to direct its corrective communication efforts at both internal and external publics to achieve goals that are mutually beneficial.

Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 93) stated that systems theory assumes the organization to be an open system whose “subsystems affect one another and are affected by environmental systems.” Systems theory is goal-oriented and uses quantitative methods with computers to gather and process information. In systems management, the public relations manager may try to change other systems—publics—or adapt to other systems, or do both depending on the organization’s environment. Grunig and Hunt (1984) found the systems theory helpful for managing public relations departments that are two-way asymmetric or two-way symmetric.

Applying the open systems theory to Web sites, an organization can use its Web site to get input from its environment, to quantify it, to identify sensitive publics and to be sensitive to them. Though the organization may not respond symmetrically, it needs to understand its publics and engage in exchanges if it is to thrive. While the Web site can be only a part of the entire systems approach, it can contribute in helping the organization achieve its goals. However, organizations using the closed systems concept will use their Web sites as one way communication tools, being content with publishing information.

The organizational Web site itself can be assumed to be a system, a part of the larger organizational system. It is necessary to ensure that it stays interconnected with its environment, as it would atrophy in a vacuum. It should maintain itself in a changing environment and respond to changes. The Web site has to be an independent entity and at

the same time a part of the organization, acting as its eyes, ears, and mouth. It has to be connected to all that is happening within the organizations and outside. It has to engage its public in dialogue by using its dialogic loops. The information it gathers from its publics can be used to make changes in the site itself and also in the organization. The changes in the site also have effects on its environment, its publics, and the way in which they react to it. The site can thrive as a system only if it is allowed free circulation of information and interaction.

A thriving Web site can bring its users nearer by facilitating interaction. This will bring about mutual understanding between the organization and its publics. It is then close to its potential of bringing the organization to the point of convergence. This would ultimately benefit the organization, its publics, and the community in which they exist. The concept of convergence is discussed later on.

Having reviewed the theoretical literature pertinent to public relations it is now necessary to look into background information about the Internet and the Web, and to examine if these innovations have indeed reached a 'critical mass'.

The Internet

The concept of critical mass. Before discussing the Internet and its applications to public relations, it is essential to establish that the use of the Internet has spread sufficiently to warrant its importance. Rogers (1995) described the unique feature—critical mass—involved in the adoption process of interactive media. He stated: "The critical mass occurs at the point at which enough individuals have adopted an innovation

so that the innovation's further rate of adoption becomes self-sustaining." Rogers (1997) explained that critical mass is particularly evident in the diffusion of new media like the Internet because of their interactive nature. As new users embrace the Internet, it increases its value for each existing user, and also for future users.

It is essential to determine that the usage of Web sites has reached critical mass in order to consider organizational Web sites as legitimate tools of public relations, and as tools of convergence. The concept of convergence is discussed next as it is directly related to the interactive potential of Web sites and to the systems approach that sees the world as distinct yet interconnected systems. Once the organization accepts the systems holistic view, and opens itself to the views of others, it can move towards convergence by initiating, generating, and maintaining dialogue with its publics. It is the unrestricted circulating of information that brings the world closer. The Web site can help in circulating information by incorporating dialogic loops and other features essential for two-way communication.

Internet: a brief history

Slevin (2000) traced the evolution of the Internet from the ARPANET in 1969, to the legal action taken by the U.S. government against Microsoft as a browser monopoly. The Advanced Research Project Agency (ARPA) was a major contributor to the emergence of computers as a communication tool. ARPA which was established by the Pentagon to maintain the position of the U.S. as a leader in science and technology, created the ARPANET in 1969, which is the original form of the present-day Internet. It

was a communication tool for computer scientists. Later, in 1981, the BITNET—which stands for ‘Because It’s Time Network’ started by connection of leased telephone lines between universities. In the early 1990s, BITNET joined with many other networks to form the Internet, an electronic network of networks. However, as Holtz (1999) pointed out, the Internet became accessible to the average public only in 1993 when the Mosaic—a utility or browser for using the World Wide Web— was introduced. Holtz stated, “As more and more people signed up and installed Mosaic on their computers, more and more individuals and institutions created sites and pages to which people could navigate.”

The fastest growing technology in world history is the Internet. While it took 46 years for electricity, 38 years for the telephone, and 17 years for television to reach 30% of American homes, it took only seven years for the Internet to reach 30% of American households. The Web has grown phenomenally since it became public. According to the International Telecommunications Union, there were 214 countries connected to the Internet worldwide in 2000—a jump from the 60 countries that were connected in 1993. The ITU reports that in 2000, there were 315 million Internet users, while the PR Reporter pegs the number of Web users at 350 million. In the U.S., the Internet has penetrated 35% of the population.

The U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) recently issued a report that states that the overall level of U.S. digital inclusion is increasing at a fast rate, with the percentage of households with Internet access increasing by 58%, rising from 26.2% in December 1998

to 41.5% in August 2000. There were 116.5 million Americans online in August 2000, which is 31.9 million more than there were only 20 months earlier. The report by NTIA displays the pattern of household access to computers and Internet that is similar to the 'S' curve pattern typically observed in the adoption of new technologies.

The U.S. Census Bureau, current population survey of August 2000 mentioned that among various uses, 87.7% of the adult population with Internet access uses the net for e-mail, while 64.2% use it for researching information, and 39.8% use it for shopping/paying bills.

According to a Nielson/Netratings report, as on April 2001, 103,056,022 people were active users of the Internet in the U.S. A recently released report from Scarborough Research found that at the end of 2000, 48% of adults in the US used the Internet in the 30 days prior to the study and 55% had been using the Internet for three or more years. In fact, Scarborough reports that a growing percentage of Internet users are decreasing their alternative media consumption due to Internet usage.

All the above data, point to the rapid diffusion of the Internet as an innovation. Though the digital divide does exist, there has been tremendous progress in computer ownership and Internet access rates. It is obvious from the statistics that the Web is growing in popularity and has reached a self-sustaining point of no return.

Theoretical Concepts Related to the Internet

The concept of convergence. Rogers and Kincaid (1981) explained the concept of convergence in communication. They first identify communication as the process leading

to mutual understanding. It is a recurring process involving assigning meaning to information exchanged between two or more individuals as they move towards convergence. Rogers and Kincaid define convergence as: "The tendency to move toward one point, or for one individual to move toward another, and to unite in a common interest or focus." Rogers (1988) suggested that theories stressing communication networks and interaction are apt for the new media. The new media are an amalgam of computers and telecommunications. While computers are interactive, telecommunications encourage communication among entities. He stated that instead of seeing communication as a linear transmission of a message from a source to a receiver through a fixed channel, it could be seen as "an interactive process of convergence." Rogers (1986) acknowledged that basic changes in communication models are required as the new communication technologies with their unique features help shape societies, which value information more than anything else.

Web sites can be a conduit for convergence between an organization and its publics if they shed their linearity and employ their interactive capacity for dialogic communication.

The interactive, dialogic capacity of Web sites derives from the peculiar nature of the Internet. The Internet vastly differs from the traditional forms of media in certain ways. This literature review now looks at the four new models of communication proposed by Holtz (2000) that help delineate the Internet as a distinct medium.

Four new models of communication. Holtz (2000) proposed four new communication models including many-to-many, receiver-driven communications, access-driven communications, attracting a market sample of one. The few-to-many model of one-way communication from the organization to its target audience has given way to the many-to-many model with the advent of computer-mediated communications as interested publics can easily and freely share information and organizations no longer have a monopoly over publishing material. This means that the one-way asymmetrical models of communication now have an alternative. Web sites can afford one to many communications, while also supporting many to many communications and feedback loops for organizations.

The Internet has replaced the producer-driven, linear model of communication where information was presented or ‘pushed’ in logical progression, to a receiver-driven model where information is presented through ‘pull’ mechanisms, customized to suit a specific audience, which actively seeks specific information. In the context of organizational Web sites, this means that information presented without a target audience in mind will not be “pulled” or used. The one-way communication models, therefore, will not work to the advantage of an organization if it does not strive to understand its target publics and only concentrates on its own agenda. However, the information that is “pulled” from Web sites can be tracked, so the organization can know what is important to its publics and address that, leading to two-way communication.

The access-driven model makes information available in the media that the

particular audience is most likely to select when seeking information. On the Web, this just means that a Web site should contain material that would be of interest to the target audience and the audience will come to the Web site.

The market-sample-of-one approach involves understanding consumers on a niche level, and enticing one member at a time by ensuring the right information awaits individuals where they are likely to seek it. Though the Web site reaches many people at once, the intensely personal nature of viewing it makes it a powerful medium to reach the individual member in the audience.

In addition to the four new models, Holtz (1999) observed five major characteristics of communication on the Internet that set it apart from the other traditional media. Rogers (1986) pointed out three unique features of the new media. These are reviewed next.

Characteristics of new media. Rogers (1986) enumerated the changes in communication due to new technologies, pointing out the distinguishing characteristics of the new media. The first difference in the new communication systems is their interactivity, which is the ability of the system to respond or 'talk back' to the user like in interpersonal communication.

However, unlike interpersonal communication, new media can reach a larger audience. The second difference is that the new media are de-massified and individualized as the control of mass communication system moves from sender to receiver. Individual messages can be exchanged with members of a large audience,

though the communication is not face-to-face. The third difference is that the new media are asynchronous—no longer time bound. Sending or receiving a message can be done at the individual's convenience.

Holtz (1999) pointed out five differences between print communication and Internet communication. He said that information communicated through paper is linear as it begins at a certain point—upper-left-hand corner, and proceeds in the same fashion. However, information presented through the Internet is non-linear as the readers can start at any point and pull the information they want. If the reader follows links placed on a page, the context of information previously read changes with the nature of the new page. The second difference is that the Internet communication is two-dimensional as information is displayed on a flat computer screen. When online, the principle is—what you see is what you get. This requires that the visitors to a Web site should immediately know where they are instead of having to laboriously click their way through the structure. Print, in contrast, is three-dimensional so within mere seconds, one can sense the structure of a print medium. The third difference involves interactivity, with the print media being devoid of interaction and the online—especially Web—content being interactive in various ways at different levels. The fourth difference between online and print media is that in print, communication is only through words and pictures, whereas online the tools of communication include multimedia—audio, video, animation, interactivity etc. The fifth difference is the physiological effect of the online media, with the light-radiating computer screen placing more strain on the human system leading to

eyestrain, headaches and nausea due to rapid scrolling of text.

The unique characteristics of the Internet distinguish it from the other media of communication. As it differs in certain basic ways from the existing media, the rules of communication for the Internet also differ in some ways from the established rules of communication for the traditional media. It is essential to review how this new medium with its evolving rules can be used in the practice of public relations. This review now moves to the uses of the Internet in public relations. Holtz (1998, 1999) has contributed in this area too.

Uses of the Internet in Public Relations

Holtz (1999) suggested that the Internet could be employed strategically in a public relations plan to establish a Web site, publish press releases, video news releases of open house events, photos, facts and figures about the company's economy, surveys, participation in select discussion groups, and banner ads. The Net can also be used to research a company's environment by reading newsgroups, using search engines and other Web services, subscribing to mailing lists, conducting focus groups through e-mail and chat rooms.

If the organization uses its Web site only to publish facts and figures, it becomes a one-way communication tool. The Web site can be said to conform to the public information model. In addition to participating in other discussion groups on the Internet, if the Web site has a discussion group/message board and chat rooms, these can be monitored to get an insight into the views of publics. Also, arranging live chat sessions of

organizational experts/leaders with the public will open the doors for two-way communication.

Holtz (1998), while tracing the involvement of IT professionals in knowing and using the Internet, gave some helpful pointers to communicators who demand a role in controlling Web sites as they become more aware of their company's Web presence. He suggested that they should learn about computers and networks to get along with the IT staff, discuss what constitutes 'content', move to a stage of mutual commitment to work together in the best interests of the organization. He stated that mutual commitment, mutual responsibility for success of a Web site, and cross-functional teams are of importance.

Witmer (2000, p126) observed that the traditional media gatekeepers, as well as target publics directly, could be reached through the Internet in different ways. She stated: "The increasingly sophisticated capabilities of the Web offer public relations opportunities that are hampered only by the practitioner's imagination." Acknowledging that the media turn to public relations people as major sources of news, Witmer said that apart from sending electronic news releases to journalists, who accept them, the Internet could help in establishing media relations through online discussion groups. She said: "In addition to media relations, practitioners can exploit the features of the Internet for a variety of public relations functions, including consumer relations, issues tracking, crisis communication, marketing communications, government affairs, employment opportunities, and investor relations." The organizational Web site can address all these

areas and also involve the various publics by imbedding dialogic loops in its pages.

Making the content relevant to and useful to various publics moves the Web site closer to becoming an integrated system.

Gaddis (2001) noted that the Internet was a valuable research tool for public relations practitioners as it offered a quick, easy and inexpensive alternative to traditional methods for gathering information from local, national and international publics. She mentioned on-line interviewing, e-mail surveys, Web surveys, focus groups, newsgroups, newsgroups and electronic mailing lists as Internet-based research tools. These same tools can help the organizational Web site become a public relations tool with two-way communication capabilities. However, the organization should have dedicated staff skilled in research techniques to make full use of these research tools.

Wilcox and Nolte (2000), while acknowledging the Web as the first controlled medium to reach a mass audience minus the traditional media gatekeepers, noted the main features of a Web site that help in public relations functions. They observed that on a Web site information can be updated swiftly, and distribution of information to journalists and publics is cost-effective. Interactivity is allowed so users can ask questions, get answers, download required information, and express their opinions. Space constraints of the print medium do not restrict online information. Readers can obtain details of subjects that interest them through links to other resources.

Wilcox and Nolte (2000) observed that a potential disadvantage of Web sites featuring exhaustive information on an organization in the form of press kits, annual

reports, etc. is that media representatives can bypass the public relations persons of an organization. Though personal contact between public relations personnel and journalists could be reduced, it is not a desirable outcome, as the Web does not replace that need. The authors, while stressing the interactive nature of Web sites that enables a person to engage in dialogue with an organization, cautioned that the organization should be prepared to respond efficiently and effectively to queries from its publics.

Having established the importance of the Internet and of organizational Web sites to the practice of public relations, this review now segues to the elements that can make a Web site an ideal public relations tool.

What Elements Make a Web Site an Ideal Public Relations Tool?

Marlow (1996) stated that organizations should utilize the interactive potential of the Internet to communicate with its customers. Asking for feedback and suggestions on new offerings is one way of involving customers. Marlow recommended updating the creative content of the site periodically—at least once a month, keeping the home page interesting, and making special offers to people in the form of new reports or research or studies.

According to Kent and Taylor (1998), all Web sites should provide information of general value to all publics. A Web site is effective if it has good content, and it should not rely on flashy graphics to lure the audience. Graphics increase download time and make the site inaccessible. This point is worth remembering in relation to the finding that the average person will wait only 8 seconds for a Web page to load. (Source: *Fortune*,

June 12, 2000) Kent and Taylor suggested allowing viewers to choose between a basic version of the site, and a more advanced version requiring higher system capabilities. Advertising links should be avoided or placed strategically as they lead visitors away, and are distracting too. They state five principles to maintain two-way communication with publics and to capitalize on the interactive potential of the Web—the dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface, rule of conservation of visitors.

Nielson (1999) specified some of the elements that make a Web site usable. These included ease of navigation in helping users manage loads of information, reducing navigational clutter, using subsites to keep information manageable, providing search capabilities, proper page descriptions and key words.

While defining usability as a branch of ergonomics that studies design for human use, Kirk Hallahan (2001) stressed the need for usability research of organizational Web sites by public relations professionals to test the effectiveness of messages. He discussed the elements of an effective Web site based on usability principles. Hallahan said that content and simplicity of design are vital criteria in a Web site. Content should be practical and useful to the site's users including reporters. Simplicity of design includes the following five pointers—systems compatibility, speed of use and decision-making, ease of navigation (existence of navigation bars and icons on every page, color and/typographic coding of similar classes of information, backlinks to tops of documents and main pages, key section breaks, and simplified main menus), success rate of searches

and a concise writing style that effectively uses links, subheadings and bullets.

The authors mentioned above and other Web design experts have pointed various ways of making Web sites easier to use. Such guidelines help establish rules for this evolving medium. Most organizations with resources now have their own Web sites. Naturally research has been conducted on the different aspects of Web sites as tools of organizational communication. This literature review now looks at the research done in recent years that is relevant to this study.

Related Studies

Marchwick, Tamplin, and Wanca (1997) did a quantitative study of Fortune 100 Web sites to determine the diffusion of Internet innovations in organizations. They found that organizations in telecommunications, electronic, and computer industries (TEC) had a higher rate of innovation adoption than non-TEC industries.

White and Raman (1999) conducted a study of persons responsible for the Web site development of organizations. They found that the processes of planning, research, and evaluation that are so fundamental to public relations were not carried out when designing corporate Web sites. Sites were designed based on trial and error methods and intuition instead. This was found to be so because organizations treated Web sites as a kind of status symbol as they wished to establish an Internet presence to keep up with the competition.

Hill and White (2000) conducted interviews with public relations practitioners in organizations with Web sites to explore perceptions about the value of the World Wide

Web as a communications tool. The study uncovered that though Web sites were viewed as tools for enhancing an organization's image, the practitioners were unable to give them time or priority to keep them up-to-date.

In an effort to develop a typology of corporate Web sites, Esrock and Leichty (2000) did a content analysis of a random sample of Fortune 500 company Web sites, examining the publics addressed and the features on the home pages. They found that investors, customers and the press were the most addressed publics in that order of importance. Many of the home pages were found easy to navigate. This author partially replicated the study conducted by Esrock and Leichty (2000).

Springston J. (2001) described a study conducted to research the impact of Internet-related technology on public relations. Mail questionnaires were sent to public relations practitioners throughout the U.S. to question respondents about the impact of the Internet on themselves, their organizations, and the public relations field. The results showed that a majority—94% of practitioners had access to the Internet. E-mail and the Web appeared the most important aspects of the Internet, and practitioners used the Internet for research purposes. However, the results showed that the practitioners and their organizations were incapable of exploiting the Internet's multimedia and hypertext capabilities. Respondents conveyed that they needed technology training to keep abreast of the latest technological advances. The dialogic communication potential of the Web will remain unused if public relations practitioners are unskilled/untrained in the new medium.

Summary and Research Questions

This literature review discussed the four main theories used in this study: the press agency model of one-way communication, the mixed-motive model, the theory of dialogic communication, and systems theory. The concept of critical mass and the concept of convergence, were also discussed as they are relevant to the subject of organizational Web sites. The four new models of communication and the distinguishing characteristics of the Internet as a medium of communication were reviewed. Next, this author examined information on the uses of the Internet in public relations. Information on elements of a Web site that could make it an excellent public relations tool was also reviewed. Finally, a summary of recent studies concerning Web sites and public relations was presented in this literature review.

The press agency model of one-way communication that was widely practiced two centuries ago is reflected in the Web sites of some organizations even today. Organizational Web sites that are used mainly to publish information favorable to the organization can be said to follow the press agency model.

The mixed-motive model employs nine strategies with the final aim of building relationships with the various publics of an organization. The tactics falling under the symmetrical scale can be implemented in the organizational Web site by giving up-to-date information and management's commentaries and also by adding the information/features that are desired by the publics. Omitting an issue under negotiation from the Web site could reflect the tactic of avoidance. Each of the nine strategies

included in the model can be used in the Web site simultaneously while the organization is dealing with its publics through interpersonal communications or through other media.

The theory of dialogic communications views dialogue as a product rather than a procedure. Pearson (1989) holds public relations practitioners responsible for creating conditions favorable for dialogue while recognizing the potential of the Web for building relationships with publics. The theory advocates the use of dialogic loops in Web pages. It provides five basic rules— dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface, and conservation of visitors—to create a Web site capable of dialogic communications. These rules form the backbone of this study.

The systems theory stresses the importance of a holistic approach towards the world that is formed of integral, interconnected systems, based on common organizational principles. Just as the components of a system are connected and interrelated irrespective of their composition, the systems themselves are interconnected. Systems cannot exist in a vacuum. Much like the two-way symmetrical model, they exchange input with the environment, affecting it and getting affected by it. Assuming the Web site to be a system, it needs to exchange information freely with its publics, which form its environment, and with the organization itself. This can happen only if the Web site contains the latest organizational information while also having easy access to input from its users. Latest information can be published on the Web site in an open system where those in charge of updating the site have access to management's decisions, and where the management views the site as an important tool of communication. A Web

site can actively seek input from users by providing its users easy access to dialogic loop features such as feedback links and surveys. A site addressing and responding to multiple publics could be said to conform to the holistic systems concept.

The Internet and the Web are in such wide use that there is no fear of this medium lacking sustenance. With 64% of the U.S adult population with Internet access using it for researching information, the Web sites on the Internet can be said to have reached a “critical mass.” Web sites of companies can now reach an audience large enough to consider them as major tools of communication. Rogers (1986), Holtz (1999), and Witmer (2000) acknowledge them as capable of forming relationships with publics. When used with that intention, they have the potential of getting the organization to a point of common interest or “convergence” with its publics. Various experts (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Nielson, 1999; Hallahan, 2000; and Gaddis, 2000) have explained the features that can make a Web site interactive, and effective. Wilcox and Nolte (2000) sounded a realistic note of caution saying that it was crucial for an organization to be prepared to respond efficiently and effectively to queries/comments from its publics. Without this preparation, the dialogic loops would be in vain.

The four new models of communication (Holtz, 2000) and the unique features of the Internet pointed out by Rogers (1986), Holtz (1999) help in understanding how communication through a Web site differs from communication through other media. While keeping the various audiences uppermost in mind, the site designer also has to consider the physiological limitations this medium places on the person using a Web site.

Uses of the Internet in public relations point to swift, low-cost, easy updating of information on Web sites for the benefit of various publics, especially the media (Holtz, 1999; Gaddis, 2001; Wilcox and Nolte, 2000.) However, virtually every public relations issue including crisis communication, government affairs, marketing communications, investor relations, customer relations, employee communications, can be addressed through the organizational Web site (Witmer, 2000.)

This review discussed the views of various authors on the elements that make a Web site an ideal communication tool. Addressing different publics through specific, updated content, incorporating dialogic features, making navigation easy for the user, simplicity of design, and provision of search capabilities emerged as essential features of a Web site.

The recent research done on organizational Web sites from the point of view of public relations was summarized. The research conducted by Esrock and Leichty (2000) was partially replicated in this study. Based on the literature review, 40 characteristics that can make an organizational Web site a tool of dialogic communication were distilled by this author. These are detailed in the next chapter of this thesis.

The theories indicated the need for organizations to initiate and sustain dialogue with publics, while various Web design experts explained the elements that can make a site useful. Combining It is apparent that the sites that use the above features can be used as dialogic tools of communication. This leads to the hypothesis that organizations with the financial capacity and manpower to do so make full use of their Web sites as

dialogical public relations tools. The other research questions based on the review are:

Do organizational Web sites address their various publics by providing relevant content for them on their sites? Are organizational Web sites geared to attract users repeatedly and to retain them? Are the Web sites easy to use?

Taking into consideration the importance of dialogic communication in excellent public relations, the interactive potential of Web sites as tools for two-way dialogic communication needs to be examined more closely. Though researchers have conducted studies that relate to public relations and the functions of organizational Web sites, definitive guidelines that pinpoint the characteristics necessary for sites to emerge as tools of excellent public relations communication are yet to emerge. Building on the study conducted by Esrock and Leichty (2000), this study attempts to define such guidelines.

Chapter III

Method

Strengths of Content Analysis

The quantitative method of content analysis best suited the purpose of the research questions. Content analysis was chosen as the primary method for this study as the nature of mediated communication under study is well suited for it, and affords a great degree of reliability. This author distilled 40 variables based on the literature review and previous studies. These variables were used to evaluate the 250 Web sites that were studied. The variables are operationally defined on the following page. The amount of data involved necessitates the use of the method of content analysis.

Content analysis is an unobtrusive method that does not alter or interfere with any of the things being researched. Babbie (2001) included Web pages among other forms of communication that lend themselves to content analysis. He explained content analysis as “the study of recorded human communications.” (p304)

Berelson (1952) defined content analysis as “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p 18). Holsti (1969) emphasized the inferential nature of this method, defining it as “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (p14). Krippendorff (1986) was more explicit in spelling out the goal of content analysis, describing it as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context.” As content

analysis is a replicable method, it satisfies the requirement of reliability.

Weaknesses of Content Analysis

The method of content analysis has its drawbacks. Besides being limited to the data recorded, it is not strongest in terms of validity. The richness and depth of data obtained by qualitative interviewing is lacking in content analysis. For the purpose of this study, the method of content analysis did not throw light on the way in which organizations used the information gathered from publics on their Web sites.

Variables Involved

Based on the literature review, 40 characteristics were distilled to examine the extent to which the Web site is used as a public relations tool. The Web sites were coded for presence/absence of the principles of dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface, and rule of conservation of visitors. The following features were coded as 1 (one), if they were present on a Web site and 2 (two) if they were absent:

Dialogic loop. These are the features that make it easy for visitors to initiate communication with the company. The researcher examined whether or not the front page of the site included (1) feedback or e-mail links to the corporation; (2) online surveys; (3) comment/response features; (4) use of “cookies” (cookies are short pieces of data used by Web servers to help identify Web site usage.)

Usefulness of information. These features determine the prominence given on the front page to different publics: (5) presence of clearly identified hyperlinks or icons with

content specific to audiences including customer/customer service; (6) dealers/retailers; (7) employees; (8) prospective employees (employment opportunities); (9) the press; and (10) investors/shareholders/financial community. The more audiences are addressed, the better the company is represented in all its facets according to Esrock and Leichty (1998.) Web sites were coded for presence of other features, such as (11) availability of news releases; (12) annual reports; and (13) multimedia formats. Characteristics suggested by Kent and Taylor (1998) that were also coded for their presence include (14) search engine; (15) contact addresses; (16) telephone numbers; (17) e-mail addresses of organizational/external experts; (18) content areas specific to the organization's product/service; (19) mailing lists; and (20) discussion groups.

Generation of return visits. Web sites were coded for features that attract users repeatedly. According to Kent and Taylor (1998) and Marlow E. (1996), these include: (21) updated information; (22) new commentaries; (23) online question and answer capacity; (24) featuring experts to chat with public; (25) FAQ sections; (26) easily downloadable or mailed information; and (27) links to local agencies or information providers.

Ease of interface. Nielson (1999) stressed the importance of ease of navigation. The characteristics specified by Kent and Taylor (1998) that make the Web site easy to use even for the average user were coded. These include: (28) well-formatted content; (29) absence of needless graphics; and (30) accessibility for users with minimal software and computer memory capacity (choice between plain text site and another supercharged

site). Sites were coded for (31) the presence of site maps or indexes as done by Esrock and Leichty (1998). Sites were also coded for the presence of the following elements specified by Hallahan (2001): (32) navigation bars and icons on every page; (33) color and/typographic coding of similar classes of information; (34) backlinks to tops of documents and main pages; and (35) simplified main menus.

Conservation of visitors. The following characteristics of Web sites mentioned by Kent and Taylor (1998) were examined: (36) download time (Time taken for a Web page to open is not more than 8 seconds); (37) absence of non-essential links; (38) clearly marked return paths to Web site from essential links; (39) placement of advertising if any at bottom of page or behind other clearly marked links to minimize distraction of visitors; and (40) concise writing style (short sentences and paragraphs, use of meaningful subheadings, bullets) as suggested by Kirk Hallahan (2001.)

Research Design

Quantitative content analysis of Fortune 500 Web sites was carried out between January and April 2002. The rank-ordered Fortune 500 list of companies (www.pathfinder.com/fortune/fortune500/500list.html) as of Jan 22, 2002, was used for studying corporate Web sites.

Companies were classified under 10 different categories by industry: consumer discretionary, consumer staples, energy, financials, healthcare, industrials, information technology, materials, telecommunication services, and utilities. The companies in the Fortune 500 listing were ranked in descending order of size with the topmost ranked

company being the largest in the list. This study partially replicated the study conducted by Esrock and Leichty (2000.)

Web sites of companies were the subject of analysis, and Web pages the units of analysis. As seen in the previous pages, 40 variables were operationally defined. Operationally defining the key terms of analysis allowed a valid coding system. Web sites were accessed through a dial-up computer modem connected to a phone-line at an average speed of 52 KBPS.

The content of 250 of the 500 Web sites included in the Fortune 500 database of companies was analyzed on the 40 criteria mentioned earlier. The companies analyzed, were ranked 1 to 200, and 448 to 500 in the Fortune 500 rankings. Two of the companies—Reliance Group Holdings, a financial company ranked 459, and Interstate Bakeries, a consumer staple company ranked 464—did not have their own Web sites. Aid Association for Lutherans, a financial company ranked 477, merged with Lutheran Brotherhood, and did not have a Web site. The companies were classified under economic sectors as per Standard & Poor's Global Industry Classification Standard and were divided into groups of 50 for comparing Web sites of larger and smaller companies.

The chi-square test was used as the test of significance to examine the relationship between variables. The independent variables were the groups based on the rankings of the companies and the six categories of industries. The dependent variables were the 40 features observed. The level of significance to consider an association between the independent and dependent variables was determined to be $p < 0.05$.

The findings are presented in the form of tables for easier understanding. Separate tables are displayed for each of the five principles of dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface, and conservation of visitors. Tables are arranged first based on the Fortune 500 rankings and then based on industry categories. The major observations are discussed, followed by the detailed table.

Chapter IV

Results

The use of cookies was found to be significantly less in companies ranked in the bottom 50 Fortune 500 companies, that is companies 448 through 500. While these companies used cookies only 32% of the time, the company ranked in the top 50 that is companies 1 through 50 used cookies 60% of the time. Companies ranked 51 through 100 used cookies 52% of the time; companies ranked 101 through 150 used cookies 64% of the time; while companies ranked 151 through 200 used cookies 56% of the time. The use of feedback links was consistent across rankings, ranging from 70% to 86%. This was followed by the use of cookies, which ranged from 32% to 64%. In complete contrast, the use of surveys and response features was very infrequent across company rankings, and across industries. The use of surveys ranged from 2% to 10% across and from non-existent to 6% respectively. The other dialogic features had no statistically significant differences for the size of the company as can be seen from Table 1.

The Web page containing press releases was inaccessible on the Universal Corp. site. When this author sent e-mail through the feedback link on the site, an automated response was received. Shortly afterwards, the company activated that page.

Table1

Presence of Dialogic Loop Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies

Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics

Features	1-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	448-500	χ^2	Prob
	n=50	n=50	n=50	n=50	n=50		*p<0.05
FL	82	70	70	86	78	05.818	.213
SV	4	4	10	4	2	04.027	.402
RP	2	4	4	0	2	02.391	.664
CK	60	52	64	56	32	12.455	.014

Note. FL=Feedback/E-mail Links, SV=Survey/s, RP=Response Features, CK=Cookies

As Table 2 indicates, energy/utility companies differed significantly in the use of feedback/e-mail links on their Web sites at 97%. The healthcare company sites followed at 87%. Overall, the presence of feedback links to the companies was observed across all industry categories, ranging from 65% to 97%. In comparison to feedback links, surveys and response features were infrequent across all industry categories. Among consumer companies, Procter & Gamble had a hyperlink for surveys on the home page to help the company get specific feedback on its products. Whirlpool displayed survey instruments and promotions on the home page in such a way that the user would not miss them.

Puget Sound Energy, an energy company also had a survey on its home page. Duke Energy, another energy company displayed awareness for the need to carry on a dialogue, simply by giving prominence to the feedback link on the home page. It had its feedback link right in the middle of the home page, saying: “Ask us a question. The time for dialogue is now!” The Coca-Cola site had response features based on the topical theme of Winter Olympics. The Sun Microsystems site was the only one with both surveys and response/comment features.

Across rankings and industries, feedback/e-mail links to the Web site were present in 77% of the sites, surveys were present in 4.8% of the sites, comment/response features were present in 2.4% of the sites, and cookies were used by 59% of the sites.

Table 2

Presence of Dialogic Loop Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies

Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics

Features	1	2	3	4	5	6	χ^2	Prob
	n=74	n=34	n=41	n=23	n=43	n=35		*p<0.05
FL	74	97	71	87	65	80	13.907	.016
SV	5	3	7	4	5	3	1.186	.946
RP	4	6	0	0	0	3	5.287	.382
CK	55	53	49	61	42	60	3.862	.570

Note. Classification of company Web sites is based on Standard and Poor's Global Industry Classification Standard. The six categories are respectively: (1) Consumer Discretionary and Consumer Staple; (2) Energy and Utilities; (3) Financials; (4) Healthcare; (5) Industrials and Materials; and (6) Information Technology and Telecommunication Services. FL=Feedback/E-mail Links, SV=Survey/s, RP=Response Features, CK=Cookies

As Table 3 shows, companies largest in size were observed to address their customers more than the smaller companies. Fortune 500 companies differed significantly by size in almost half (7 of 16) information usefulness characteristics. Companies ranked in the top 50 were significantly more likely to address customer and investor needs and less likely to use mailing lists. While 74% of the companies ranked in the top 50 addressed customers, only 38% of the companies ranked in the bottom 50 did so. Only 96% of the top 50 companies addressed investors through hyperlinks/icons on the home page. Only 32% of the top 50 companies used mailing lists, while 82% of the companies ranked 51-100 used mailing lists. Hyperlinks/Icons for customer service were more prevalent in larger companies. This indicates a stronger customer-service attitude in these organizations that is reflected in their Web sites. It could also be because top ranked organizations have the capacity to transact business through their sites, necessitating customer service on the Net. However, this study did not examine the e-commerce capability of Web sites. Overall, larger companies were generally found to be more adept at addressing their various publics through their sites.

Companies ranked 51-100 were surprisingly lagging behind in addressing their dealers/retailers/suppliers at 14% of the time compared to companies ranked 101-150 at 34% of the time, and the top 50 companies at 30%. Web sites of companies ranked 51 to 100 on the Fortune 500 ranking used multimedia formats 88% of the time, while the top 50 companies used multimedia 64% of the time.

This indicates willingness to experiment with newer media forms and a technically competent staff possibly fuelled by a desire to make their sites more uptodate than the top 50 companies' sites.

The use of search engines decreased significantly with a decrease in company size. The top 50 companies used search engines 92% of the time, while the bottom 50 used them only 48% of the time. This is because the larger sites addressed more publics, leading to more information on their sites. Search engines are justified to make the site more useful and easier to navigate only if the site contains a large amount of information.

This author observed that companies—such as TWA and American Airlines, AmeriSource and Bergen, Tosco and Phillips Petroleum—that have merged maintain a common site for investors and members of the media and another site for customers.

Table 3**Presence of Usefulness of Information Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies****Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics**

Features	1-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	448-500	χ^2	Prob
	n=50	n=50	n=50	n=50	n=50		(*p<0.05)
H-CS	74	50	48	44	38	15.140	.004
H-D/R/S	30	14	34	22	10	12.121	.016
H-Epy	8	6	2	8	6	2.128	.712
H-Ept	94	92	90	90	72	14.509	.006
H-Press	72	70	58	60	54	5.239	.264
H-Inv	96	84	72	82	82	10.474	.033
News	100	98	96	100	100	5.398	.249

Note. H-CS=Hyperlink/icon for customer service, H-D/R/S=hyperlink/icon for dealers/retailers/suppliers, H-Epy =hyperlink/icon for employees, H-Ept= hyperlink/icon for employment, H-Press= hyperlink/icon for the press, H-Inv=hyperlink/icon for investors, News=Availability of news releases

Table 3 continued on the next page...

Table 3 (continued)

Presence of Usefulness of Information Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies

Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics

Features	1-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	448-500	χ^2	Prob
	n=50	n=50	n=50	n=50	n=50		(*p<0.05)
AR	98	100	96	98	98	02.041	.728
MM	64	88	60	66	62	11.949	.018
Search	92	76	72	68	48	24.501	.000
CA	72	84	74	90	82	06.955	.138
TN	80	86	82	90	88	02.728	.604
E-mail	22	14	18	22	28	03.302	.509
P/S-SC	100	96	98	100	98	03.557	.469
ML	32	82	64	72	66	30.373	.000
DG	2	2	4	4	6	01.614	.806

Note. AR=availability of annual reports, MM=use of multimedia formats,

Search=presence of search engines, **CA**=contact address, **TN**=telephone numbers,

E-mail=e-mail addresses of organizational experts, **P/S-SC**=product/service-specific

content, **ML**=mailing lists/e-mail alerts, **DG**=discussion groups/message boards.

Table 4 shows that industry categories differed significantly on six of the sixteen information usefulness features: customers, dealers, press, investors, multimedia, and mailing lists. Also, the presence of some of the features was more across all industries than the others. Hyperlinks/icons for employment, news, annual reports, product/service-specific content, contact address, and telephone numbers were observed commonly across all industries, while hyperlink for employees, e-mail addresses of experts, and discussion groups were not very common across industries.

Finance companies addressed their customers' needs 73% of the time, followed by IT/telecom companies at 66% of the time, while healthcare companies were the last to do so at 30%. However, healthcare companies wooed prospective employees the most at 100%, while industrials/materials companies lagged behind at 79%. Healthcare and energy/utility companies also addressed the press most at 83 % and 82% respectively, while consumer companies were last to do so at 45%. Investors were the most prioritized public for energy/utility companies at 94%. IT/telecom companies had hyperlinks/icons on the home page for their dealers/retailers/suppliers/agents 34% of the time, while industrial/materials companies had them only 9% of the time. This researcher did not inquire whether companies who did not address their dealers/retailers/suppliers through their main Web sites did so through a separate site accessed exclusively by this public. Energy/utility companies used multimedia formats most at 88% of the time, while financial companies used them least at 46% of the time and IT/telecom companies used them 71% of the time. Energy/utility companies also scored the most on mailing

lists/e-mail alerts at 82%, while financial companies scored the least on this feature at 34%.

Prospective employees were the most prioritized public across industry categories, followed by investors. The press came a distant third in the priority assigned to it as a public. Of all the Web sites examined, 88% had hyperlinks/icons for employment opportunities, while 83% had icons for investors, and 63% had them for the press, 51% for customer service, 22% for dealers/retailers/suppliers, and only 6% for employees.

Most Web sites provided e-mail addresses of their public relations staff/media contacts. Surprisingly multimedia formats and mailing lists/e-mail alerts were used more frequently by energy/utility companies rather than by IT/telecommunication services companies.

Table 4**Presence of Usefulness of Information Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies****Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics**

Features	1	2	3	4	5	6	χ^2	Prob
	n=74	n=34	n=41	n=23	n=43	n=35		(*p<0.5)
H-CS	50	44	73	30	35	66	20.126	.001
H-D/R/S	28	26	15	13	9	34	11.641	.040
H-Epy	5	3	10	4	7	6	01.825	.873
H-Ept	85	88	90	100	79	91	07.299	.199
H-Press	45	82	54	83	63	80	25.825	.000
H-Inv	74	94	71	96	91	89	16.633	.005
News	100	97	98	100	98	100	03.463	.629

Note. The six categories are respectively: (1) Consumer Discretionary and Consumer Staple; (2) Energy and Utilities; (3) Financials; (4) Healthcare; (5) Industrials and Materials; and (6) Information Technology and Telecommunication Services.

H-CS=Hyperlink/icon for customer service, H-D/R/S=hyperlink/icon for dealers/retailers/suppliers, H-Epy =hyperlink/icon for employees, H-Ept= hyperlink/icon for employment, H-Press= hyperlink/icon for the press, H-Inv=hyperlink/icon for investors, News=Availability of news releases.

Table 4 continued on next page...

Table 4 (continued)

Presence of Usefulness of Information Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies

Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics

Features	1	2	3	4	5	6	χ^2	Prob
	n=74	n=34	n=41	n=23	n=43	n=35		(*p<0.5)
AR	95	100	100	100	100	97	07.387	.193
MM	68	88	46	70	70	71	15.520	.008
Search	66	59	78	78	70	83	07.296	.200
CA	77	82	76	87	70	89	03.372	.643
TN	81	85	83	87	79	91	02.640	.755
E-mail	24	26	19	22	88	20	03.485	.626
P/S-SC	97	100	98	96	12	100	03.679	.596
ML	63	82	34	61	79	60	25.111	.000
DG	4	6	2	4	0	6	0	0

Note. The six categories are respectively: (1) Consumer Discretionary and Consumer Staple; (2) Energy and Utilities; (3) Financials; (4) Healthcare; (5) Industrials and Materials; and (6) Information Technology and Telecommunication Services.

AR=availability of annual reports, MM=use of multimedia formats, Search=presence of search engines, CA=contact address, TN=telephone numbers, E-mail=e-mail addresses of organizational experts, P/S-SC=product/service-specific content, ML=mailing lists/e-mail alerts, DG=discussion groups/message boards.

As noted in Table 5 companies differed significantly across Fortune 500 rankings on one of the generation of return visits features, easily downloadable/printable/mailable information. The top 50 companies surprisingly lagged behind in making the material on their Web sites easily printable/downloadable/mailable. Only 52% of the top 50 companies were capable of doing so, while 78% to 94% of the smaller companies succeeded in doing so.

Table 5

Presence of Generation of Return Visit Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies

Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics

Features	1-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	448-500	χ^2	Prob
	N=50	N=50	N=50	N=50	N=50		*p<0.05
UI	98	100	98	92	94	6.224	.183
NC	26	20	16	10	8	8.036	.090
OLH	6	0	0	4	0	0	0
EC	0	4	4	4	2	0	0
FAQ	54	48	50	64	56	3.128	.537
E-D/P/M	52	82	78	80	94	26.952	.000
LLA	12	0	0	10	0	0	0

Note. UI=Updated information, NC=new commentaries, OLH= online live help,

EC=featuring experts to chat with publics, FAQ=frequently asked questions' section,

E-D/P/M=easily downloadable/ printable/mailable information, LLA=links to local agencies/information providers.

Table 6 shows that Web sites of IT/telecommunication services companies carried new commentary by management/experts significantly more often at 37% than sites of other companies which ranged from 4% to 22%.

IT companies also tried to provide experts to chat live with members of the public, with 11% doing so. For example, the Web sites of Oracle and Sun Microsystems had experts to chat with public. This feature was non-existent in energy and healthcare companies, and only 2% of the financial and industrial/material companies had it. Gateway, an IT company had easily noticeable provision for live help on its site. Again IT companies led the way across industries significantly more in making information on their Web sites easily printable/downloadable/ mailable, with 91% doing so. In comparison, Financial and healthcare companies lagged behind at 70% and 65% respectively.

Table 6

Presence of Generation of Return Visit Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies

Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics

Features	1	2	3	4	5	6	χ^2	Prob
	n=74	n=34	n=41	n=23	n=43	n=35		
UI	96	94	98	96	95	100	2.195	.822
NC	5	21	22	4	14	37	21.892	.001
OLH	0	0	2	0	2	9	0	0
EC	1	0	2	0	2	11	0	0
FAQ	59	47	54	52	49	60	2.536	.771
E-D/P/M	72	85	66	65	86	91	13.386	.020
LLA	5	3	2	13	2	3	5.448	.364

Note. The six categories are respectively: (1) Consumer Discretionary and Consumer Staple; (2) Energy and Utilities; (3) Financials; (4) Healthcare; (5) Industrials and Materials; and (6) Information Technology and Telecommunication Services.

UI=Updated information, NC=new commentaries, OLH= online live help,
EC=featuring experts to chat with publics, FAQ=frequently asked questions' section,
E-D/P/M=easily downloadable/ printable/mailable information, LLA=links to local agencies/information providers.

None of the findings noted in Table 7 differ significantly from each other.

Table 7

Presence of Ease of Interface Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies

Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics

Features	1-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	448-500	χ^2	Prob
	n=50	n=50	n=50	n=50	n=50		*p<0.05
FT	100	100	98	100	100	4.016	.404
NNG	100	96	98	98	98	2.041	.728
AMCC	96	98	98	96	98	0.882	.927
SM	62	58	58	60	48	2.385	.665
N B/I	98	100	100	100	100	4.016	.404
C/T C	98	100	100	100	100	4.016	.404
BL-T/M	26	34	32	32	46	4.813	.307
SMM	98	100	100	100	100	4.016	.404

Note. FT=formatted text, NNG=no needless graphics, AMCC=accessible with minimal computer capacity, SM=site maps, N B/I=navigation bars and icons, C/T C=color/typographic coding of content, BL-T/M=backlinks to top of page/main page, SMM=simple main menu.

None of the findings noted in Table 8 differ significantly from each other. Many of the sites examined by this author did not have clear backlinks to the home page indicated by the word “home,” but instead used the logo of the company as a hyperlink to the home page. This tool was observed to be ineffective based on the criteria that the researcher had to repeatedly click on the browser backlinks to get to the homepage from the inner Web pages. This made navigation difficult. Hence, sites using this device were coded as having no backlink.

Table 8**Presence of Ease of Interface Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies****Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics**

Features	1	2	3	4	5	6	χ^2	Prob
	n=74	n=34	n=41	n=23	n=43	n=35		*p<0.05
FT	99	100	100	100	100	100	2.388	.793
NNG	97	100	100	91	98	100	7.715	.173
AMCC	95	94	100	100	98	100	5.920	.314
SM	53	62	66	70	49	54	4.941	.423
N B/I	100	100	98	100	100	100	5.118	.402
C/T C	99	100	100	100	100	100	2.388	.793
BL-T/M	35	29	32	35	35	37	0.633	.986
SMM	100	100	98	100	100	100	5.118	.402

Note. The six industry categories are, respectively: (1) Consumer Discretionary and Consumer Staple; (2) Energy and Utilities; (3) Financials; (4) Healthcare; (5) Industrials and Materials; and (6) Information Technology and Telecommunication Services.

FT=formatted text, NNG=no needless graphics, AMCC=accessible with minimal computer capacity, SM=site maps, N B/I=navigation bars and icons,

C/T C= color/typographic coding of content, BL-T/M=backlinks to top of page/main page, SMM=simple main menu.

None of the findings noted in Table 9 are significant enough to infer relationship between variables. Almost all Web sites displayed features that help in the conservation of visitors to sites. Advertisements were absent in 97.6% of the Web sites. They were present in six sites, out of which three placed them at the proper spot on the site. The AmeriSourceBergen site and the Walt Disney site took noticeably longer to load than other sites, due to an overload of graphics and use of flash technology.

Table 9

Presence of Conservation of Visitors Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies

Fortune 500 Ranking: Percent Using Characteristics

Features	1-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	448-500	χ^2	Prob
	n=5	n=5	n=5	n=50	n=50		
MDT	100	94	100	100	98	8.638	.071
NGA	96	98	100	100	98	3.557	.469
RPFL	2	4	2	6	2	7.376	.497
PPA	6	0	0	0	2		
CWS	98	98	100	98	98	1.016	.907

Note. MDT =minimal download time, NGA= needless graphics absent,

RPFL=clear return paths from links, PPA=proper placement of advertisements/links

CWS=concise writing style.

As Table 10 displays, Healthcare Web sites had more return paths (13%) to the site from links going out of the site than other industry categories. However, 13% still indicates a low level of return paths.

Table 10

Presence of Conservation of Visitors Characteristics in Fortune 500 Companies

Industry Categories: Percent Using Characteristics

Features	1	2	3	4	5	6	χ^2	Prob
	n=74	n=34	n=41	n=23	n=43	n=35		*p<0.05
MDT	96	100	100	100	98	100	5.137	.399
NGA	97	100	98	100	98	100	2.395	.792
RPFL	3	0	5	13	2	0		
PPA	3	0	2	4	0	0		
CWS	99	97	97	100	95	100	4.570	.471

Note. The six categories are respectively: (1) Consumer Discretionary and Consumer Staple; (2) Energy and Utilities; (3) Financials; (4) Healthcare; (5) Industrials and Materials; and (6) Information Technology and Telecommunication Services.

MDT =minimal download time, NGA= needless graphics absent, RPFL=clear return paths from links, PPA=proper placement of advertisements/ links, CWS=concise writing style.

*Blanks in the cells for PPA and RPFL indicate absence of Ads/Links leading out of the site.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Use of Web sites is largely a matter of an organization's policies, and the skill of the personnel involved in the maintenance of the sites. A Web site can become a conduit for excellent communication only if the management realizes the importance of building relationships with its publics. Even if a Web site has all the features in place to conduct dialogue with its publics, it would be meaningless if these features were not used to their full potential on a continuous basis. It is easier to build a site with all dialogic features than to actually conduct dialogue.

This study corroborated Esrock and Leichty's (2000) finding that organizational Web sites addressed multiple audiences. However, investors were not the most addressed audience. Prospective employees emerged as the audience with most priority followed by investors, the press, and customers. Like Esrock and Leichty (2000), this study too found the Web sites built for easy navigation. The major exception to this finding was the lack of backlinks to the top of the page or to the main page.

Discussion of Findings and Impact on Theory

This section examines the results to answer the research questions and to see if the hypothesis was confirmed. It also discusses the interactions of the research with the main theories that form its source.

Hypothesis. The hypothesis that organizations with the financial capacity to do so make full use of their Web sites as dialogical public relations tools was not proven.

Overall, the largest companies in the Fortune 500 ranking did not employ all the dialogical loops that are essential to receive feedback from publics. Only one company, Sun Microsystems (ranked 125), employed all the four dialogic loop features on its site. Organizational Web sites did not exploit surveys (5%) and comment/response features (2%) as instruments to solicit the opinion/views of people. This could be due to a lack of staff skilled in sophisticated research techniques, or due to work overload on the existing staff.

Though feedback/e-mail links to the organization were present in a majority of sites (77%), this feature can be of dialogic use only if the company has trained staff dedicated to respond to the feedback. It is doubtful if organizations consider the feedback that they receive through their Web sites. Even if they have the intention to respond to or act on e-mail feedback/queries, they may not have the manpower to sift through individual e-mails received through their Web site. The global nature of Web sites may be creating overwhelming feedback for the larger organizations. This researcher experienced the effectiveness of e-mail feedback first-hand by sending e-mail to Universal Corp., (a tobacco company) commenting that its Web page containing press releases was not functional. The company sent an automated response and followed up by activating that Web page.

Cookies were used by many of the Web sites studied (59% overall.) However, it is not known how the information collected through cookies is used, or if it is used at all. Web sites that did not use cookies may have done so out of concern for privacy issues.

This study reveals that the press agency model is still around in its original form, using the new medium of Web sites. This study did not observe any changes in the press agency model. It is reflected in companies whose sites just function to distribute information chosen by the organization, and where dialogic loops are non-existent, or non-functional. Though the sites of these companies may be easily navigable and containing information for various publics, they are not used to collect feedback from the publics. Such sites conform to the one-way model as information is only passed from the organization to the publics. This researcher did not examine if the information presented on the sites was objective or slanted to favor the organizations.

The present study does not affect the mixed-motive model. While it can be applied to Web sites, close monitoring of sites would be needed to examine if they reflect any or all of the nine strategies of negotiating relationships with publics. Sites that immediately publish managerial decisions/actions, as well as sites that avoid publishing material relevant to issues under negotiation can be said to conform to the mixed-motive model. Closer observation of Web sites over a longer period of time would reveal if organizations consciously use their Web sites as negotiating tables.

The theory of dialogic communication is not reflected in its entirety in organizational Web sites. While the importance of dialogue in public relations cannot be questioned, and while Web sites have tremendous potential to conduct dialogue, this potential is dormant. Organizations seem reluctant to utilize the latest technologies to facilitate exchange of ideas and opinions with its publics. Surveys and response features

are conspicuous by their absence. If organizational experts were featured on Web sites to chat live with people, it would generate dialogue in addition to attracting visitors repeatedly to the site. Also, encouraging discussion groups/chat rooms would help the organization get a pulse of public opinion while increasing the utility of the site. These features are absent in most sites.

The presence of feedback links on a majority of sites is reassuring. These links are the main, perhaps sole source of input from the publics through the Web medium. It is through feedback received from these links that organizations can get an inflow of public views and opinions. Though the organization may not be able to respond individually to each query, if the management gets a gist of the input received through this source, the organization becomes aware of public opinions. However, feedback links are only one component of dialogic loops. As organizational Web sites do not employ all the dialogic loops, they are not in a position to create dynamic and lasting relationships with publics through dialogue. To that extent, the theory of dialogic communication does not apply to organizational Web sites at least today.

This research does not have any impact on the systems theory. However, this theory is not entirely applicable to Web sites today if it is applied in terms of the two-way symmetrical model. While public relations can use the systems approach to get input from the organization's environment and to bring about changes in the organization as well as its environment, it is doubtful if organizations view their Web sites as systems that can help in this process. Without functioning dialogic loops, it is impossible to

circulate and process information for the organizational Web sites.

Having looked into the dialogic aspects of Web sites, this discussion now transitions to the publics addressed through the sites.

Do organizational Web sites address their various publics? Organizations studied did not address all their publics equally. This author examined the home pages of the Web sites included in the study, for presence of hyperlinks/icons leading to specific content for customer service, employees, prospective employees, the press, dealers/retailers/suppliers, and investors. Only two organizations, American International Group (ranked 22), and PacifiCare Health Systems (ranked 169) addressed all the six publics on their Web sites. However, the Web sites of both these organizations lacked feedback/e-mail links.

A few Web sites (20) addressed five publics, leaving out their employees. Employees were the least addressed public. However, this study did not inquire if all the organizations that did not address their employees through their Web sites had a separate intranet for employee use. The Enron site reflected company happenings by providing an updated page for its former employees. This seemed ironical, as the company did not treat its employees fairly with its bankruptcy.

Prospective employees were the most addressed public across industry categories. However, for organizations at the bottom 50 of the Fortune 500 ranking, investors were more important than prospective employees. Across industry categories, investors were second in priority on their Web sites, while the press was third in priority

rankings. Customer service came fourth in the priority, while dealers/retailers/suppliers were fifth. Finance companies addressed customer service more than other industry categories. This may be because these companies have provision for transactions and updating of customer information through their sites. As customers use the site for services, the need for customer service also rises. All the healthcare company sites studied, addressed prospective employees, indicating a clear need for more manpower in that industry. Healthcare companies also addressed their investors more than any other industry category. Healthcare companies and energy/utilities companies courted the press much more than other industry categories. It would be interesting to know if the energy companies did so even before the California energy crisis last year. The healthcare sector is performing well in the economy, and some of this performance could be attributed to addressing their main publics efficiently.

The mixed-motive model is valid for Web sites that consistently update information. The sites that present latest organizational developments and decisions, reporting tactics adopted by management on a day-to-day basis in dealing with the major publics, mirror the strategies adopted by the organization in dealing with its publics. When they honestly reflect an organization's strategies in negotiating solutions, sites conform to the mixed motive model. Even when a Web site does not address a current issue, it is reflecting the tactic of avoidance that is elaborated in the model.

When the holistic systems theory is applied to Web sites, assuming that the site is a system in itself, it implies that it encompasses all its publics as part of its environment.

However, sites do not connect with all publics, leaving out some part or the other of the organization's environment, making the flow of information between the organization and its environment incomplete.

It is essential to see if Web sites are geared to generate return visits from the publics that are addressed through them. The following section examines this issue.

Are organizational web sites geared to attract users repeatedly and to retain them?

Organizational Web sites could do more to attract visitors repeatedly to their sites. This again depends on the interest of the management in seriously utilizing the Web site as a tool of dialogic communication. Since dialogue cannot be sporadic, there has to be a continuous flow of communication through the Web site. And this will be possible only if publics have reasons to use the site on a regular basis.

Of the seven features measuring generation of return visits to the Web site, availability of updated information was the only feature universally present (96%) across ranking and industry categories. However, updated information was usually in the form of press releases directly uploaded on the site. The sites lacked (16%) new commentaries/features by the management. Web sites of IT/telecommunication services companies carried new commentary by management/experts more often than sites of other companies. This indicates a higher involvement by management in their organization's sites.

Surprisingly, the largest companies (the top 50) had the least easily printable/downloadable/mailable information. IT companies did better than other industry

categories on this feature. This suggests a finer understanding of the way people prefer reading the information on Web sites. For example, it is harder on the eyes to read an annual report online, than in its printed form.

Online live help, and experts to chat with the public were rarely found features on Web sites. This could either be due to lack of technical capacity or due to a lack of interest on part of the management. These interactive features, if implemented, have the potential to be used as dialogic loops and can be publicized through other media.

Sites did not have links (4% overall) to local information providers/agencies. This may be a tactic to avoid losing visitors to other sites. However, links relevant to the target audience, placed at the proper place on a Web page can make a site valuable for users.

Web sites studied by this author were built to retain visitors who accessed them. Across rankings and industry categories, sites contained four of the five features of conservation. They had minimal download time, absence of non-essential links, absence of advertisements, and concise writing style. Absence of advertising links is understandable, as these companies do not need revenue from that source.

While this discussion has covered the various characteristics of organizational Web sites, it has not yet visited the basic aspect of ease of use. It is therefore necessary to see if sites today are easy to use for the average user.

Are the web sites easy to use? The Web sites studied by this author answered positive to six of the eight, ease of interface features. Almost all of them had well-formatted content, absence of needless graphics, general accessibility, navigation bars

and icons, color/typographic coding of content, and simplified main menus. However, the sites studied lacked clearly located/identifiable backlinks to the top of the page/homepage. Only 34% of the sites had backlinks to the top of the page/homepage. Lack of backlinks makes navigating the site a cumbersome and irritating process because users have to click their way back to the top of a lengthy page or to the home page. This may lead some users to lose patience with the Web site and abandon it altogether.

Site maps were present in only 57% of the sites. This feature makes locating information on a site easier for the user. Though 71% of all the sites had search engines, the capacity of the engines to generate relevant results was not tested. Besides, it has to be assumed that not all users would be expert at using a search engine.

Overall, organizational Web sites studied by this author were found to be easy to use. They did not implement dialogical features, and addressed only some of their publics. They were not geared to attract visitors repeatedly. However, Web sites had features that made visitors stay on longer once they visited the site. It now remains to be seen how these findings can be used in practice.

Impact on Practice

Atleast some part of the organizations' success can be attributed to their Web sites. Web sites, give an edge over competition by allowing swift circulation of information. However, organizations that have resources at their disposal do not fully use the interactive potential of Web sites to build relationships with their publics. They are

wasting a powerful tool of public relations. In case organizations are not fully utilizing the latent potential of their Web sites as two-way communication tools, they can benefit by implementing the mentioned characteristics. This will help organizations in initiating and sustaining dialogue with their publics and in building relations with existing and new publics. Exploiting the potential of an existing asset (Web site) will be beneficial for organizations. Even partial implementation of the criteria can assure a Web site that is easily usable.

Limitations

Sites are not static entities, and only continuous research can help monitor their dynamic nature. This study was limited by its time frame of three months from January 2002 to March 2002. As organizations and their Web sites are continuously evolving, the present study is inadequate to draw conclusions about specific organizations.

The Web sites of only the first 200 and the last 50 companies included in the Fortune 500 rankings were examined. Inclusion in the Fortune 500 implies a high level of fiscal success. The Web sites studied represent organizations that have ample resources at their disposal. This study left the smaller organizations that do not have a high turnover outside its purview.

Due to time constraints, this author did not examine the efficiency of the feedback loops in the Web sites examined. This study does not reveal whether organizations respond effectively to comments and queries received through their Web

sites. Also, being qualitative in nature, no interviews were conducted to gauge the managements' approach towards communication and the place of Web sites in their communication strategy.

Future Questions

A content analysis of Web sites of smaller “mom and pop” companies, using the 40 features integrated by this author can be conducted for comparison with larger organizations or for comparison with this study. This would reveal if the size of a company makes a difference in implementing these dialogic features.

As Web sites are evolving entities, it is essential to continue observing them. This study examined the Web sites of only 250 companies included in the Fortune 500 listing. A study of all the 500 Web sites could be conducted to observe changes in Web sites. Studies could examine if organizations that have feedback/e-mail links on their sites do respond efficiently to queries received through their sites and if they consider comments received from their publics. The expectations of Web site visitors could be sought and taken into consideration while evaluating the content and structure of sites. Future research can enquire if companies that do not address their employees through their Web site have separate intranets for internal use. Also worth investigating is whether information from cookies is utilized in any way to make changes in the sites or in the organizational behavior.

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