



Relationship maintenance strategies on *Fortune* 500 company web sites

Relationship maintenance strategies

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Eyun-Jung Ki and Linda Childers Hon

Department of Public Relations, College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how organizations enact positivity, openness, access, sharing of tasks, and networking through their web sites. The paper also aims to investigate whether, different types of industries display different levels of relationship strategy.

Designs/methodology/approach – A content analysis of 286 web sites was conducted to determine how corporations use their site as a communication medium for building and nurturing relationships with publics. Company web sites were selected from the *Fortune 500* list according to industry type. The sites were analyzed for the presence and quality of variables identified in the public relations literature as measures of relationship maintenance strategies.

Findings – The study's first research question addressed how the sampled organizations display use of relationship maintenance strategies through their web sites. The results revealed that openness was the strategy used most frequently. The quality of the openness dimension also was rated more highly than it was for any of the other strategies. The second research question explored whether industry type made a difference in organizations' use of the relationship maintenance strategies. A statistically significant difference among industry type was found for three of the strategies – positivity, openness, and access.

Originality/value – This study gives guidelines as to how companies can use their web sites more proactively to build and maintain relationships with their publics. The study also provides some insights into why some types of organizations might be more likely than others to use web sites for relationship maintenance. This study's primary contribution to public relations theory is its original focus on strategies for organization-public relationship maintenance and this study also sought to identify and measure the quality of maintenance strategies.

Keywords Public relations, Internet, Corporate communications, Communication management

Paper type Research paper

Public relations researchers have been leaders in recognizing the potential of the internet for building and maintaining relationships between organization and publics. In 1997, Johnson provided one of the first glimpses into the role and impact of new technologies on public relations practice. She argued that the internet could serve the public relations function by providing an outlet for news releases, disseminating organizational information, researching publics, and providing interactivity with publics (Johnson, 1997).

The Fall 1998 issue of *Public Relations Review* showcased several studies that examined how organizations use the internet to communicate with publics. For example, Esrock and Leichty (1998) found that 90 percent of *Fortune* 500 corporations

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have web sites and that 82 percent of those web sites displayed more than one corporate social responsibility issue. Coombs (1998) examined how activist organizations are using the web to extend their reach. Heath (1998) studied how corporations and activist organizations employ the internet for issues management and argued that even seemingly disempowered publics can play a role in global issues through cyber dialogue. And, Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested that strategically designed web sites might offer organizations, an opportunity to engage in dialogical relationships.

Web sites bring organizations several obvious advantages for building relationships with publics such as low cost for content development and 24/7 availability. Web sites also provide access to more active publics and have the potential to help organizations improve transparency with these publics (Esrock and Leichty, 1998).

According to ClickZ (2004), one of the most popular internet survey sites, the total number of internet users in the USA alone was over 144 million. Because of its ubiquity, organizations regard the internet as a primary communication tool for engaging in one-way or two-way communication with a range of external publics (Nel *et al.*, 1999).

In a roundtable discussion about “high tech” communication published in the *The Strategist* (2003, p. 12), Wolder, a public relations consultant, spoke about the fundamental changes that the internet has brought to public relations:

Internet technology is a great leveler – it wipes out the middle man, allows people to establish new business relationships, enables PR people to move faster and requires the development of different skills.

In the same issue, public relations executive Wickenden outlined several online communication trends that are related to relationship building – multidimensional communications, whereby web site users “find higher value in sites where they can do something and where information is visual, animated, and auditory as well as textual” (p. 24) and the “anywhere, anytime” nature of online communication, especially wireless messaging that is producing new forms of social connectivity and relationships (p. 26).

Yet, despite the internet’s potential, most scholarly research in public relations has shown that organizations have not capitalized fully upon its interactivity and use web sites predominately as a tool for one-way communication transfer. For example, Esrock and Leichty (1999) found that the corporate web sites they examined primarily provided information for the news media, financial community, and customers. Other scholars have researched interactive features of web sites and also concluded that the promise of relationship building still was largely unrealized (Cooley, 1999; Haeckel, 1999; Kang and Norton, 2004; Major, 1995; Naude *et al.*, 2004; Tammi *et al.*, 2000). Similarly, several studies have focused on examining web sites *vis-à-vis* Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) public relations models and have found little use of either of the two-way models (Naude *et al.*, 2004; Park and Berger, 2002).

This study is novel in its attempt to apply a more recent and cogent theoretical perspective for examining relationship building via web sites. In their model of how public relationships are formed and maintained, Hon and Grunig (1999) proposed

several communication strategies that organizations can employ to facilitate quality relationship outcomes.

Public relations as relationship management

Relationship management as a focus for public relations research goes back to Ferguson's (1984) argument that the relationship between an organization and its key publics should be the central unit of analysis for public relations scholarship. Ehling (1992) contended that this relationship perspective is a marked departure from thinking about and practicing public relations as the manipulation of public opinion to a focus on building and nurturing relationships as the essential function of public relations. Practitioners often use the language of relationship building in their definitions of public relations effectiveness (Hon, 1997) and many scholars in public relations have embraced this shift (Broom *et al.*, 2000; Bruning and Ledingham, 1999, 2000; Coombs, 2001; Cutlip *et al.*, 2000; Grunig, 1993; Grunig and Huang, 2000; Heath, 2001; Ledingham and Bruning, 1998; Leichty and Springston, 1993; Wilson, 2001).

The starting point for understanding relationship management is defining what is meant by a relationship. According to Berko *et al.* (1997, p. 448), a relationship is the:

... connection that exists when (1) the interactants are aware of each other and take each other into account, (2) there is some exchange of influence, and (3) there is some agreement about what the nature of the relationship is and what the appropriate behaviors are given the nature of the relationship.

Thomlison (2000, p. 178) provided a more succinct definition, stating that a relationship is a "a set of expectations two parties have for each other's behavior based on their interaction patterns". And, important to the study here, this scholar went on to point out that relationship maintenance is paramount (Fisher and Brown, 1998). Similarly, Canary and Stafford (1994) compared maintaining a relationship to gardening, implying that relationship maintenance strategies are the light and water, without which relationships could neither grow nor thrive.

Relationship maintenance focuses attention on relational stability, which is essential to personal involvement (Dindia and Canary, 1993). Maintenance also refers not only to a stage of relational development, but also to the dynamic processes involved in relating (Canary and Stafford, 1994).

From a public relations perspective, maintenance is the means to an end, with that end being long-term, stable, quality relationships between organizations and their significant publics. As explained, most public relations professionals retain knowledge that has "something to do with how to communicate with publics, in order to maintain a relationship with those publics" (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 13).

Several studies have demonstrated the efficacy of applying key variables from scholarship on interpersonal relationships to public relations (Thomlison, 2000; Toth, 2000; Wood, 1995). Theorizing about public relations through the lens of interpersonal communication is not new. Several key relational features consistently appear as important indicators for both interpersonal relationships and organization-public relationships. These include trust (Grunig *et al.*, 1992), control mutuality (Ferguson, 1984; Burgoon and Hale, 1984, 1987; Canary and Spitzberg, 1989), commitment (Burgoon and Hale, 1984, 1987; Canary and Spitzberg, 1989; Canary and Stafford, 1992; Aldrich, 1975, 1979), and satisfaction (Ferguson, 1984; Grunig *et al.*, 1992).

This study employs several of Stafford and Canary's (1991) dimensions of relationship maintenance strategies and applies them to online communication via web sites. Stafford and Canary's (1991) strategies include positivity (attempts to make the relationship enjoyable), openness (disclosure of thoughts and feelings), assurances (of legitimacy of concerns), networking (having common friends), and shared tasks (taking joint responsibility). Canary and Stafford found these maintenance strategies kept the relationship favorable and fostered some relationship outcomes such as control mutuality, liking, commitment, and relational satisfaction.

These relationship maintenance factors are suggested to be analogous to communication strategies implicit in a two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig and Huang, 2000; Grunig and White, 1992; Grunig and Grunig, 1992; Grunig, 1989). Grunig and Huang (2000) additionally suggested additional relationship maintenance strategies based on research about conflict resolution. They recommended communication strategies that help conflict to be resolved (or even postponed, if necessary) in a way that preserves relationship quality for the long term.

Relationship quality, as Grunig and Huang (2000) explained, is a direct result of parties in a relationship engaging in communication and conflict resolution that leads to relationship outcomes such as control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment. A detailed discussion of these variables is beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, though, control mutuality has to do with whether parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Trust is defined as confidence in and willingness to be open to the other party or parties in the relationship (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Satisfaction occurs when parties feel favorably toward others because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Commitment is the extent to which parties believe the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote (Canary and Stafford, 1994; Hon and Grunig, 1999).

Positivity

In Canary and Stafford's (1994, p. 15) study, positivity was conceptualized as "attempts to make interactions pleasant". Positivity consistently has emerged as an important predictor of control mutuality and liking and is a primary maintenance strategy predicting trust (Canary and Stafford, 1993; Stafford and Canary, 1991).

Hon and Grunig (1999, p. 14) applied this strategy to public relations and defined it as "anything the organization or publics do to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved". Positivity corresponds to the principle of Be Unconditionally Constructive espoused by Fisher and Brown (1998) in building relationships, which Grunig and Grunig (1992) and Plowman (1995) adopted for the symmetrical model.

Openness and disclosure

Openness has a long tradition of research in interpersonal communication (Chelune, 1979). Canary and Stafford (1994, p. 12) defined openness as "direct discussions about the nature of the relationship and setting aside times for talks about the relationship". Guerrero *et al.* (1993) found that openness is represented by proactive and constructive maintenance actions as well.

The concept of openness in public relations involves disclosing "thoughts and feelings among parties" in a relationship (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 14). Dimmick *et al.*

(2000) defined trust as willingness to self disclose. Grunig and Huang (2000) further elaborated that this strategy is consistent with the symmetrical model and that it leads to positive relationship outcomes. According to Bok (1989), openness can make the distribution of power in a relationship more symmetrical.

Grunig and Huang (2000) suggested that monitoring disclosure provides an effective gauge of relationship quality. In a detailed example based on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) study, AT&T community leader teams, under evaluation in the 1970s, tended to be more open with their concerns during interaction with effective teams than with less effective teams. Additionally, Grunig and Huang (2000) argued that public relations managers could quantify disclosure by publics by counting suggestions, complaints, inquiries, and other contacts that members of publics, the media, government, or leaders of activist groups registered with the organization.

Access

Related to openness is access, which Hon and Grunig (1999, p. 14) explained as the following:

[M]embers of publics or opinion leaders provide access to public relations people. Public relations representatives or senior managers provide representatives of publics similar access to organizational decision making processes. Either party will answer telephone calls or read letters or e-mail messages from the other. Either party is willing to go to the other when they have complaints or queries, rather than taking negative reactions to third parties.

Access is an important variable for this study because anyone with internet access potentially can reach organizational leaders if a web site provides contact information such as telephone numbers and staff electronic mail addresses. And sites that encourage feedback through bulletin board discussions and online surveys provide other mechanisms for publics to gain access and communicate with the organization.

Sharing of tasks

Sharing of tasks means that parties share whatever responsibilities have been created by the mutual decisions made in the relationship (Canary and Stafford, 1994; Stafford and Canary, 1991). Stafford and Canary (1991) found that sharing of tasks is a consistent and strong predictor of control mutuality, commitment, liking, and satisfaction, and that it contributes to parties' liking one another in interpersonal relationships. Other researchers also have commented on the importance of sharing tasks for relational satisfaction (Huston *et al.*, 1986; Wilmot and Sillars, 1989).

Hon and Grunig (1999, p. 5) applied this strategy to organization-public relationships and defined sharing of tasks as "organizations' and publics' sharing in solving joint or separate problems". Examples of these tasks might include reducing pollution, providing employment, making a profit, and staying in business, in the interest of either the organization, the public, or both (Grunig and Huang, 2000). Hon and Grunig (1999) determined that sharing of tasks could be measured by integrating social responsibility reports that would demonstrate the extent to which management had worked on problems of interest to publics.

Networking

In interpersonal relationships, networking involves spending time with mutual friends in order to gain support and make the relationship enjoyable (Canary and Stafford,

1994). Networking is realized through shared explanations, control mutuality, and liking (Canary and Stafford, 1994). Furthermore, Guerrero *et al.* (1993) stated that networking should be proactive and nurture beneficial maintenance behaviors.

Organizations build networks with the same groups that network with their publics, such as unions, community groups, and environmentalists. Thus, this relationships maintenance strategy is manifested through the number and quality of contacts with networks of these groups (Grunig and Huang, 2000).

Research questions

Given the efficacy of conceptualizing relationship maintenance as fundamental to public relations strategy, this study examined the following research question:

RQ1. How do organizations enact positivity, openness, access, sharing of tasks, and networking through their web sites?[1]

The following question also was investigated as exploratory:

RQ2. Do different types of industries display different levels of relationship maintenance strategies?

Methodology

A content analysis of web sites of *Fortune* 500 companies[2] was conducted during the period from March 1, 2003 to March 30, 2003. Content analysis is “a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purposes of measuring variables” (Wimmer and Dominick, 2000, p. 135).

Sampling was conducted using ten industry types as strata. The ten industry types were derived from *Standard and Poors’* global industry sector categorization and included materials, industrials, telecommunication services, consumer discretionary, consumer staples, energy, financials, health care, information technology, and utilities.

A total of 30 organizations were selected from nine of the ten industry sectors. One industry, telecommunication service, had only 16 companies. Including these 16 brought the final sample total to 286. The number of companies in each sector ranged from 16 (telecommunication service) to 102 (consumer discretionary).

Company web sites were designated as the unit of analysis. Organizational sites, which were under construction or did not load during the coding period, were excluded from the sample. When this happened, other web sites were selected randomly from the respective industry sector as replacements. Instead of simply analyzing the front page of each section, all sections were analyzed in their entirety, meaning that every link in every section was examined.

Operational definitions

Positivity was operationally defined as any attempt to enable ease of web site use. Indicators include ease of navigation, inclusion of a sitemap, and availability of a search engine. The standard for measuring ease of navigation is clear labeling and operational links. A sitemap is any categorized outline of the web site. Search engines, of course, are provided by organizations to help visitors locate specific items or information through the use of a key word search. The researchers reasoned that web

sites with these navigational tools are more user-friendly and help foster positivity between the organization and publics.

The following items on the web site were considered as indicators of openness: a company overview, news releases, annual reports, and stock prices. Company overview was defined as any description of the history of the company, how it is organized and operates, and/or its corporate capabilities and environment, etc.

Access was measured by the presence of telephone numbers, company addresses, and staff e-mail addresses[3].

Social responsibility initiatives involving the environment, community, and education were indicators of sharing of tasks. Environmental activities were any effort, such as a program, grant, project, service, or product to help alleviate pollution, nurture and promote plant and animal life, end or decrease global warming, or provide relief in times of natural disaster. Community ventures involved trying to improve quality of life for community residents such as Cox Communications' fundraising program for the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life walkathon[4]. Educational activities were any effort to help bolster education such as AT&T's sponsorships of the National Academy of Engineering's celebration of women in engineering initiative and the National Action Council for minorities in engineering[5].

Networking was indicated by any evidence on the web site of contact with any specific activist public such as environmental, union, and community groups. For instance, on its site, Wal-Mart describes its community relations partnership with the United Way and provides a link to United Way's site[6].

Two independent coders evaluated each link and all of the web sites for evidence and quality of each maintenance strategy. Each link received a score for each maintenance strategy using a scale that ranged from zero to five, with zero meaning nonexistent, 1 = low quality, 3 = middle quality, 5 = high quality. For example, high quality access was indicated by a site that included contact information for the company's top executives. Low quality was indicated by a site where the only contact information was for personnel such as customer support staff. Using Holsti's (1969) formula, intercoder reliability ranged from 87.5 to 92.6 percent[7].

Research question 1

The *RQ1* sought to address how well organizations use the relationship maintenance strategies of positivity, openness, access, sharing of tasks, and networking through their web sites. A composite measure was created by summing up the items for each strategy, and descriptive statistics were computed for each composite measure.

As Table I displays, the sampled corporations used openness the most frequently ($M = 3.18$) among all of the relationship maintenance strategies. The quality of openness also was rated more highly since more organizational sites (approximately half of the sample) received scores of 5 (high) for openness than any of the other strategies. These organizations used networking the least on their sites ($M = 0.75$), and most of the sampled sites (almost 90 percent) were judged to be low quality (scores of 1) for networking.

Research question 2

RQ2 asked about whether different types of industries show different levels of the relationship maintenance strategies. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests performed

Strategies	Mean value	Level	<i>N</i>	Percent
Positivity	2.69	High	72	25.2
		Middle	135	47.2
		Low	79	27.6
Openness	3.18	High	137	47.9
		Middle	125	43.7
		Low	24	8.4
Access	2.66	High	74	25.9
		Middle	122	42.7
		Low	89	31.1
Sharing of tasks	1.7	High	31	10.8
		Middle	95	33.2
		Low	160	55.9
Networking	0.75	High	1	0.3
		Middle	30	10.5
		Low	255	89.2

Table I.
Descriptive statistics by
strategies (*N* = 286)

with each of the ten industry sectors found significant differences among sectors for three of the relationship maintenance strategies – positivity, openness, and access (Table II and Figures 1-5).

The mean scores for positivity are significantly different across industry types ($df = 9/276, f = 2.86, p = 0.003$). As shown in Table II, the information technology and industrials sectors most frequently displayed positivity ($M = 3.10$ and $M = 3.00$, respectively). In contrast, telecommunication service, materials, and consumer discretionary sectors showed lower mean scores for positivity ($M = 2.08$, $M = 2.17$, and $M = 2.26$, respectively).

Industry type	<i>N</i>	Positivity Mean (SD)	Openness Mean (SD)	Access Mean (SD)	Sharing of tasks Mean (SD)	Networking Mean (SD)
Consumer discretionary	30	2.26 (1.19)	2.86 (1.02)	2.14 (1.18)	1.44 (1.49)	0.90 (1.15)
Consumer staples	30	2.69 (1.16)	2.79 (1.14)	3.11 (1.37)	2.26 (1.41)	1.10 (1.01)
Energy	30	2.60 (1.00)	3.08 (1.06)	3.02 (1.47)	1.91 (1.36)	0.66 (0.88)
Financials	30	2.92 (1.24)	3.23 (1.10)	2.98 (1.33)	1.44 (1.32)	0.80 (0.95)
Health care	30	2.91 (1.15)	3.30 (0.77)	2.96 (1.37)	1.70 (1.60)	0.84 (0.97)
Information technology	30	3.10 (1.10)	3.64 (0.85)	2.34 (1.35)	1.48 (1.15)	0.40 (0.78)
Industrials	30	3.00 (1.08)	3.87 (0.65)	1.86 (0.91)	1.32 (1.41)	0.36 (0.57)
Materials	30	2.17 (1.07)	2.78 (1.00)	2.36 (1.40)	1.58 (1.32)	0.79 (1.00)
Telecommunication service	16	2.08 (0.80)	3.16 (1.01)	2.17 (1.20)	1.56 (1.65)	0.69 (0.98)
Utilities	30	2.88 (1.20)	3.12 (0.65)	3.43 (1.28)	2.30 (1.30)	0.91 (1.05)
Total	286	2.69 (1.15)	3.18 (0.99)	2.66 (1.37)	1.71 (1.41)	0.75 (0.96)
Sum of squared error		32.078	34.078	70.682	31.817	14.187
<i>F</i>		2.855	4.304	4.650	1.812	1.765
Significance		0.003	0.000	0.000	0.066	0.075

Table II.
Results of ANOVA tests

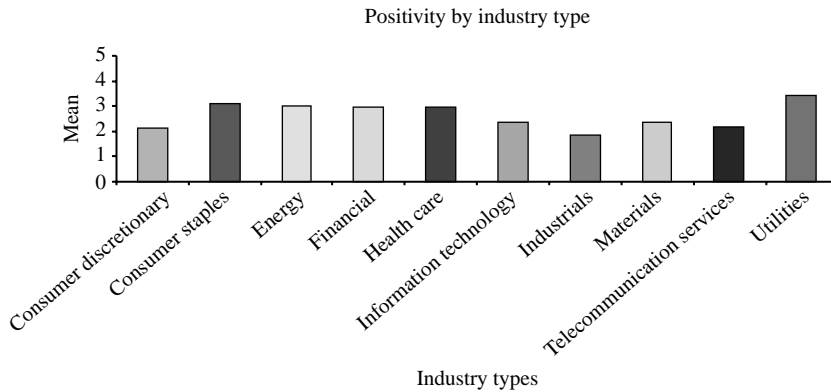


Figure 1.
Positivity by industry
type

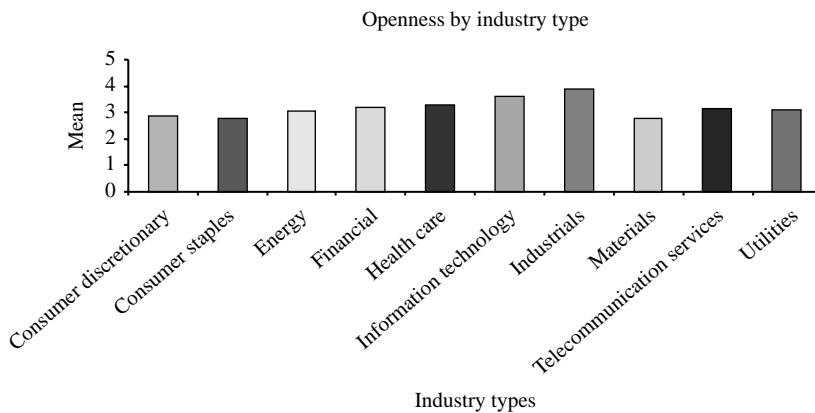


Figure 2.
Openness by industry
type

The mean scores for openness among the sampled industry sectors also are significantly different ($df = 9/276$, $f = 4.30$, $p = 0.000$). As Table II indicates, the industrials and information technology sectors show the highest mean values for openness ($M = 3.87$ and $M = 3.64$, respectively) while the materials, consumer staples, and consumer discretionary sectors show relatively lower mean values for openness ($M = 2.78$, $M = 2.79$, and $M = 2.86$, respectively).

Looking at access across industry types, a statistically significant difference among mean values also can be seen ($df = 9/276$, $f = 4.65$, $p = 0.000$). The web sites of utilities and consumer staples showed the highest mean values ($M = 3.43$ and $M = 3.11$). The web sites of industrials, consumer discretionary, and telecommunication service sectors showed the lowest mean values ($M = 1.86$, $M = 2.14$, and $M = 2.17$, respectively).

Discussion

For public relations, relationship maintenance can be thought of as the communication strategies that organizations and publics should use in their day-to-day interaction.

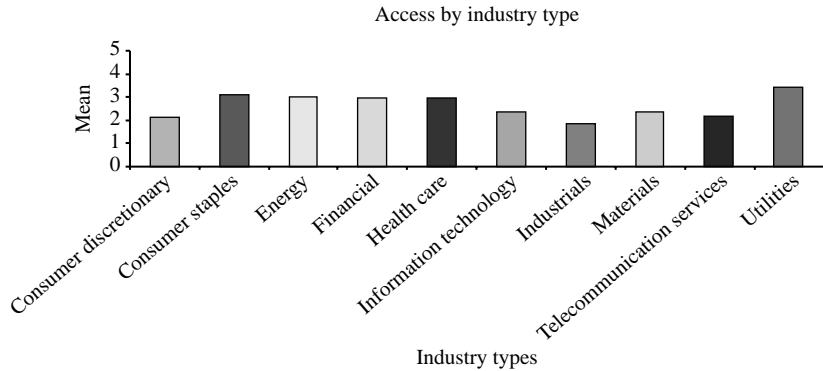


Figure 3.
Access by industry type

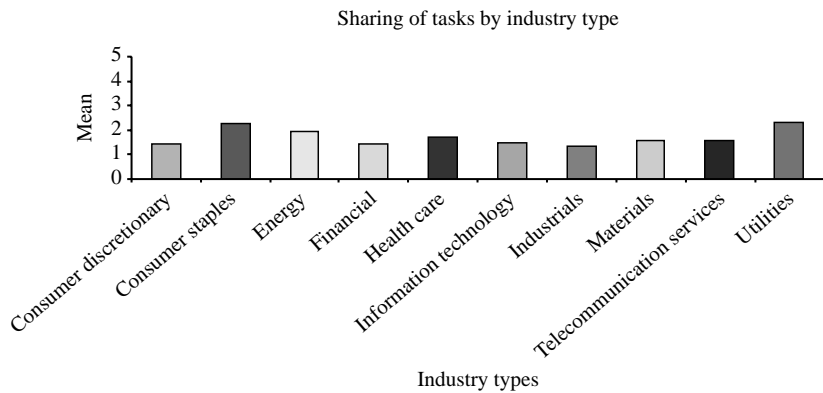


Figure 4.
Sharing of tasks by
industry type

Scholars have discussed the importance of relationship maintenance (Grunig and Huang, 2000; Hon and Grunig, 1999) and web sites seem to offer a unique and innovative opportunity for stewardship of the organization-public relationship.

This study found that among the five relationship maintenance strategies measured here, sampled web sites most often enacted openness. This finding is not too surprising given web sites' ability as a controlled medium to, as Wolder pointed out earlier, wipe out the "middle man" (p. 12). Although the openness observed here is still mostly one-way (e.g. postings of news, the annual report, stock prices), organizations' using the web to self disclose and display transparency could be key to promoting relational outcomes such as trust among organizational constituencies.

This study also found that access was the second most frequently displayed maintenance strategy. Providing access to organizational members (particularly top officials) is a powerful relationship maintenance strategy because users perceive that the organization is willing to communicate directly with affected publics – not just through official channels, including the public relations department, which may be viewed as less credible (Callison, 2004). However, before organizations provide access via their web site, they must ensure they have the resources to be truly responsive.

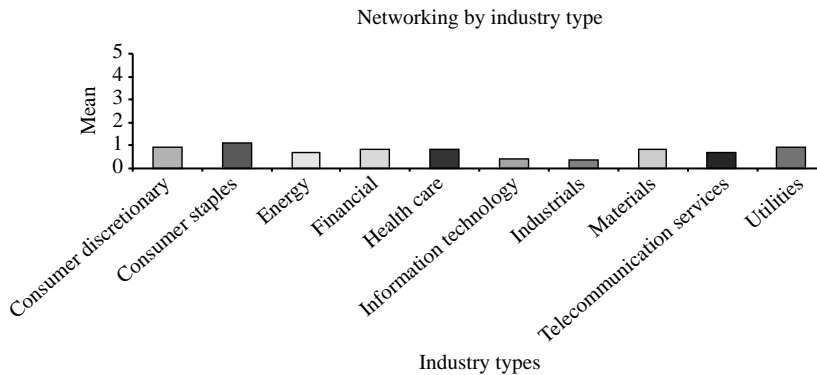


Figure 5.
Networking by industry
type

According to a *Booz Allen & Hamilton* (1999) report, most companies offer at least one e-mail address for public contact. However, a large number of companies fall short of customer expectations when it comes to e-mail support (Newsfactor Network, 2002).

This study also determined that networking with groups, such as environmental, union, and community publics, was the maintenance strategy that occurred least often on these web sites. The sites analyzed here clearly provide company-related information to a much greater degree than information related to networks with such groups.

Yet, Coombs (1998) identified the internet as a creator of linkages with other like-minded stakeholders. By using web sites, organizations can develop networking as an additional maintenance strategy and can exhibit their networking activities, provide information about groups they work with, and highlight organizational activities related to such groups.

Evidence of sharing of tasks, which in this study was identified with corporate social responsibility activities, was scant among sampled sites. This finding indicates a corporate failure (or unwillingness) to showcase their participation in environmental, community, and educational efforts.

Yet, web sites provide a novel opportunity for organizations to display their involvement in social responsibility initiatives as well as engage publics in direct action (e.g. volunteering, donating). As Badaracco (1996) suggested, corporate social responsibility has become a pragmatic public relations necessity. It seems logical, then, that web sites are another tactical medium available to help organizations fulfill this mandate. And, web sites are especially effective at communicating with publics who are already aware and active communicators for particular social issues. Esrock and Leichty (1998) made a similar argument earlier, stating that a good way for organizations to communicate their social responsibility activities is through computer-mediated communication networks such as the internet or web sites. And, as Lez-Herrero and Pratt (1996) pointed out, one of the best strategies for avoiding negative media coverage during a crisis is for organizations to have a demonstrated record of social responsibility activities. With this in mind, companies should be more proactive about using their web sites for providing information about their social performance as well as developing opportunities for sharing of tasks and networking with relevant publics about social issues.

This study's second research question asked whether different industry types display different levels of the relationship maintenance strategies. This question was posed in an exploratory vein since current research on organization-public relationships provides few insights into why some types of organizations might be more likely than others to use web sites for relationship maintenance.

The information technology sector performed best for positivity. Obviously, these types of companies lead in the creation and development of new technologies. For example, IBM (2003) provides web site creation and development services to other companies. The positivity score for IBM is one of the highest in the entire sample. So is the positivity score for Maxtor, a leading hard drive company and provider of storage solutions (Maxtor Corporation, 2003). Since these web site structures seem to be the exemplars for enacting positivity, other industry sectors might benefit from following their lead.

With regard to openness, the industrials sector stood out. Many of these companies do business with the government or are involved in business-to-business relationships. For example, United Technologies, an aerospace and defense company, was the leader among the sampled sector and also got the highest evaluation for openness. The company primarily sells its products and services to the government and other companies (United Technologies, 2003). Norfolk Southern is a major freight railroad company that services other businesses. Its web site was likewise evaluated as one of the best for openness; it provides detailed information about how the company operates and how the company's finances have changed and developed.

These companies certainly must consider potential stakeholders such as government clients and other business customers. Therefore, the industrials sector may understand that such stakeholders are looking for more business-related information than individual customers who might prefer product-based content and customer support information.

In terms of access, the web sites for the utilities sector were the best examples. Obviously, utility companies supply vital resources for daily life such as water, electricity, and gas. Because of the essential nature of these services and products, access via company contact information must be provided to the public. The top performer here, Dominion Resource, one of the nation's largest producers of energy, was rated highly because its web site offers a wide range of contact methods, including contact information for different branch locations. And perhaps more so than consumers of other products or services, utilities customers, after activating service, tend to stay with one utility company and pay bills on a monthly basis. Thus, access via the web site can play a key role in allowing customers and the company to engage in the level of interaction needed for a satisfying relationship[8].

The results of this study suggest that some web sites indicate evidence of enacting relationship maintenance strategies, especially positivity, openness, and access. Few of the sites analyzed here, however, demonstrate that organizations are realizing the potential of their sites for communicating about and fostering relationship building activities such as sharing of tasks and networking.

Of course, the researchers are not suggesting that multidimensional web sites are the panacea for the challenges organizations face in communicating and building relationships with publics (and vice versa). Other communication tactics, especially face-to-face communication, will be needed too. Yet, traditional public relations tactics,

coupled with online communication, certainly can provide the best overall strategy for effective public relations.

This study's primary contribution to public relations theory is its original focus on strategies for organization-public relationship maintenance. The maintenance strategies examined here have been included in recent models of organization-public relationships (Grunig and Huang, 2000), but the strategies have not been validated empirically. Nor have the strategies ever been applied to online communication. Although previous content analyses have probed notions of interactivity and whether web sites display features of two-way communication, no other study to date has used relationship theory as a conceptual framework. And, from a measurement perspective, most of the earlier web site analyses simply measured for presence or absence of a feature, whereas this study also sought to identify and measure the quality of maintenance strategies.

However, this study has some limitations that suggest future research directions. First, this study did not measure the effects of relationship maintenance strategies on organizations and publics. Although previous research supports a link between these strategies and indicators of relationship quality such as trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality, this study's methodology does not allow for establishing such a connection. The ability to do so obviously would allow for more meaningful insights into the significance of organizational web sites for strategic public relations. This study also did not explore how the use and quality of relationship maintenance strategies for organizations might differ, depending upon the public involved – ongoing publics such as investors, customers, employees, government, community, and media as well as issue-based publics such as activist groups. Future research might examine, for example, relationship building and maintenance according to the particular relationship involved such as that between the customer discretionary industry and its customer base. In addition, analyzing web sites for companies not based in the US will be valuable for comparing how different environmental factors (e.g. culture, economy, political system) influence the presence and quality of relationship maintenance strategies on web sites.

Notes

1. Stafford and Canary's maintenance strategy of providing assurances was omitted from the study because of the difficulty of operationalizing this strategy in a way that was valid and reliable for communication via web sites.
2. See www.fortune.com/fortune/fortune500.
3. Initially, the researchers also operationalized access as inclusion of online surveys and discussion groups/bulletin boards. However, since so few of the sampled sites contained these interactive features, meaningful analysis of these feedback mechanisms was not possible.
4. See http://media.corporate-ir.net/media_files/IROL/76/76341/reports/AR_2003/community.html.
5. See www.att.com/foundation/programs/education.html.
6. See www.walmartfoundation.org/wmstore/goodworks/scripts/Community.jsp?BV_SessionID = @@@@0272844114.1097633263@@@@&BV_EngineID = cccjadcmjgijheicfkfcfkjdgoodglh.0&oid = -10263&coid = -10289.

7. Reliability = $2M/C1 + C2$, M is agreement of the coders' coding decision, C1 and C2 are the total number of coding decisions made by the two coders.
8. Of course, many utilities operate in a regulated environment, so they have a mandate to provide access. Yet, given the deregulated environment that some utilities are facing, building positive relationships with customers now will be key to retaining them once customers can choose among service providers.

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Corresponding author

Eyun-Jung Ki can be contacted at: ejki@jou.ufl.edu