



# **Public Relations *Online*: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media**

## **Peer-to-Peer Public Relations**

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# Peer-to-Peer Public Relations

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*In the age of the Web where hype blows up in your face and spin gets taken as an insult, the real work of PR will be more important than ever.*

—DocSearls and DavidWeinberger (2001, p. 90)

## Overview

Online media give us new options for practicing public relations with more of a peer-to-peer view of the communication process. This chapter covers parallel ranges of communication concepts: from asymmetrical to symmetrical, from denotative to connotative, from monologic to dialogic, and from seeing markets as targets to seeing markets as conversations. Online, where the relative balance of power between organizations and publics is shifting, understanding these concepts is critical to practicing smart public relations.

## Peer-to-Peer Public Relations

If you have ever used a file-sharing program like Kazaa, Limewire, WinMX, or Napster to download audio, video, or text files, then you have worked on a computer that could simultaneously function as both a server (providing files for others to download) and a client (downloading files from others). Now granted, when those shared files contain copyrighted material, the networks run into legal issues, which is what led to the downfall of Napster and WinMX, but the concept of people working in peer-to-peer networks in the legitimate and productive exchange of original resources is becoming more and more prevalent online. Yale law professor Yochai Benkler (2006) has suggested that the general characteristics of peer-to-peer networks are changing the very nature of “information production fields”:

The material requirements for effective information production and communication are now owned by numbers of individuals several orders of magnitude larger than the number of owners of the basic means of information production and exchange a mere two decades ago .... We are beginning to see the expansion of this model not only to our core software platforms, but beyond them into every domain of information and cultural production... from peer production of encyclopedias, to news and commentary, to immersive entertainment. (pp. 4–5)

Whereas computing power and digital resources are concentrated on servers in server-side online operations, peer-to-peer networks work with resources that are more evenly distributed among the participants. This potential for more balance in the communication process makes peer-to-peer technology a useful metaphor for online public relations.

Whereas public relations books and academic articles of the 1980s focused most often on tools and tips for one-way communication tactics such as publicity, corporate advertising, audiovisual techniques, and effects-based communication efforts, public relations scholarship in the new millennium is just as likely to cover symmetrical models of communication, women's studies, diversity, and negotiation (Botan & Taylor, 2004). But it's not just the thinking about public relations that has shifted, the online technologies of everyday public relations are allowing the practice of effective public relations more room to move from one-way message targeting to two-way conversations.

## Two-Way Models

Putting communication processes into neat little boxes with labels such as one-way and two-way can be tricky. If you define effective communication as a process that requires some sort of feedback, you might argue that all communication is two way, but even so, there is obviously a broad range in the way communication channels are used. An organization's intranet, for example, might be used simply for top corporate officers to make announcements to employees, who in turn acknowledge receiving the messages by showing up at the meetings announced or turning in downloaded forms on time. Or the exact same technology may be adopted by employees as an open forum to voice their new ideas, post news from the frontlines, and discuss candid concerns with organizational management. The online technology allows for two-way communication in either case, but the directional flow of influence varies enormously based on how people use it.

As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), the Grunig and Hunt models of public relations represent basic ways that public relations people perceive their jobs in general. The publicity and press agency model and the public information model are considered primarily one-way approaches to public relations. The two-way models that follow are distinguished based on symmetry, or balance, in the directional flow of influence between an organization and its publics.

**Two-way asymmetrical public relations** is unbalanced. In this model, an organization gets feedback from its publics but uses this feedback as a basis for trying to persuade the publics to change. A key underpinning of asymmetrical communication strategies is that an organization wants the people it communicates with to change in some way, but the organization is unlikely to change much itself.

Take for example Burson-Marsteller's work for Hewlett-Packard China's (HPC's) Imaging and Printing Group in China:

HPC conducted market research targeting almost 12,000 consumers in China to ascertain their usage and behavioral attitudes towards digital imaging, with the objective of developing a marketing concept HPC could own for the launch. The research covered six cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Shenzhen and Hangzhou, and targeted two audience groups—25- to 32-year-old affluent singles and couples, and 33- to 40-year-old couples with children. From the research, HPC concluded that consumers in China want to do more with what they have, as opposed to having more features in their [information technology] products. (as cited in "Case Study," 2004)

With the results of this research, Burson-Marsteller (as cited in "Case Study," 2004) developed a campaign that combined online media with print and broadcast media to launch HP products with the theme, "At Home With HP: Out of This World." A highlight of the campaign was an online competition hosted on a major Chinese Internet portal called <http://sina.com> to recruit 99 families from across the country to try the HP products (PCs and all-in-one devices). More than 5,000 families entered the competition, which required them to submit pictures and family stories online. The families, and the trade media that covered the campaign activities, were used to "seed" the market prior to launching the HP products to the larger population. Of course, the 99 families and the trade media benefited with free HP products, but HP benefited with people to serve as seeds for their public relations-driven product launch. The feedback Burson-Marsteller and HP gathered from consumers was part of a two-way communication process, but the larger benefit Burson-Marsteller reportedly delivered was designed for HP.

Two-way asymmetrical tactics are not limited to sales-support public relations. Political strategists do a lot of research to learn which issues will resonate with key voting blocks before preparing their candidates to speak with these people. The main idea isn't as much to inform policy as it is to win votes (and raise funds). To the extent that the political candidate uses her political resources to control the "conversation," and to the extent that the public relations person promoting his client's new product uses his budget and media connections to get his key message across to masses of people, the balance of power favors the organization in the organization-public relationship. Both cases are asymmetrical.

Research and persuasion, online or otherwise, are not inherently bad or unethical. The political candidate and her advisors may be seeking to do very good things for their constituents if elected. They may even get voters more engaged in democratic processes if their arguments are engaging enough. The product promoter might be promoting healthy foods, which would benefit consumers in the long run. (Burson-Marsteller also develops campaigns to fight obesity.) When organizations begin to take publics' real interests into account and balance organizational interests with public interests, their strategies start to move toward the symmetrical end of the continuum.

**Two-way symmetrical public relations** then means (a) the organization takes the interests of publics into careful consideration, and (b) public relations practitioners seek some sort of balance between the interests of their organizations and the interests of publics. Interactive communication greatly enhances an organization's ability to practice symmetrical public relations.

In symmetrical public relations terms, *organization* and *public* are almost interchangeable. Of course, organizations usually communicate differently with different groups in different situations (Leichty & Springston, 1993). The exchange between HP and <http://sina.com>, for example, might have been more symmetrical, whereas the relationship between HP and consumers was more asymmetrical. Likewise, HP might have, at times, been open to suggestions from consumers on how the company actually designed and marketed products. In online environments, in which publics have much greater access to the channels of communication compared with traditional mass media environments, many publics are realizing more power in the communication process. Some have argued that the relatively low cost of getting online to deliver information and express opinions has put activists, government agencies, and corporations more "on par" online, and that the Internet is a "potential equalizer" (Coombs, 1998, p. 289; Heath, 1998, p. 273).

## Two-Way Typologies

Betteke van Ruler (2004) suggests two two-way typologies for understanding what public relations people do. Rather than looking at the concept of symmetry to describe the range of two-way communication, she recommends we consider whether communication is more about denotative (information as "objective") or connotative (information as "subjective") meaning. You get denotative meaning by looking something up in a dictionary. The Internet, according to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (n.d.), is "an electronic communications network that connects computer networks and organizational computer facilities around the world." That's denotative meaning. But whether you see the Internet as a playground, a giant library, a worldwide swap meet, a frightening underworld of lurking criminals, or some combination of all these is more a matter of connotative meaning. Connotative meaning according to van Ruler (2004), "refers to all personal feelings and subjective associations to a symbol" (p. 127).<sup>1</sup>

**The creator.** Van Ruler's (2004) creator typology describes a public relations person whose job it is "to create agreement between the organization, or its members, and its constituencies" (p. 135). The creator type aims for mutually beneficial relationships, cooperation, and common ground. Therefore, the creator aspires to somewhat symmetrical communication. The meaning delivered by the creator is denotative. For example, Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide worked with the Centers for Disease Control to develop kits designed to educate and train labor leaders and business managers to handle HIV/AIDS issues in the workplace:

HIV/AIDS-related stigma and misinformation about the transmission of the virus was proving to be a contentious issue in offices and on unionized job sites. Businesses and unions, already pressed on insurance expenses and other health related issues, were reluctant to address HIV/AIDS directly.... An online promotional campaign focusing on the availability of the Manager's Kit and Labor Leader's Kit from the <http://www.hivatwork.org> Web site resulted in a 440 percent increase in downloads of the kit components in the first eight months. ("HIV at Work," 2005)

The kit tactic is a good example of using online media to disseminate information more efficiently. The kits were composed of PDF files—a classic example of traditional text and graphics simply digitized for online distribution—but this one-way tactic was clearly part of a larger effort that used research to learn the concerns of business and labor leaders:

From our field research, Ogilvy... learned that in order to be accepted by workers and staff, workplace education had to be endorsed and initiated by senior management and labor leaders. Only through their support and leadership would worker acceptance be possible. (“HIV at Work,” 2005)

So the larger communication strategy, which included field research, can be seen as two-way. Yet the terms *educate* and *train*, as listed in the description of the goals for the downloadable kits, suggest a transmission of denotative meaning. Those working at Ogilvy fit the creator typology in this example. They know what HIV/AIDS is and what they want to communicate about it. They seek to have their constituents understand and agree with this denotative meaning.

**The facilitator.** The facilitator sees her job as more of a dialogic communication process. Facilitator types focus more on connotative meaning. Although Ogilvy and their clients are in a good position to tell us what HIV/AIDS *is*, they would be hard pressed to post a PDF file telling us what the affliction *means* to those fighting it around the world. The International Community of Women Living With HIV/AIDS (2005), on the other hand, “is honoured and proud to be the only international network which strives to share with the global community the experiences, views and contributions of 19 million incredible women worldwide, who are also HIV positive.” The Web site, although not as slick as those produced for top clients of international public relations agencies, includes direct contact information and discussion forums for women around the world who share the organization's concerns. Any public relations efforts apparent on the page, however, are best represented by van Ruler's (2004) description of the facilitator's job: to “create environments in which meaningful dialogues can flourish” (p. 136).

## Dialogue

All dialogue might involve two-way communication, but not all two-way communication is dialogue. When organizations practice two-way communications as simply means to an end, even if that end is socially beneficial, they aren't involved in a true dialogue. Doing research and getting feedback as part of a communications strategy is not really dialogue. Dialogue, as communication theorists have conceptualized it, is a heavily philosophical concept describing a process rather than an outcome (cf. Arnett, 1981; Buber, 1958). Public relations people might be involved with this kind of dialogue if and when they find themselves in a humanistic exchange of empathy with another. But this isn't really something you can put in your daily planner. If you did, you'd probably have to squeeze it in somewhere after lunch but before self-actualization.

This isn't to say that we cannot take some useful ideas away from the high theory of dialogue. In fact, Michael Kent and Maureen Taylor (1998) have used the concept of dialogue to identify smart uses of the Web in public relations. They point out that (a) dialogue doesn't mean agreement, and (b) dialogue is about intersubjectivity and not objective truth. For now, let's leave the true essence of dialogue with a capital “D” to the philosophers. Rather, let's hedge a little and use the term *dialogic communication* to describe communication when it is seen as a collaborative process of building connotative meaning as opposed to a functional process of delivering denotative meaning. A stagnant Web site, preprogrammed e-mail application, and even a voicemail system can do the latter: “For information on our products, press 3.” Dialogic communication requires real people to get (and stay) involved in the conversation.

Kent and Taylor offered some down-to-earth principles of dialogic communication that have stood the test of time (at least in Web years—since 1998).

**Dialogic loop.** Organizations communicating online should let people get in touch to ask questions and voice concerns. That is the easy part. Almost every business, nonprofit, and interest group with a home page also has a “contact us” link posted somewhere. Whether, and how, they actually respond is the litmus test for real interactivity (i.e., contingency interactivity). I once ordered a pair of shoes online from a national retailer. The shoes never arrived. I went online and hit the “customer support” link, which took me to an online form that I had to fill out with the details of my order. (No phone number was posted.) Completing and submitting that form gave me a tracking number and link to the delivery service. The delivery service Web site did show my tracking number, and that a shipment of some sort had been made. But I still didn't have my shoes. I e-mailed customer service and received an automated response with a link back to the “customer support” page where I started. This is *not* a dialogic loop.

This story goes on and on with calls to the delivery service, an online visit to the retailer's corporate home page to get a phone number, and a maze of voicemail designed to make sure I didn't actually speak with a real person. Finally, when I did get in touch with another human, we had a really unsatisfying conversation about the status of my order. Nothing was resolved. A few weeks later, I saw that at least my payment had been credited back to my credit card account. I'll never try to buy anything from that company again. No shoes, no stock, no dice.

As Kent and Taylor (1998) put it, “Response is a major part of the dialogic loop, however, the content of the response is also critical for relationship building” (p. 327).

**Usefulness of information.** Providing useful information is an important part of one-way communication, but ensuring the usability of online communication requires a more two-way process of understanding what your publics are looking for (more on usability in [Chapter 10](#)). Useful information as a principle of dialogic communication means that you are providing publics something of substance that will allow them to engage you as informed partners.

Sure, the online shoe shop let me see all the styles, sizes, and colors. That was somewhat useful. The online shopping might even have been construed as two way and functionally interactive as I entered my preferences and saw the product pictures change and which items were on sale, but it was definitely not dialogic.

On the other hand, a quick Google search for the company's name and *customer service* turned up an independent customer-review-and-rating bulletin board (“BizRate,” 2005). Of course, lots of customers (the ones who actually received their orders as expected) were happy with the retailer, but too many others shared my concerns. The following are the five posts made in the five days prior to my query. Never mind the broken English and the typos; I would have found the human voices on this page just as useful, if not more so, than the expertly designed shoe store home page:

- I bought some shoes from the [company] site. They were advertised as “soft upper,” but when I received them they were very hard penny loafers. It also took quite a while for delivery and I could not find a way to track the shipment.
- was sent an email w / the sale price on an item. check the website to place the order and the regular price was given to me. Checked w / customer svc via phone and they didn't know anything about it. I had to check the website every couple of days for a week and half until the correct prices were posted.
- Local stores no longer carry Boat Shoes. Went on-line and had the product within 5 Days. Excellent service and a great fit.
- When I E-mail customer servive on the pair of shoes I wanted and didn't find on the Internet site. I E-mail them to find out if they where still availbe and if they where not, what would be there replacement. All they told me was they where no longer available. But didn't tell me what it replacement was.

Very poor customer service for someone who is selling shoes. I had to call the Corporate Office to find the replacement

- please can you tell me where is my order please call me at...

The last comment made me wonder what the chances were that anyone would ever call the person back. Next time, I'll check the ratings page first.

**Generating return visits.** Dialogic communication means not just getting people engaged in a back-and-forth conversation, but also keeping them engaged. This is an area in which public relations differs somewhat from marketing.

Surprisingly, three of the five people cited above indicated that they “would shop here again,” as noted with a little green smiley face next to their comments. In a marketing sense, this is a 60% success rate. When I think of myself as marketers think of me—as a customer—I see a successful online transaction as one in which I get on the Web, find what I need, buy it, and have it delivered in a minimal amount of time. When my order goes through smoothly, I normally don't want to dialogue about the product (i.e., “What do shoes really mean?”).

But members of customer publics are often existing or potential members of other publics—including journalists, stockholders, regulators, suppliers, employees, neighbors, and activists. Encouraging these people to become “return visitors” and not just “repeat customers” is a public relations function that means offering something of value beyond a marketable product. It means inviting them to get involved in a conversation. Journalists, stockholders, and regulators always have been likely to have their concerns taken seriously. Imagine treating a *Wall Street Journal* reporter or a Securities and Exchange Commission official like a customer: “Your feedback is important to us. Press one for a quote from our CEO. Press two for our response to auditors. Or remain on the line to hear these options again.” Taking the same approach online with links to a stagnant “press room” or “investor relations” page with canned content is just as silly. An organization needs to offer something worth returning for if it wants to use online media to develop relationships with any of its publics. Keep in mind that employees, neighbors, and activists are organized online too. Online, the organization-public distinction is easily reversed.

#### Markets as Conversations—Another Perspective on “PR Types”

Doc Searls and David Weinberger are two of the Internet's most respected voices when it comes to understanding the shift in emphasis online from traditional marketing and public relations practices to approaches that give much greater weight to the voices of publics. And what do they think of “PR types?” “They're the used car salesmen of the corporate world,” say Searls and Weinberger (2001). But then they write:

Of course, the best of the people in PR are not PR Types at all. They understand that they aren't censors, they're the company's best conversationalists. (p. 90)

Searls and Weinberger (2001) see online markets as conversations, not as targets. As they explain, the first markets were places where people gathered to do business and exchange ideas—a far cry from my online shoe store. These markets brought people with shared interests together to discuss wares and services. Buyers and sellers talked to each other in ways mass media would never allow. Business models of the late 20th century, however, were developed to deliver large shipments of uniform products to distant markets.

Advertisers, marketers, and public relations people followed suit in the only way that made sense for such mass markets. They sought to deliver their messages with mass communication. Strategic mass communi-

cation came to mean getting a persuasive message to work on a target market, and these target markets came to be defined based on their demographic, geographic, and even sociographic profiles. What riddles businesses now is how to stay in touch with these markets as the media used to communicate with them are de-massifying.

Searls and Weinberger (2001) recommend getting back to the concept of markets as conversations among peers, which means speaking with a human voice and getting away from the tactics of mass marketing. Public relations people, with their emphasis on two-way communication, are in a good place to engage people in such conversations. This doesn't mean funneling all communication between an organization and its publics through a single person or office (or support page or voicemail system). To the contrary, a big part of the public relations function is to open an organization to direct conversations between people in the organization and people outside the organization who are interested in what the organization is doing. This markets-as-conversations approach echoes open-systems, peer-to-peer, two-way, and dialogic models of public relations.

### It Depends

As discussed at the end of [Chapter 1](#), Glen Cameron and his colleagues have worked to elaborate how the best approaches to successful public relations are not total advocacy or absolute accommodation (e.g., Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Reber & Cameron, 2003). In response to the idea that Grunig's symmetrical ideal of public relations might provide a single superior model for practice, they developed the contingency approach to describe how successful public relations means picking the point on the continuum that works best given the specifics of a situation.

Likewise, the best approach to online communications depends on the circumstances. Online media are perfectly capable of server-side, one-way, asymmetrical, denotative, monologic, and markets-as-targets approaches to public relations. There are times when it makes good sense to use them as such. But what makes online public relations exciting is closer to the other end of these continua, where the "real work of PR" is likely to occur (see [Table 4.1](#)). Online media are giving us new opportunities to practice more two-way, symmetrical, facilitative, dialogic, conversational public relations.

**Table 4.1 Ranges of Choices for Online Media Use**

<i>Server-Side</i>	<i>Peer-to-Peer</i>
One-way	Two-way
Asymmetrical	Symmetrical
Creator-type (denotative)	Facilitative
Monologic	Dialogic
Markets as targets	Markets as conversations

## Note

1. Van Ruler's (2004) concepts of denotative and connotative meaning are cited here in abbreviated form for their direct application to public relations practitioner typologies. She cites Littlejohn (1992) and Rosengren (2000) as sources of more general discussion of denotation and connotation in communication studies.

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Hands-Online Activity

*Cases in Point?*

1. Search online for two separate public relations case studies in which online media were central to the strategy. Hint: Case studies are available through the Web sites of professional organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America (Silver Anvil Awards) and the Council of Public Relations Firms, and public relations agencies such as Ketchum and Ogilvy Worldwide.
2. Compare where the overall communication strategy (not the specific tactics) of each might fit on the continua in [Table 4.1](#).

*Case 1*

Name of Case: \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe how online media were used:

Rate the overall communication strategy on a scale of 1 to 5 for each dimension:

<i>Case 1: Overall Communication Strategy Was . . .</i>					
Very one-way 1	2	3	4	5	Very two-way
Very asymmetrical 1	2	3	4	5	Very symmetrical
Very denotative (creator type) 1	2	3	4	5	Very facilitative
Very monologic 1	2	3	4	5	Very dialogic
Very markets-as- targets 1	2	3	4	5	Very markets-as- conversations

*Case 2*

Name of Case: \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe how online media were used:

Rate the overall communication strategy on a scale of 1 to 5 for each dimension:

<i>Case 2: Overall Communication Strategy Was . . .</i>				
Very one-way 1	2	3	4	Very two-way 5
Very asymmetrical 1	2	3	4	Very symmetrical 5
Very denotative (creator type) 1	2	3	4	Very facilitative 5
Very monologic 1	2	3	4	Very dialogic 5
Very markets-as- targets 1	2	3	4	Very markets-as- conversations 5

3. Was the one with the higher ratings better public relations than the other? Why or why not?

- public relations
- dialogic
- peer-to-peer
- target markets
- communication processes
- HIV/AIDS
- customers

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