Public Relations *Online*: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media

Commerce-Driven Relationships

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There is a generation growing up not used to reading newspapers and that is looking for less mediated engagement, and they're not particularly interested in looking for a press release translated by a writer and interpreted by an editor.

—*Wired* Magazine editor-in-chief Chris Anderson, in a speech delivered to Silicon Valley Public Relations Society of America members (as cited in O'Brien, 2005)

Overview

As more and more commerce moves online, public relations departments face challenges in determining their role when it comes to generating and maintaining online business. This chapter will discuss how online technologies, individual people, and cultures all come into play in building and maintaining dollar- (or yen-, or euro-, or franc-…) driven relationships. Effective employee relations, customer relations, investor relations, and donor relations mean taking the perspective of the employees, customers, investors, and donors with whom you have conversations online.

What Needs to Be in Place?

In a world of employee intranets, e-commerce, online investor relations, and Internet-based fundraising, the antecedents of online relationships are still about the technologies people use, the people themselves, and the diversity of cultures in which they live, work, and play—and buy, sell, and trade.

Technology and Content

Whereas P2P stands for "peer to peer" in computer networking, B2B is short for "business to business," and B2C is short for "business to consumer." Each refers to a basic relationship to identify a category of technologies. B2B applications often are designed to save humans time by automating tedious tasks such as handling repeat orders along a supply chain from manufacturer to retailer. B2C applications allow customers to complete automated transactions. This is good stuff for e-commerce, but it's not exactly what we mean when we talk about relationships in public relations. What are more critical to public relations are the forms of human communication that go along with these technologies.

General-access Web pages and discussion forums, intranets, extranets, consumer-generated media, and plain old e-mail cover a range of technologies from the broadest levels of mass commerce to the most personalized forms of commerce-driven communication between an organization and its publics.

Commerce-driven Web pages. Stuart Esrock and Greg Leichty (2000) were among the first to take a serious look at how profitable organizations were using Web pages for public relations purposes. They studied Fortune 500 company Web sites in 1997 and again in 1999 and found, not surprisingly, that these companies tailored their Web content for the press, investors, customers, and prospective employees among other publics (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). They inferred, quite logically, that the prominence of materials on a company's home page indicated the primary publics the site was designed to reach. If press releases were front and center on the home page, Esrock and Leichty figured news media were a primary public. As you might have expected, this emphasis on news was most common in the 1997 study. However, by the second wave of the study in 1999, the researchers observed something different. Relative to investors, customers, and potential employees, the press was a secondary public, at least in terms of the structure of the organizations' front pages. The

media relations functions of these Web sites didn't disappear; they just moved backstage a bit.

Esrock and Leichty (2000) seem to have uncovered a lasting lesson in a changing media environment. Almost a decade later, as podcasts and executive blogs like those posted by General Motors and Sun Microsystems became the focus of "cutting-edge" seminars and public relations agency tip sheets Web-wide, *New York Times* journalist John Markoff told the public relations trade publication *Bulldog Reporter* the following: "Reporters really don't find that much use in [blogs]. Their real value is in being a direct channel to the public" (as cited in Pittman, 2005). Not all reporters would agree with Markoff, but the take-home point stands that Web-based public relations clearly extends directly to "the public" (or "publics," as strategic public relations people see them) beyond the news media.

Of course, Fortune 500 companies have large public relations staffs or large public relations agency teams at their service, but even large public relations teams are greatly outnumbered by the number of people they hope their organization will communicate with beyond traditional mass media. This begs the question of how public relations teams ranging anywhere from 2 to 20 in size can carry on conversational communication with so many niche media, customers, consumers, investors, and donors.

How can public relations efforts be distributed online? Part of the answer still lies in the one-to-many tactics of old-fashioned corporate communication. Just as effective media relations require stepping into the shoes of journalists, effective consumer relations, investor relations, donor relations, and employee relations mean taking the perspective of the consumers, investors, donors, and employees who visit you online.

General-access facts and frequently asked questions. When done right, these offer people facts and information they actually want.

Are the frequently asked questions (FAQ) really asked frequently?

For some reason, my home address won't register on the Web page for one of the national pizza chains in my town. I enter my quirky order online (using a coupon for two free toppings, but asking for four toppings on half and just cheese on the other half). I figure this will be a lot easier to get right online than it will be to negotiate with the harried guy who answers the phone. But then when I try to submit the order, my address won't register. So I have to call anyhow. I ask the guy on the phone why my address works on his computer but not mine. He has no idea. The delivery driver doesn't know either. So before I try to order from them again, I check the FAQ page.

There was a time when I would expect to find on the FAQ page answers to trivia-type questions like when the company was founded and how many pounds of pizza dough they use in a day. But I am now thankful that as consumer-targeted Web pages have improved, the likelihood of finding the answer to my question in FAQ sections has increased. The Domino's Pizza FAQ page includes, "Can you help me with online ordering?" and Papa John's has an online customer feedback form that specifically asks if my feedback is related to online ordering.

In doing my "research" for this chapter, I went ahead and filled out the Papa John's customer feedback form. In a few minutes I got an e-mail from one of their employees:

> Tom
>
> I do apologize for the inconvenience, however Online Ordering is currently unavailable for your address. Our current US Postal Service information indicates your address is invalid. Some possible explanations for this may be: new construction, recent change of street name or number, or new zip code. Please feel free to check back for future updates. Until then, Ordering Online will be unavail-

able.

Evan
Consumer Services Team

This works for me. The new-construction explanation makes sense where I live. I doubt Evan's job description includes the actual words *public relations*, but his function on the Consumer Services Team is certainly part of his company's relationship with its publics. If he offers me a cynical answer or ignores my request, and if I were the type to get vocal about my pizza mishaps, I might go and blog about it, or go complain on the forum at http://www.papajohnsucks.com/-yes, it's a real page.[1] Then there would be no question of whether this is a public relations issue. (We will look at this from the perspective of http://www.pizzadeliverydrivers.org/ in the next chapter.)

Online forums. Because there is a huge gap between the types of questions that are asked so often that they belong within a click or two of an organization's home page and the questions that require one-to-one attention, many organizations host online forums with searchable archives.

For example, if you've got a fairly specific question about your computer hardware, there is a pretty good chance someone else using that hardware has the same question, such as "Will my Hewlett Packard 4110 OfficeJet printer work with my Apple Airport Extreme?" We probably wouldn't call this a "frequently asked" question, but even if it's asked a couple of times, the organization can save time by making the answer available to anyone who looks for it in the future.

This isn't a question to post prominently to http://www.hp.com or http://www.apple.com, but it's also not the type of question that Hewlett Packard (HP) and Apple should have to rewrite an individual response for every time it is asked. This is how online forums are useful. For example, a forum may be set up for people with questions for HP about the OfficeJet 4100 line of printers. First you can do a search to see if the question already has been answered. If you don't have any luck, then you can ask the question yourself. When a tech person answers, she can then archive that answer so it shows up for the next person who might search for it.

For this whole process of answering questions and adapting to the business environment to work, the gears of internal communication must be oiled well. This is why public relations people should be involved. On the surface, these are issues of marketing, information technology (IT), and store management, but handling them requires both smooth internal communication and effective external communication. Otherwise, those communicating on behalf of an organization—including pizza order takers and consumer hardware technicians—will find themselves unable to keep up with questions, or offering answers like, "I don't know" and "That's just what the computer is telling me."

Public relations people cannot possibly do it all, but they can work to distribute the function of building and maintaining relationships between an organization and its online publics among internal and external groups. This is where server-side, one-to-many communication starts to look more like peer-to-peer, many-to-many communication.

We find social concepts and technological concepts running parallel yet again as we turn our attention to intranets and extranets as technologies that aid communication among internal and external groups.

Intranets and extranets. Intranets allow a business to keep some information semi-private. Privacy doesn't mean sinister secrecy. It just means employees and members can share information such as their home contact information, proprietary business ideas, benefits concerns, and even goofy photos from the company picnic with their colleagues without worrying too much about this information flowing out to the public domain. Of

course, some information might "leak" out, and it is possible that an outsider could hack into an intranet, so we can't say that intranet communication is completely worry free, but intranets do afford internal publics at least the general expectation that access to the content will be limited to colleagues in the same organization. Intranets are particularly helpful in geographically dispersed organizations, adding an additional communication channel to help people in distant locations build and maintain more productive working relationships (Hallahan, 2004).

Public relations people can participate in intranets to keep in touch with issues important to internal publics, which again is a big part of the boundary-spanning role. They also can use intranets to distribute information internally. In other words, systems, server-side, and peer-to-peer public relations tactics all can be used to build and maintain online relationships with internal publics such as employees, members, and volunteers.

Whereas intranets are designed for internal publics, extranets serve external publics such as vendors, credentialed news media, and even public relations agency clients. Marketing data, inventory lists, breaking news releases, and updated media lists might be shared among select internal and external groups. In promoting Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide's expertise in online communication, senior vice president John Bell (n.d.) described his agency's use of extranets as follows:

> With our collaborative extranets, we can share material across borders instantly. We can manage a far-flung team, carry on online dialogue, and deliver relevant news streams right to the desktop. Our Communications Central extranet has a component approach to give agency and client teammates the right "dashboard" for any engagement.

Consumer-generated media (CGM). CGM is yet another set of initials to describe online communication forms that include blogs, ratings sites, rogue Web sites (e.g., http://www.papajohnsucks.com), podcasts, and the like. Whereas we might think of Fortune 500 Web pages, FAQ pages, product discussion forums, intranets, and extranets as pretty much owned by the organizations that host them, the term *CGM* suggests a different kind of ownership. Even if the topic is your organization's products or services, you will have no more control over the conversation than you would if it were happening in an Italian café or Taipei noodle house.

As Pete Blackshaw (2005) said, "CGM can be influenced, but not controlled, by marketers." Blackshaw, a columnist on digital marketing strategies for JupiterMedia's ClickZ network, gets at a lasting media concept that should be familiar to anyone studying public relations: the continuum between highly controlled media such as paid advertisements and highly uncontrolled media such as the content of an editorial page (see also Questionable Claims in Chapter 6). CGM, such as blogs, ratings sites, third-party discussion forums, podcasts, and so forth, obviously fall on the uncontrolled side of the spectrum from a marketer's perspective. But from another perspective, as media relations expert Lloyd P. Trufelman put it in a 2005 *Public Relations Tactics* article, "Media *consumers* are exhibiting much *more control* over the content they receive" (p. 17, italics added). One group's loss of control may be another's gain. From the consumer's perspective, this is the beauty of CGM. To understand the array of perspectives in online communication, we must take into account the people using the technologies.

People and the Cultures of Online Commerce

Working to understand the perspectives of individuals in the context of unique cultures is not a new idea in business-driven communication, but one that was amplified with the "de-massification" of media in the late 20th century. The concept of *integrated marketing communication* offers lasting ideas that help us make sense of why and how individuals make use of the constantly changing communication technologies that are central to online commerce.

In the big picture of two-way communication between organizations and publics, computers were first used in gathering information much more than they were in disseminating it. In the early 1970s, General Electric (GE) developed a theory called Focus that was built on the idea that "all good advertising begins with a fundamental understanding of the receiver," according to professor and former GE marketing executive Bob Lauterborn (as cited in Schultz, Tannenbaum, & Lauterborn, 1993, pp. 6–7). And with increased marketer access to computers and databases in the 1990s, the idea became "implementable" (p. 11). Lauterborn (as cited in Schultz et al., 1993) converted the four Ps of marketing—product, price, place, and promotion—to the four Cs—consumer wants and needs, costs to satisfy those wants and needs, convenience to buy, and communication. "The motto of the age of the manufacturer—*caveat emptor*, let the buyer beware—is replaced by *caveat emptorum*, beware of the buyer" (as cited in Schultz et al., 1993, p. 13).

Rapid rises in rates of consumer access to computer-mediated communication technology trailed the trends in marketers' access to computing technologies by only a few years, and two-way models of communication took off further from there. Schultz et al. (1993) placed consumer perceptions at the heart of their concept of integrated marketing communication. This means that the real "integration" of brands happens in the consumer's views and experiences, even more so than in the flowcharts of organizations aspiring to espouse those brand ideals. My perceptions of the Papa John's brand is based on the gestalt of my experience with their ads, their pizzas (and the pepper-oncinis they put next to the pizzas), their Web site, their delivery drivers, my conversations with the people who answer the phones, what I have read on http://www.papajohnsucks.com, the e-mail Evan sent me, and every other point of contact I have had with the organization.

Public relations, marketing, advertising, IT, human resources (HR), and every other part of an organization that comes into contact with the organization's publics play a role in the way consumers see the organization. This brings to mind van Ruler's (2004) conductor-type from Chapter 3. Although public relations people should work to understand all these points of contact, they should be especially involved in the processes of communication when identifying consumer wants and needs.

Employees and internal publics. One of the simplest ways to segment publics in business environments is to distinguish between internal and external publics. Once you have determined whether a public is internal or external given the circumstances, you can take into account how organizational cultures affect employees and members when they are involved in online communication between the organization and its publics.

During crises, internal communication becomes more important than ever. Maintaining a first-person sense of "we" is one of the few things that can help pull an organization through tough times, and online media can offer a way for top management to stay in touch with internal publics while also responding to the tremendous external demands of government and media.

During and following the attacks of September 11, 2001, American Airlines made use of a number of internal channels, including an intranet, employee e-mail, fax-on-demand, and electronic newsletters. Joe Downing's (2004) case study of American Airlines' use of mediated communication during that massive crisis was cited in Chapter 2 as an example of how the different faces of American Airlines' online presence serve different roles from a systems view, with a major Web site devoted to consumers and another intranet reserved for internal communication. Perhaps the most telling part of the case, however, was how a campaign called Good Words evolved. American Airlines' manager of employee communication Mick Doherty and his colleagues started the effort on September 24 to pass along to internal publics the words of condolence, prayers, and poems that they had received. They interspersed these pieces in with the troubling operational news they had to deliver daily via e-mail, the intranet, and other channels. Then something interesting happened.

> Employees began to send in their own stories, and these were added to the messages the airline had already received. Ultimately, this allowed employee reactions to become part of the story.

(Downing, 2004, p. 45)

As more employees read the communication, more also submitted their own stories. Doherty (as cited in Downing, 2004, p. 45) described the communication as "self-replicating." This goes to show how internal communication can work when online media are seen as "our" media rather than someone else's. It also shows how organizational culture is not something defined and distributed by top management in a server-side process from few to many, but something developed in a peer-to-peer exchange among members of the various groups involved. The role of public relations became less about targeting messages and more about inviting internal publics to a conversation and encouraging them to bring their own thoughts and feelings to the table, thereby sharing experiences and building an environment, rather than just receiving a message.

Questions of how culture is communicated online and to what effect are also at the center of consumer relations concerns, especially in a worldwide context.

Consumers and customers. "Globalization simultaneously creates tendencies toward some degree of cultural (structural) homogenization while at the same time it encourages people to identify more strongly with their ethnic or national grouping," say researchers Michael Maynard and Yan Tian (2004). This statement outlines the foundation for a sophisticated approach to communicating with consumers and customers in an online environment, in which posting new material to a Web page in Atlanta carries the risk of putting off a huge group of people in Beijing. Maynard and Tian call it "glocalization" when global companies with global brands such as Coca Cola design Web presences from local perspectives.

Of course, there are countless cultures even in the metro Atlanta area to take into account. You need not travel far—virtually or otherwise—to be overwhelmed by the diversity of perspectives to consider in supporting even a single local brand. This is why one-size-fits-all marketing is so limited. The trick is to find the right balance between two extremes. Trying to be all things to all people doesn't make much sense because your organization will have no consistent identity (i.e., brand)—no one, not even you, will know what your company is all about. On the other hand, a totally homogenous and stagnant "company line" of communication designed to appeal to the broadest possible market likely will end up bland and generic, which also misses the point of online communication. Stagnant systems don't adapt.

So what's the solution? "Since corporations and businesses aren't individuals, ultimately their authenticity is rooted in their employees…. When a conversation is required, or even just desired, being able to count upon a rich range of corporate spokespeople is crucial" (Searls & Weinberger, 2001, pp. 100, 110). Whenever your company's employees speak online in the first-person voice, they are spokespeople for the organization. They contribute to the environment, experiences, and even the internal thoughts and feelings of your publics. But they act as eyes and ears too in the process of two-way communication.

We might call this *distributed public relations.* With an immediate nod to Dan Gillmor (2005) for his work with the concept of "distributed journalism," a definition of "distributed public relations" might be in order:

>   **distributed public relations:***n.* intentional practice of sharing public relations responsibilities among
>   a broad cross-section of an organization's members or employees, particularly in an online context.

Open conversations yield good data to help understand customers and other publics. Talk with employees to see what they have learned about the diversity of customer perspectives out there. Collaborate with all the people who come into online contact with your company's customers. Avoid turf battles. Get involved in the conversations too so you can speak directly with consumers and customers.

The general idea here is to realize that different groups of consumers have different interests, and it is pos-

sible to work those interests into your business model while at the same time communicating out about your products and services. Shel Holtz (1999), for example, explains how public relations people can work with IT people to achieve some harmony in online communication, profit driven or otherwise:

> Sit down with your IT counterparts and discuss your objectives. IT needs to understand what you are trying to accomplish on the company's behalf and how the intranet and/or Web figure into the equa-tion. Listen to IT's objectives. With all your cards on the table, take that next big step: Agree to work together to provide the solutions the organization needs in order to be successful and competitive. (p. 252)

This type of conversation can work just as well with marketing, advertising, and other departments that are attuned to consumer wants and needs. And for financial publics such as investors and analysts, you can ex-tend this model of cooperation to investor relations (IR).

Investors. In the 1990s and early 2000s, large brokerage firms such as Morgan Stanley Dean Witter and Merrill Lynch had to adapt to the demand for a more individualized trading environment, which was brought about by the services of do-it-yourself online discount brokerages like E*Trade (Kawamoto, 2003). The shift from big brokerages doing almost all of the business to individual investors making more individual trades online mirrors de-massification trends in other industries.

Online, public relations and IR can work together to make sure that financial information is available whenever appropriate and that this information is presented in a form that is easily accessible by all interested parties, including individual investors. The two departments can work together with IT and even HR (if, say, stock op-tions are part of employee benefits packages), to make sure the organization's financial records are available when they should be and in line with the requirements of regulatory agencies such as the Securities and Ex-change Commission in the United States.

Donors. Dot-orgs need investors as much as dot-coms. Nonprofit organizations must compete with other or-ganizations to convince donors that money donated constitutes a wise investment. Although the return on that investment may be disaster relief, disease control and prevention, education programs, or reforestation efforts, getting those efforts funded can be just as competitive—if not more so—than convincing people that a company's stock will pay dividends. Online media offer new opportunities to identify and cultivate relationships with potential investors and donors supporting social and environmental issues. Chapter 8 looks at online re-lationships when the context of online public relations is as much a marketplace of ideas as it is a marketplace of commerce.

Questionable Claims

None of Our Business?

XBRL (extensible business reporting language) is a good example of the intersection between online technologies and the interests of financial publics. XBRL is based on the same technology as RSS (really simple syndication). Like HTML (hypertext mark-up language), it allows people entering and re-porting data from a wide variety of organizations using different computer platforms to present data in

a consistent format. That way, a potential investor could analyze the financial documents of several companies in the same industry without having to manually thumb through piles of documents distributed by each organization to make apples-to-apples comparisons. For example, net profit is tagged the same way for every company using XBRL, so an investor easily can download and compare net profits between multiple companies.

Companies can use this technology to make it easier to update public information such as the contents of quarterly and annual reports. XBRL is designed to make it easier for companies in the United States to comply with the disclosure standards of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). It makes it easier for companies to file annual and quarterly reports to the SEC's EDGAR (Electronic Data Gathering and Retrieval) database. The finance-phobic public relations practitioner may ask, "Is that really something I need to worry about?"

XBRL is as commerce driven as any communication technology out there, but it is also helping public relations people in their efforts to establish more transparency. Even though it is tempting to write off such technologies as the domain of another department, Michelle Savage (2005), vice president of IR for PR Newswire makes a compelling argument for public relations practitioners to get involved. What's at stake, according to Savage, is the idea that "all of a company's critical audiences can access news and financial information" (p. 12). Whether this happens from the full adoption of XBRL or some other technology, the importance of public relations people understanding how financial information gets communicated is critical.

Note

1. The site provider "closed" the site on August 16, 2005, and stopped adding new content.

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Hands-Online Activity

Do-it-Yourself Faq Tips

1. Revisit some commercial Web sites that you have used in the past few weeks and find at least two examples of FAQs from these sites. For example, if you ordered a pizza online, you might go to http://www.pizzahut.com/ and from there find http://www.pizzahut.com/faq/.

    a. URL for first FAQ_____

    b. URL for second FAQ_____

2. This chapter offers some advice for writing FAQs from the perspective of those using the Web sites. Two tips are listed here for writing FAQs that support relationships between organizations doing business online and the publics who will make or break the success of that business. Working from the previous URLs, note examples (good or bad) of FAQ items that illustrate these ideas.
    - Tip 1: Ensure that your frequently asked questions really are asked frequently.

Example of a FAQ that you think really is asked frequently (or one that you think almost never gets asked):

- Tip 2: Be conversational. This means being responsive in tone as well as making contact

information available if the customer needs more information than you offer in your FAQ.

Example of a conversational FAQ item (or a particularly non-conversational one):

3. Write three tips of your own and add examples to illustrate what you mean.
   ◦ Tip 3:

Example:

- Tip 4:

Example:

- Tip 5:

Example:

- public relations
- extranets
- intranets
- staff
- podcasts
- donors
- consumers

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