Public Relations *Online*: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media

Managing Public Relations in Real Time

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Managing Public Relations in Real Time

Strategy, not technology, drives PR programs.

—John Guiniven (2005, p. 6)

Overview

This chapter covers the interrelated roles of online planning, action, and communication in the cyclical process of strategic public relations. Online media serve as forums for public relations planning as well as tools for often high-speed organizational action and communication. This chapter will discuss issues to consider when public relations people work as members of geographically dispersed teams and online communities. Practical advice for online action and communication is offered based on interactive strategies for building and maintaining relationships.

The Speed of Real Time

In August 2000, a computer equipment company called Emulex unwittingly became the focus of a case study of the dark side of light-speed online communications. Early on a Friday morning in August 2000, an Emulex press release was posted on an Internet news distribution service called Internet Wire. (The service later became Market Wire.) The release said that Emulex's chief executive was resigning, that the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission was investigating the company, and that its quarterly earnings report was being revised to show a loss instead of a profit. In just 16 minutes after the release was republished online by several major wire services, stock prices plunged from more than $103 per share to $43 per share (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2001). Misguided investors traded more than 2 million Emulex shares during that brief time. Other companies in similar businesses also noticed sell-offs as investors worried that the news from Emulex indicated sector-wide financial issues. But here's the catch—the news release was a hoax.

Emulex executives immediately notified the NASDAQ stock market that the news was phony, and NASDAQ officials temporarily halted trading of Emulex shares. Emulex CEO Paul Folino made multiple appearances on CNBC that day to ensure investors that he was still on the job and that the company had indeed turned profits in its quarterly earnings (Grice & Ard, 2000). Dow Jones, Bloomberg News, CBS Market-Watch, and http://TheStreet.com—all news services that had reported the false news—quickly followed with corrections. By 10:30 a.m. Pacific Time, Emulex shares were back on the market, and by the end of the day, they had recovered to a price of $105.75, but not before Emulex experienced the unwanted excitement of a $2.2-billion market capital thrill ride.

About the only part of this case that didn't move at digital speed was the follow-up investigation of Mark Jakob, a former Internet Wire employee who issued the phony release from a personal computer at El Camino College in Torrance, California. A year later, in 2001, he was sentenced to 44 months in prison after pleading guilty to charges of securities fraud and wire fraud.

Such is the speed of Internet buzz, which can hurt an organization as fast as it helps it. Can you do anything about it? Often you can, but it takes planning and interactive communication.

Planning

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Strategic public relations is all about the planning, action, and communication that result from ongoing research and evaluation efforts. (Research and evaluation are covered in more detail in the next chapter.) The Emulex case shows just how fast an organization may need to respond to a situation in an online environment, and the better the strategic planning, the better prepared an organization is to adapt at the speed of online information. Real-time adaptation doesn't necessarily mean seat-of-the-pants public relations. Online media offer opportunities for strategic but interactive communication (i.e., contingency interactivity, in which each organization's and each public's action and communication depends on the action and communication of the other).

In the most practical sense, strategic public relations planning means developing goals and objectives. Goals are more general than objectives. Objectives specify measurable steps you take to achieve goals. Some situations, such as planning to overhaul an organization's Web site, might allow plenty of time to develop a very detailed strategy. A several-month timeline could be designed based on careful research, with a detailed budget and week-by-week objectives leading to a final product that accomplishes goals supporting the general mission of the organization. On the other hand, an unexpected emergency such as the Emulex case may require a quickly devised goal (e.g., recover market capital!) with on-the-spot objectives (e.g., notify NASDAQ now, get corrections out through all major wire services before noon). Even the latter case, however, can benefit from some degree of proactive planning.

Building a Web site. Let's first consider the planning that might go into building a Web site when planners have the luxury of working in an extended timeline. Then we can look at ways planning can help organizations respond to emerging issues in their environment as well as flat-out emergencies. General goals for Web sites may include keywords like *inform, sell*, and *persuade* (Diggs-Brown & Glou, 2004). And as we have seen in prior chapters, public relations goals for Web sites also might include more directed ideas such as generating publicity, responding to consumer concerns, and building coalitions. Writing realistic objectives to serve as steps to accomplishing these broader goals depends very much on your budget and timeline—key parts of the planning process in their own right. Budgets for building a Web site or any form of content management system should include the costs related to personnel (salaries, benefits, training, overhead) as well as the costs of technology and information (hardware, new or upgraded software, database subscriptions, etc.).

Internet publicity expert Steve O'Keefe (2002) suggests a three-part approach to getting an online publicity effort up and running. First, get the right software and get people familiar with using it. For building a Web site, this might include database software, HTML editors, graphics programs, and FTP (file transfer protocol) applications. Second, “teach the documents,” which means asking staff to work with various document formats such as spreadsheets, HTML, PDF, and Word (O'Keefe, 2002, p. 411). Document-based lessons include how to find documents online, how to format information for online presentation, how to address and send targeted e-mail messages, how to annotate bookmarks, and how to convert document content across formats. Testing is the final step O'Keefe recommends in planning to go live online. Testing is a good example of how evaluation can be done throughout an ongoing process of public relations and not just at the end of a campaign. Seeing how your Web page loads in different Web browsers, entering data from a remote terminal and seeing how that data feeds into your database, and sending automated response e-mails to your own inquiries are all examples of basic informal research that will help you work bugs out before going live with your Web page. This testing also illustrates the range of tasks that might require hiring or training team members as part of your plan.

Key skills in planning or overhauling a Web site include writing, graphic design, information architecture, database operations, and general system maintenance. For a simple Web page, you might be able to handle all this yourself with just a laptop, some Web editing software, and a server. But if you are designing a Web page to meet larger goals, you'll likely work with a number of different people bringing a variety of areas of expertise to the project.

Online teamwork. Working with different people handling different tasks to reach a common goal requires

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one of the most important public relations skills of all—management. Content management systems and wikis, as defined in Chapter 1, are a big part of getting the job done when you are working with people online.

Dan Forbush (2005), founder and president of ProfNet, which is a service of PR Newswire designed to make expert sources available to journalists, launched a wiki called http://www.katrinaexperts.com. The Hurricane Katrina-focused wiki offered constantly updated information from experts such as college and university professors to news media covering the disaster. Forbush suggests that, to be strategic, wikis used for public relations purposes need to be much more focused than all-inclusive content management systems (CMSs) like Wikipedia. He outlines four questions to ask as part of the planning process:

1. Who are the people you aim to enlist in this interaction?
2. What do you aim to achieve there?
3. What kind of content do you hope they'll be motivated to submit?
4. Who do you hope it will read it?

Meeting budget and timeline objectives means getting along with the people involved; with online projects, those people often work together in geographically dispersed teams (GDTs). Organizational networking consultants Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps (2000) define a GDT as “a group of people who work interdependently with a shared purpose across space, time and organization boundaries using technology” (p. 18).

GDTs will work better in cases in which all members of the team are somewhat practiced with the constraints and issues that arise when working in online environments. Just getting acquainted with the cultural, geographical, and technological changes we face when we join such an effort is a big part of the job. Professor Gary Fontaine (2002) at the University of Hawai'i has conducted extensive research and training with GDTs and has found three key challenges:

1. Overcoming “ecoshock,” which is a term Fontaine (2002) uses to describe our psychological reaction to strange new work environments. Symptoms include frustration, fatigue, clumsiness, rigid thinking, and anxiety.
2. Developing and implementing strategies to get things done. In culturally diverse teams, strategy options include adopting the ways of others, compromising, or coming up with new ways to do things altogether.
3. Maintaining motivation despite the lasting effects of ecoshock. Fontaine (2002) says this is the greatest challenge “because it takes time for ecoshock to diminish and for new strategies and skills to be developed and practised in order to get tasks done effectively” (p. 122).

In the example of building a Web site or an online publicity effort, we can see how planning can help increase your chances of accomplishing your tasks. For example, you'll want to provide opportunities for people to get acquainted as part of your timeline and budget. This is all based on the assumption that your goals and objectives are clear, as are the expectations of the members assigned to the team.

Online communities. Although a GDT may be considered a type of online community, the term *online community* generally connotes a larger group of people working together with less specifically defined goals and less measurable objectives than a GDT working on developing a Web page for public relations purposes. Blogging communities are a good example. Sun Microsystems' http://blogs.sun.com is a good example of an online community using corporate blogs as a primary forum for communication. The site is described in a single sentence on its home page as a space “accessible to any Sun employee to write about anything” (Sun Microsystems, 2005). Microsoft also actively encourages employees to blog at http://blogs.msdn.com. Microsoft was the single largest host of corporate blogs in October 2004 according to data collected by Sifry (2004), who mused “that there is still a tremendous opportunity for forward-thinking companies and management to have a significant positive impact on their public perception” by way of hosting blogs.

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Blogging policies of corporate blog pioneers show how some rules for managing these forms of communication were beginning to emerge in 2005. Fredrik Wackå (2005) compared the blog polices of eight of the most prominent corporate blog sites of June 2005, including IBM, Yahoo, and Sun, as well as public relations giant Hill & Knowlton. All eight included some variation of four core rules:

- Take personal responsibility for your blog posts
- Abide by the existing rules of your company
- Don't tell trade secrets
- Be nice and courteous

Hill & Knowlton's (2005) code of practice for its “Collective Conversation” blog is of particular interest to those working with (and within) online communities to achieve public relations goals and objectives. The stated goals of the Hill & Knowlton blogs are “to give our consultants the opportunity to participate in the blogosphere, to listen to and learn from our audiences, and to contribute their own vast insight and experience on topics related to our industry” (Hill & Knowlton, 2005). These goals are right in line with the concept of contingency interactivity, keeping the focus on the interaction of actual people using technologies to communicate.

Emergencies, crises, and disasters. Although thinking through the steps of a new Web site might allow plenty of time for planning and proactive management, and although developing guidelines for emerging online forums for communication might mean balancing reactions to new technologies with proactive goals and objectives, online crises such as the Emulex case offer the most extreme challenges to the concept of planning. This isn't to say that public relations people cannot do any planning for crises. Although there may be no way to plan for all the unpredictable effects of a large-scale disaster such as the September 11, 2001, attacks or Hurricane Katrina, online media can be used as part of a general disaster plan to allow for better communication when strategy must be developed on the spot.

At a very technical level, crisis plans can include computer security measures such as updated password systems; secure servers; firewalls; updated virus protection and anti-spyware programs; hardware backups; and satellite, dial-up, and battery-operated communication options if electrical systems go out (Silverman, 2005).

Middleberg (2001) recommends designing a contingency Web site that will be ready to activate in case your organization needs to make a quick shift from online business as usual to crisis management mode. Contingency sites should be ready to launch on very short notice and should include offline and online contact information for key executives and spaces where information can easily be posted and updated during the stress of a crisis.

Strategic planning, then, is not limited to predictable situations. Going live with a contingency Web site, writing guidelines for an emerging online community hosted by your organization, and responding to an online misinformation crisis are all ways that action and communication processes can flow from goals and objectives, which can be derived from past research and evaluation of issues and crises.

Questionable Claims

Instant Synergy—Just Add Technology?

When students at the University of Hawai'i and Kansas State University worked in GDTs to produce

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strategic public relations plans, the students (and the professors) got a good example of the ups and downs of managing public relations work online. The students worked together using online bulletin boards and related educational technologies as very basic content management systems.

One assignment involved developing a strategic plan for promoting either genetically modified or organic papayas to Hawai'i residents aged 20 to 30. You might predict—as we did—that projects turned in by students working in teams consisting of both Kansas and Hawai'i students would demonstrate better understanding of the target public, the product category, and the range of relevant issues than projects turned in by comparable teams consisting of students in Kansas only. Yet independent judges rated the projects turned in by Hawai'i-Kansas teams to be no better than projects turned in by Kansas-only teams.

So what happened? At times, Hawai'i students wanted to know why Kansas students were in such a hurry, and Kansas students couldn't understand why Hawai'i students were missing deadlines. At times, the expectations were reversed. Sometimes the issues were cultural. Sometimes they were chronological. When it's 8:30 a.m. Tuesday in Manhattan, Kansas, it's 4:30 a.m. in Honolulu, unless you're on daylight savings time—then it's 3:30 a.m. in Honolulu. By 8 p.m. Honolulu time, it's Wednesday morning in Kansas. I'm now more wary than ever of the word *synergy.*

But the papaya projects did produce some fruit. We found that in all groups, the projects led to an increase of self-efficacy among students when it came to working with online media. It was a learning experience for all of us. So-called synergy isn't organic to online technology. It takes time and practice (O'Malley & Kelleher, 2002).

Action and Communication Processes

The relational strategies introduced in Chapter 5—positivity, openness, assurances, task sharing, social networks—can be used to build a rough outline for practical advice on online public relations.

Positivity. Keeping things positive in online public relations requires knowledge of how and why journalists, consumers, investors, activists, and other stakeholders go online in the first place. It also requires a good sense of netiquette that applies to working online with real people from any of these groups. One major value that public relations people offer clients is the quality (not just quantity) of human contacts in various stakeholder groups.

According to Virginia Shea (1994), who literally wrote the book on netiquette, Rule Number 1 is “Remember the human.” For an example from the world of media relations, consider the advice of public relations counselor Ann Wylie (2004), who recommends writing less formally when contacting reporters via e-mail. She offers a quick self-test for readability of e-mail releases: “Say, ‘Hey did you hear?’ If the rest of your release sounds as if it could logically follow that level of informality, you're on the right track” (p. 14). You've got to re-write your press releases if you are going to send them as e-mail. Simply cutting the text and headings of a longer printed release and pasting them into an e-mail doesn't show much regard for the person on the other end.

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Wylie (2004) also recommends keeping e-mail subject lines to less than five words, about the maximum most e-mail programs will show in the inbox, and working to fit your entire release on a single computer screen with contact information below to minimize the need for scrolling to get the scoop. This advice illustrates a cycle in the history of news media. The whole idea of writing news stories with the most important information in the lead (i.e., inverted pyramid style) has been attributed to telegraph technology that made editors fear losing the bottom part of a story if the transmission was interrupted (Scanlan, 2003). Always consider the person on the other end.

O'Keefe's (2002) point ("teach the documents") about how important it is to learn the ins and outs of various formats of online documents resonates here. Working well with online documents might mean simply reformatting and rewriting a news release for e-mail in media relations. But it also can mean learning to migrate annual report data to XBRL in financial relations (see Chapter 7) or taking a paper-based political letter to legislators and making it work online as a template for potential activists in issue-driven public relations efforts (see Chapter 8).

Openness. Perhaps the most common recommendation made in both public relations trade media and scholarly literature for online communications is this—post good contact information! If you are using e-mail, the Web, RSS, streaming media, or any other form of online communication to start a conversation, you must make sure you give receivers a reliable way to respond. Include your physical address, e-mail addresses, instant messaging information, telephone numbers, or any other way of contacting you that will actually work.

If you've got public information to share, put it in the digital sunshine. Financial documents such as annual and quarterly reports are the first thing that come to mind, but also consider posting white papers, speeches, and the like if you think these documents and audiovisual files might be useful in helping journalists, investors, consumers, and other stakeholders understand your organization and its leadership. Sharing an understandable flowchart with links to different parts of your organization also will help you make your organization's inner workings more transparent. And as discussed in Chapter 2, a well-designed organizational Web presence may work even better than a flowchart to help people see how your organization works.

Assurances. Remember the rhetorical importance of dialogue. The best way to assure publics that you are serious about online communication is to be responsive. Contact information is a good start, but make sure real people are available to answer inquiries at the points of contact you provide. Not having the human infrastructure to support a splendidly presented Web presence can undermine the whole effort. Barbara Long (2002), president of E-Savvy Communications, suggests that public relations people working with consumers online ask themselves, "Are you and your staff ready to respond to e-mails, answer questions, fill online orders, keep the site current and manage customer databases to generate e-mail coupons and newsletters?" (p. 23).

Assure your publics that any e-mail or other push communication they receive is totally optional. Only push materials if people opt in, and make it easy for them to opt out. In other words, assure them you're not a spammer.

Task sharing. Relationships flourish when people work to help each other out. This one comes directly from the research on interpersonal relationships (e.g., Stafford & Canary, 1991). Open-source efforts produce better results only when people take the time to improve a product such as a software program and then make that work publicly available. The same goes for news. Use online media to make yourself a generous source and your organization a generous resource to reporters.

Online media also are making it easier for public relations people to serve as better resources for each other. For example, online communication consultant Constantin Basturea (n.d.) started the NewPR Wiki (http://www.thenewpr.com/wiki) to offer the following:

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- a repository of relevant information about how the PR practice is changing
- a collaboration tool for PR professionals and people interested in the practice of public relations
- an open space where anyone can ask questions, post ideas, or start a project.

Social networks. Systems theory works here. Remember that you don't work alone when you represent an organization. Rather, you work in a system that includes all the other people and departments in that organization. People might be interested in hearing from those others directly. Some public relations people are defensive about letting journalists and others talk to employees and members directly, and this apprehension is understandable because communicating with consistency, with “one voice,” is such an important factor in integrated communication strategies, but it is probably unrealistic to expect to have total control over all points of online contact. So you're better off collaborating with both your colleagues and the news media to stay involved in the conversation. Talk with your colleagues about what they are talking about online. This is a more harmonious way to stay consistent in communications than trying to build firewalls and no-comment policies (Searls & Weinberger, 2001). This is easier said than done, but not impossible, especially in smaller companies.

Build your online action and communication efforts into external networks—the suprasystems in which you, your colleagues, and your publics work and play online. Linking to the work of other journalists, bloggers, and even competitors helps you put your actions and communication in context. Journalists doing research like to have context, as do activists seeking affiliations and consumers looking for marketplace conversations.

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Hands-Online Activity

Blogs and Strategy

Hass MS&L, a firm that specializes in auto industry public relations, won *PR Week's* 2006 "Innovation of the Year" award for working with General Motors (GM) to launch the GM Fastlane blog (http://fastlane.gmblogs.com/). The blog site served as a channel for top-level GM executives (namely, GM Vice-Chairman Bob Lutz) to make daily entries during the 2005 Detroit Auto Show and continues beyond that as an ongoing forum. The GM blog also allows Internet users to post comments, to which GM executives regularly respond. According to *PR Week:*

> While some corporations were already operating blogs, GM was one of the first Fortune 500 companies to have such a successful one, in a year in which it desperately wanted to woo back customers and reestablish itself as an innovative company. ("PR Innovation of the Year," 2006)

One of the measurable objectives toward these broader goals was to attract 1,000 visitors a day during the blog's first months online. GM also sought links from marketing, public relations, and car enthusiast blogs. The blog got more than 1.3 million hits in its first nine months. The blog planners also calculated that 90% of media impressions were positive.

1. Do the huge number of hits and positive media impressions indicate success for GM in the broader goals of wooing customers and positioning itself as an innovator? If so, how? If no, why not?
2. Find another example of a corporate blog, as defined in Chapter 1.

Name or URL of corporate blog site:

3. What do you think the goals of this blog site are? (If you can find the goals stated explicitly, that's even better.)
4. In the final chapter, we will look at how public relations people use online media to evaluate their efforts. If objectives are measurable steps taken toward goals, how might the outcomes of the blog you named in Number 2 be measured? Answer by writing at least two measurable objectives that public relations people could use to determine whether the broader goals for the blog are being met.
    - Objective 1:
    - Objective 2:

- public relations
- content management systems
- e-mail
- web sites
- Kansas
- NASDAQ
- release

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