

5

Relationships



❖ OVERVIEW

This chapter will look at the “relations” part of online public relations. Online media technologies, individual characteristics, and cultural characteristics of social groups are discussed as relational antecedents that must be in place before relationships are established online. Concepts borrowed from the field of interpersonal communication are then covered to help understand the underlying processes of online public relations. Finally, relational outcomes such as trust, commitment, satisfaction, and mutual control show the potential value of public relations in terms attuned to the experiences of real people using online media to communicate.

❖ FOCUSING ON RELATIONSHIPS

If we define public relations as a process of building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships, then we ought to be able to say just what we mean by “relationships.” Although no single definition is universally agreed on, here are a few solid working definitions of *relationship* in the context of public relations to get us started:

- “The state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity” (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62).
- “Relationships consist of the transactions that involve the exchange of resources between organizations” (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997, p. 91).
- “Routinized, sustained patterns of behavior by individuals related to their involvement with an organization. . . . Many online relationships operate in tandem with offline relationships and thus are part of a total organizational-public relationship” (Hallahan, 2004, p. 775).

So how do we study relationships? This is an important question for academics, but it also is important for practitioners who want to be able to discuss the contributions of their work in ways more sophisticated than counting the number of names in a database or the number of hits on their Web pages. Although there are just about as many ways to study relationships as there are people taking on these studies, most seem to agree that the study of relationships can be broken down into antecedents, maintenance processes, and outcomes (Broom et al., 1997; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hallahan, 2004; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). The remainder of this chapter will look at these three aspects of understanding the role of online media in public relations. This relational approach then can be used as a foundation for understanding how public relations people work with a wide variety of publics and organizations ranging from news media (Chapter 6), to consumers and investors (Chapter 7), to activists (Chapter 8).

❖ NOT-SO-SECRET INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS—RELATIONAL ANTECEDENTS

Relational antecedents are the things that need to be in line before relationships between organizations and publics can be established. We can look at three broad categories of antecedents for online relationships in public relations: (1) technologies, (2) the individuals who use the technologies, and (3) the social structures and cultures that give context to public-relations-type relationships.

Technologies. Kirk Hallahan (2003) of Colorado State University has identified several important factors that help determine how online

computer systems can contribute to relationships. First is the actual computer gear. The range of online technologies, from server-side databases to broadband, multimedia group-conferencing systems, offers a broad spectrum of communication options for relationship building.

Media richness theory helps explain the important characteristics of this range. In the 1980s, organizational communication scientists Richard Daft and Robert Lengel (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Lengel, 1983) studied how media vary in their ability to carry information. They posited that each medium differs in (a) feedback capability, (b) number of cues used, (c) personal focus of source, and (d) language variety (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987). As shown in Table 5.1, studies rating various media illustrate a clear pattern in how media vary in richness (Irani & Kelleher, 1997). Placing newer media into the pattern isn't rocket science. A barebones, brochureware-type Web site would fall near the bottom of the list. Smooth-running videoconferencing technology would be richer than audio-only conferencing or standard telephone calls.

Media richness, then, is the potential of a particular medium to convey rich information. Media richness theorists suggest that richer media are better suited for handling more equivocal communication. *Equivocality* is the ambiguity, or lack of clarity, of information. Researchers consider information tasks that are very unambiguous with well-understood procedures to guide information-seeking behavior to be low in equivocality. Highly equivocal information tasks, on the other hand, leave room for "the existence of multiple and conflicting interpretations" (Daft et al., 1987, p. 357).

According to media richness theory, more equivocal information tasks—the kind that are likely to be involved in relationship management—call for richer media. Public relations people who report conducting more manager-level work (i.e., building and maintaining relationships) as opposed to technical tasks (i.e., disseminating information for others) also report using richer media more often (Kelleher, 2001).

Although face-to-face communication is still the gold standard, having access to richer media makes work easier for those trying to establish and maintain relationships online. Of course, both the public relations practitioner and the people she wants to communicate with must have access for these technologies to work. You might have an awesome video conferencing setup at your office, but it will not do you much good if the people you want to communicate with don't have access on the other end.

The concept of richness is just one way of understanding how characteristics of media technologies differ in ways that affect the

Table 5.1 Media Richness Ratings

Richest	<i>Lengel (1983)</i>	<i>Trevino et al. (1988)</i>	<i>Daft et al. (1987)</i>	<i>Trevino et al. (1990)</i>	<i>D'Ambra & Rice (1994)</i>
	Face-to-face Telephone Written personal (letters, memos) Written, formal (bulletins, documents) Numeric, formal (computer format)	Face-to-face Telephone E-mail Written	Face-to-face Telephone Written, addressed documents (note, memo, letter)	Face-to-face Telephone E-mail, letter Note, memo	Face-to-face Telephone Voicemail, e-mail Business memo
Leanest					

relationships among people using these technologies.¹ Yet any lasting concept describing media technologies in relationship management only matters to the degree that it affects how real people interact with those media.

Individual people. Before a relationship starts, individuals generally hold some prior knowledge about an organization or public and have attitudes about that group. If a person perceives an organization to be credible, he is more likely to enter into a relationship with that organization. When you are getting ready to make an online purchase from a company for the first time, how do you decide whether to give them your credit card number? Before you decide whether to delete or respond to an e-mail request, what do you take into consideration?

Relevant factors in an individual's decisions about whether or when to enter an online relationship include prior knowledge, attitudes, other communication activities, personalities, and goals (Hallahan, 2003). These are the factors you—as a public relations person—should consider before trying to initiate an online relationship with a reporter, a customer, or a vocal critic.

Put yourself in his or her shoes. Your assessment of an organization's credibility is based on what you already know about it, or others like it. Perhaps you already have a relationship with an organization offline, but you are considering moving that relationship online by making a purchase, answering an e-mail, or completing a survey. Your prior experiences with that organization are obviously going to affect your decisions.

How well individuals identify with an organization also comes into play. When I get a request to complete an online survey from a student at some distant university, I have a really hard time saying no, even if I have never met that student or anyone from her school. I wasn't always so amenable to surveys. After conducting a few surveys myself though, I now really identify with the researcher making a request. I'll even put up with some usability hassles (e.g., having to enter a password and scroll through multiple screens) that I would never tolerate from someone trying to sell me something. I often ask the researcher to send me the paper or article that results from the research. I'm more apt to start a relationship with this person because I can identify with him or her or the school. If the survey comes from a school where I attended or taught, I find it almost impossible not to answer.

Cultures. How social groups form and operate online also is an important factor in understanding how relationships get started. Consider how group blogs often come to define public or organizational cultures. Groups, instead of individuals, maintain many blogs, and these

groups often comprise people working in different places for different organizations. When this happens, the group blog defines the common interests of its contributors, thereby making the blog a defining feature of a new organization (or of a new public, depending on your perspective).

Slashdot.org is a prime example. Slashdot is so big, claiming to post millions of Web items for hundreds of thousands of readers, that many who visit the site might not even consider it a blog. Developed in 1997 by Rob Malda and Jeff Bates to provide “news for nerds” and “stuff that matters” (see <http://slashdot.org>), Slashdot’s news, links, downloads, and commentary are open to editing and update by a number of Slashdot authors. Anyone logging on to Slashdot also can submit story ideas. Submissions are vetted by authors who select posts “with an eye towards whatever is going to make Slashdot be what it is for that particular day” (Slashdot FAQ [frequently asked questions], n.d.). The site focuses on news and resources for those working in or interested in the information technology industry, but topics extend beyond technical articles to political and social commentaries and criticism.

But before firing off a press release with hopes of reaching those hundreds of thousands of readers, consider the following statement from Slashdot’s FAQ (n.d.):

Slashdot will certainly review press releases from anyone who chooses to submit them through our standard submission form. However, please be aware that your product/service/tradeshaw might not be as interesting to us as it is to you, and we are relatively unlikely to select press releases to be posted to the Slashdot main page. You’re welcome to try, but please use the form as our email boxes are already bursting at the seams with unwanted press releases that if printed, could easily wallpaper a large portion of the Pyramids at Giza.

Like most influential bloggers, the Slashdot authors take pride in the open-source nature of their work as a community. Understanding the meaning of “open-source” is a critical antecedent to relationship building with such a group. It drives their norms and expectations. It also illustrates how a group of individuals working together online in geographically dispersed teams produce communication coming from an organization or public group distinct from the individuals who make up that group.

Open-source software includes computer code that anyone can tinker with once they acquire it. A common explanation of such free software is that it is free as in “free speech,” but not necessarily free as in “free

beer" ("Free Software Definition," 2005). Open-source software is like a batch of cookies from a friend that comes with the recipe. You can make your own batch later, maybe changing some ingredients, to see if you can produce a snack more to your own taste. You might even share with friends the changes you made to see if they like your version of the recipe better than the original. Proprietary software, on the other hand, comes to you with protected coding that you will probably never see or alter. This is like buying cookies at the store that don't include a recipe. Homemade cookies are often better than store bought.

Slashdot and other grassroots media groups extend the open-source concept beyond software to their communication efforts in general. The basic idea, as Dan Gillmor (2004) puts it, is like online barn raising. As a technology columnist for the San Jose, California, *Mercury News*, Gillmor was intrigued with the idea that, collectively, his readers often knew more than he did about the topics he covered: "If my readers know more than I do (which I know they do), I can include them in the process of making my journalism better" (p. 18). This open-source concept demands a certain amount of transparency in communication. Off-the-record comments, privileged sources, and embargoed press releases make about as much sense in this context as secret ingredients on a recipe exchange site.

Words like *open-source*, *grassroots media*, and *transparency* define the expectations and norms of many of the Web's most influential online publics and organizations. Their culture is to make information available. The theory of *structuration* can help public relations people understand how online social structures can be seen as both the medium of communication as well as the outcome of communication efforts (Witmer, 2000). The way Slashdot.org has evolved is different than the way traditional news media have evolved. Both the blog-like technology and the open-source social spirit are the products of a reflexive process in which people make decisions on how to use the technology, which leads to different social patterns, which lead to new uses of the technology, and so on. So how do you get in?

Join the party.

Joining the party, so to speak, is easy enough for you as an individual. You can start by reading posts in an online community, getting a sense of the group's norms, and starting to participate when you feel comfortable. The only snag is that you will likely find the group's norms are not in line with standard practices in public relations (e.g., news releases on Slashdot.org). To have your organization communicate effectively with publics online, you might find that you need to start thinking of your organization as a public itself.

Microsoft was one of the first of major U.S. companies to take this approach by hosting its own employees' blogs on blogs.msdn.com. MSDN stands for Microsoft Developer's Network. Although Microsoft still makes proprietary software, the spirit of their communication seems to have made a move toward a more open-source approach. Microsoft bloggers still refer to "PR" as a separate function, though, suggesting that those who do public relations in an official capacity are not the ones doing most the communicating in this context. "On the positive side," according to Searls and Weinberger (2001):

By acknowledging that, inevitably, many people speak for a particular company in many different ways, the company can address one of the most important and difficult questions; How can a large company have conversations with hundreds of millions of people? (p. 110)

In all likelihood, groups like MSDN are good news for the development of relationships between organizations and their publics. In a study of people's perceptions of MSDN blogs, Barbara Miller and I found that the authentic individual-style communication commonly used in blogging (we called it the "conversational human voice") worked for MSDN bloggers in engendering relational outcomes such as trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Kelleher & Miller, 2006).

❖ BUILDING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS—RELATIONAL PROCESSES

Once the antecedents of online relationships are in place, the process of building and maintaining those relationships can commence. At the individual level, Hallahan (2003) suggests that online relationships are built in a process that starts with awareness and then progresses along as individuals adopt relational knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

A major challenge for those taking the relational perspective in public relations, however, is figuring out how what we know about individuals in relationships can help us understand how organizations and publics get along in relationships. One lead we have that looks promising is the work of Laura Stafford and Dan Canary in the field of interpersonal communication. Stafford and Canary's (1991) taxonomy of *relational maintenance strategies* provides a theoretical link between strategies found to be effective in interpersonal communication and the group-based relational outcomes of interest in public relations.

Canary and Stafford's (1992) five maintenance strategies for interpersonal relationships include the following: positivity (interacting with partners in a cheerful, uncritical manner), openness (directly discussing the nature of the relationship and disclosing one's desires for the relationship), assurances (communicating one's desire to continue with the relationship), social networks (relying on common affiliations and relations), and sharing tasks (performing one's responsibilities).

These strategies may be applied to organizational relationships by shifting the focus of the communication strategies to public, rather than interpersonal relationships (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999). For example, positivity and cooperation involve efforts an organization employs to make a relationship more enjoyable and productive for those involved, openness includes providing disclosure regarding the nature of the organization and information of value to audiences, assurances include communication that emphasizes the value of audience members, social networks involve an emphasis on common affiliations between organizations and publics, and sharing tasks may include asking for public involvement when appropriate.

I find it striking, but not accidental, that these same strategies also are accounted for in the literature on blogs, markets as conversations, grassroots media, and online public relations (see Table 5.2). These underlying themes are lasting concepts for changing media.

❖ EVALUATING RELATIONAL STRATEGIES—RELATIONSHIP OUTCOMES

In the mix of advertising, marketing, and other communication functions, public relations is unique in its ability to build and enhance relationships with a range of key publics via relational strategies. Organizational relationships, which may include professional, personal, or community relations, can increase organizational effectiveness; can reduce the cost of litigation, regulation, boycotts, and so forth; and may also contribute to an organization's financial well-being through shareholder, consumer, and donor support (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999).

Hon and Grunig (1999) developed the PR Relationship Measurement Scale to help practitioners assess their organization's longer-term relationships with key publics by focusing on the following four indicators of the quality of an organization-public relationship:

1. **Control mutuality** is the degree to which parties agree on issues of power and influence. This doesn't mean that everyone has to have

Table 5.2 Relational Maintenance Strategies

	Relational Maintenance Strategies— Interpersonal (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 1992)	Relational Maintenance Strategies— Public Relations (e.g., Grunig, Hon, Huang)	Markets as Conversations, Grassroots Media, Structuration (e.g., Searls & Weinberger, 2001; Gillmor, 2004; Witmer, 2000)
Positivity	“Interacting with the partner in a cheerful, optimistic and uncritical manner” (p. 243).	“Anything the organization or public does to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 14).	“The Web is a funny place— literally. We learn a lot about the voices we hear through their humor” (Searls & Weinberger, 2001, p. 102).
Openness	“Directly discussing the nature of the relationship and disclosing one’s desires for the relationship” (p. 243).	Disclosure	Transparency
Assurances	“Stress one’s continuation in the relationship” (pp. 243–244).	“Attempts by parties in the relationship to assure the other parties that they and their concerns are legitimate” (Hon & Grunig 1999, p. 15).	Respect as a norm; legitimacy in structuration
Social networks	“Interacting with or relying on common affiliations and relatives” (p. 244).	“Organizations building networks with the same groups as their publics” (Grunig & Huang, 2000, p. 37).	Linked blogs, group blogs, grassroots media
Sharing tasks	“Performing one’s responsibilities” (p. 244).	“Organizations’ and publics’ sharing in solving joint or separate problems” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 14).	Open source

exactly equal power. People expect some imbalance, even in peer-to-peer relationships. But do you—or the group you belong to—have a say when it is appropriate? Online sales and auction sites allow users much more control in rating items and even setting prices than traditional modern marketplaces. This also applies to marketplaces of ideas such as Slashdot.

2. Trust includes dimensions of integrity, dependability, and competence. Before making an online purchase, do you trust that the organization is charging a fair price? This is integrity. Before registering your e-mail address with an online news service, do you trust that they will protect your privacy (and your inbox from spam)? This is dependability. Before making a donation to a nonprofit group, are you confident that they will be able to get your money where you believe it should go? This is competence.

3. Satisfaction is the degree to which parties feel favorably toward each other because positive expectations are met. This is what organizations are trying to determine when they ask you to rate how helpful the contents of their help pages were.

4. Commitment is the degree to which parties believe that the relationship is worthwhile to continue. Will you renew your subscription to that e-newsletter? Will you update your contact information with your alma mater's alumni office when you get a new e-mail account?

Most of these examples are indicators regarding the quality of what public relations scholars call *exchange relationships*. In an exchange relationship, parties are willing to provide benefits because comparable benefits are expected in return. This is the foundation of basic marketing theory: I'll pay the price if you deliver the product. In the most basic exchange relationships, when the customer's goal (relational antecedent) is simply to make a one-time purchase, terms like *dialogue* and *structuration* are practically irrelevant (Len-Rios, 2001). Exchange relationships also apply in employee relations: I'll do the work if you write the paycheck. But relationships based *only* on the promise of a paycheck are as hollow as the halfhearted "*mayIhelpyou*" you get from an unengaged "customer service representative" working the business end of an 800-number help line. In South Korea, for example, better organizational climates have been shown to be the result of communication factors more consistent with communities than marketing models (Jo & Shim, 2005).

In a *communal relationship*, both parties provide benefits without expecting any immediate return. Rather, they provide benefits out of

concern for the welfare of the other. This may sound touchy-feely at first, but communal relationships matter in terms of job satisfaction, customer loyalty, and the self-forming online markets that are driving newer models of e-commerce (Searls, 2004). As Hon and Grunig (1999) put it, "The role of public relations is to convince management that it also needs communal relationships with publics such as employees, the community, government, media, and stockholders" (p. 21). Not only do communal relationships help organizations attain positive outcomes, but they also help deter negative outcomes such as lawsuits, worker strikes, boycotts, and smear campaigns.

Finally, we should keep in mind the subtle but important distinction between one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication. Even relationships between organizations and publics (both are *groups* of people) involve communication between *individuals* as members of those groups. Although the public relations outcomes often are seen as relationships among groups, the communication that leads to these relationships involves real, individual people—survey respondents, critics, consumers, journalists, constituents, donors, employees, members, and so forth.

❖ NOTE

1. The concepts of *usability* (Nielsen, 2000), *attributes of innovations* (Rogers, 2003), and *social presence* (Walther, 1992) are also worth exploring.

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Hands-Online Activity

❖ LURK AND LEARN

Lurk among an active online public or organization. In other words, find a discussion board, chatroom, blog page, or other Web site where people actively are engaged in posting daily communications on businesses or topics of interest to them. Then browse around silently just to observe what's going on. Here are some examples of top-level sites that lead to more specific forums. Lurk in one of these, or find another forum closer to your own interests:

- <http://slashdot.org/>
- <http://chat.yahoo.com/> (Yahoo registration required)
- <http://www.news-record.com/news/local/blogs.html>
- <http://www.crookedtimber.org/>

1. What are the group's norms and expectations that would be most important to understand before trying to establish a relationship with other users?

2. Write three rules you would you make for yourself before contributing to the group.

3. Could you do public relations there? How?

