

A Model for Teaching Public Relations Students A CONTINUUM OF POWER DISTRIBUTION between organizations and publics IN TWO-WAY WEB SITE COMMUNICATION TOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

The theoretical basis of relationship building in public relations practice has been well-established since Ferguson (1984) introduced the concept decades ago. One aspect of relationship management is dialogic communication whereby both organizations and publics have the opportunity to create and share messages in two-way communication. The fact that the Internet provides an ideal medium for facilitating two-way communication between organizations and their publics is also well-established. Unfortunately, virtually all research studies to date that have analyzed two-way communication on organizational Web sites from a public relations perspective have found that organizations are not fully engaging their publics in two-way communication and are most often repositories of information with little dialogic communication (i.e., Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Naude, Froneman, & Atwood, 2004; Reber & Kim, 2006; Ryan, 2003; Saghaye-Biria & Izadi, 2006; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001).

Even though there are many factors that may preclude organizations from utilizing more open two-way communication on their Web sites (see contingency theory, Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999), this study addresses a gap in pedagogy linking theory to tools in terms of levels of two-way communication that students should be aware of in order to implement optimum two-way communication strategies on the Web. Indeed, scholars are now pointing out that the study of relationship-building and moving toward more equitable power distribution between organizations and publics in two-way communication should address the tools practitioners can use, as well as conceptual training for them (Ryan, 2003; Saghaye-Biria & Izadi, 2006). Furthermore, it has been suggested that one reason for lack of implementation of two-way communication is a lack of understanding of the process on the part of practitioners (Naude et al., 2004).

In summary, the theory of relationship management has been widely discussed in scholarly literature, but the conceptual basis of tools available for implementation of two-way communication on Web sites in terms of encompassing a series of levels that form a continuum from one-way with all power granted to the organization to open systems that grant more power to publics has not. Even though several research studies have looked at organizations' use of two-way or dialogic communication on the Web, few—if any—have addressed the difference in levels of two-way communication that can be offered on the Web in terms of control mutuality or power distribution between the organization, on the one hand, and publics on the other. As Kent, Taylor, and White (2003) point out, "Recent theorizing suggests that the World Wide Web may facilitate more balanced organization-public relationships and increased participation of citizens in community life" (p. 63). Similarly, Naude et al. (2004) suggest that the Web has great potential for allowing a more equitable distribution between organizations and stakeholders in the communication process and points out that understanding the practice of power distribution requires more than simply technical knowledge on the part of practitioners.

The purpose of this paper is to present a model of power distribution in two-way Web site communication tools, related considerations, and supporting literature and theory that instructors can incorporate into a teaching module when discussing organization-public communication facilitated on Web sites. The model presented in this study has implications for students in terms of understanding the choice of options available when strategizing the degree of two-way communication an organization can offer on the Web and specific tactics, or tools, for implementation. A theoretically integrated model of teaching two-way communication tools from a power distribution perspective provides a means to promote the movement from the public relations function of brokering knowledge to that of facilitating relationships (Bach & Stark, 2002).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Relations Pedagogy

Broadly speaking, there is evidence of the need for pedagogy in public relations that relates to various uses and aspects of the Internet. For example, the Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) recommends more teaching emphasis on new technology and integration of messages and tools. Similarly, Gower and Cho (2001) explain that "students should be exposed to the different Internet tools and technologies, and be able to assess their capabilities and limitations. Ensuring the students are capable of incorporating the Internet's tools into the overall strategic planning process will enhance the future of the field" (p. 91). Furthermore, Botan (1997) argues that "new information technology can present increased opportunities to choose between monologic and dialogic approaches" (p. 190) to

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strategic communications. The concept of power distribution in terms of two-way communication on the Web between an organization and its public represents one element of advanced understanding of use of the Internet for public relations students.

Two-Way Communication on the Web

Kent and Taylor (1998) produced five principles of dialogic communication on the Web—dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface, and conservation of visitors—that have frequently been used as the basis of coding categories in content analysis studies investigating dialogic communication on the Web. In terms of the model presented in this paper, the most relevant of Kent and Taylor's five principles is that of the dialogic loop, defined as allowing feedback from publics and response from organizations to such feedback. The significance of the dialogic loop is confirmed by Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) who suggest that even if the other four dialogic principles are present, a Web site cannot be considered fully dialogic if it does not offer, and follow through on, two-way communication.

Kent and Taylor (1998) emphasize the need to address organizational response to “contact us” or “e-mail us” two-way communication links. Coding such links as tools for dialogic communication are meaningless without actual response from the organization because without response, there is not two-way communication but only the appearance of it. In addition, the location of tools for two-way communication has also been addressed in research studies (Saghaye-Biria & Izadi, 2006; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). The closer the dialogic tool is to the organization's home page (or preferably on the home page), the greater the organization facilitates two-way communication.

Establishing a power differential continuum of levels of two-way Web communication

In establishing a continuum of levels of two-way communication on the Web, it is important to note that the continuum resembles that proposed by contingency theory (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Mackey, 2003). In other words, rather than argue that completely equal power/control mutuality between organizations and publics is the level that public relations practitioners must obtain in two-way communication, the continuum provides a more realistic representation of a range of options that can be used depending on particular circumstances.

Concept of communication power distribution from a public relations perspective

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) suggest that relationships are built through exchanges and reciprocity. Reciprocity, in particular, can be measured separately from relationships through the relative balance in information exchanges. They further present the symmetry of exchanges as one measure of the quality of organizational-public communication linkages. Kent and Taylor (1998) point out that in terms of relationships, communication should not be dominated by one party and needs to be open, rather than restricted. Following that assumption, allowance for open-ended feedback rather than

more restricted feedback would be more equitable in terms of control mutuality.

This ties into the concept behind the “Me2 Revolution” wherein publics and organizations are in the “midst of a continuous conversation” (Edelman, 2006, p. 3). As suggested by Edelman, empowering publics in two-way communication facilitates the consumers' ability to co-create brands and have their voices heard. Edelman advocates that organizations provide for rich peer-to-peer horizontal communication as a “responsibility, not just an opportunity, for public relations” (p.14). Such horizontal communication can be provided through tools in the two-way Web communication model such as discussion boards and chat rooms.

Concept of communication power distribution from an interdisciplinary perspective

One approach to power distribution in two-way communication relevant to the proposed model comes from communication theorist Jensen's (1998) delineation of four types of interactivity: transmissional, consultational, registrational, and conversational. The first three involve selection, choice, and use of material online (Meikle, 2002). Only the fourth type of interactivity, conversational, allows equality in communication exchange. Conversational interactivity, which most closely resembles interpersonal communication, thus provides for equal power/control mutuality in two-way communication on the Web. Also, the more the public is given the opportunity to network both with the organization and with other members, the more equal the power distribution between organizations and their publics.

Kiousis (2002) explains that Jensen's (1998) explication of interactivity leaves out the consideration of another significant dialogical communication concept, that of third-order dependency. It is also absent from most of the research studies looking at dialogic communication on Web sites from a public relations perspective. Third-order dependency is defined as the extent to which messages are related to each other and are available for retrieval over time (Kiousis, 2002). Threads in discussion forums, for example, provide for third-order dependency, particularly when such discussions are archived and easily retrievable. Therefore, incorporation of third-order dependency in two-way Web communication yields more balanced power distribution between organizations and their publics.

The emphasis on providing open two-way communication also has roots in media-related democratic theory and cultural studies perspectives. Those paradigms view the traditional mainstream media orientation of top-down, hierarchal communication to be detrimental to empowering publics and communities as equal partners in relationships with organizations (McChesney, 2004; Meikle, 2002). A further democratic assumption is that relationship management and community building under ideal conditions can best be served by presenting “a forum within which human interaction occurs and where power relations are [re-] configured” (Hartley, 2002, p. 58). Some public relations professionals have adopted media-related democratic theory; for example, Edelman (2006) argues, “we are witnessing the democratization of information” (p. 2).

THE TWO-WAY WEB COMMUNICATION MODEL

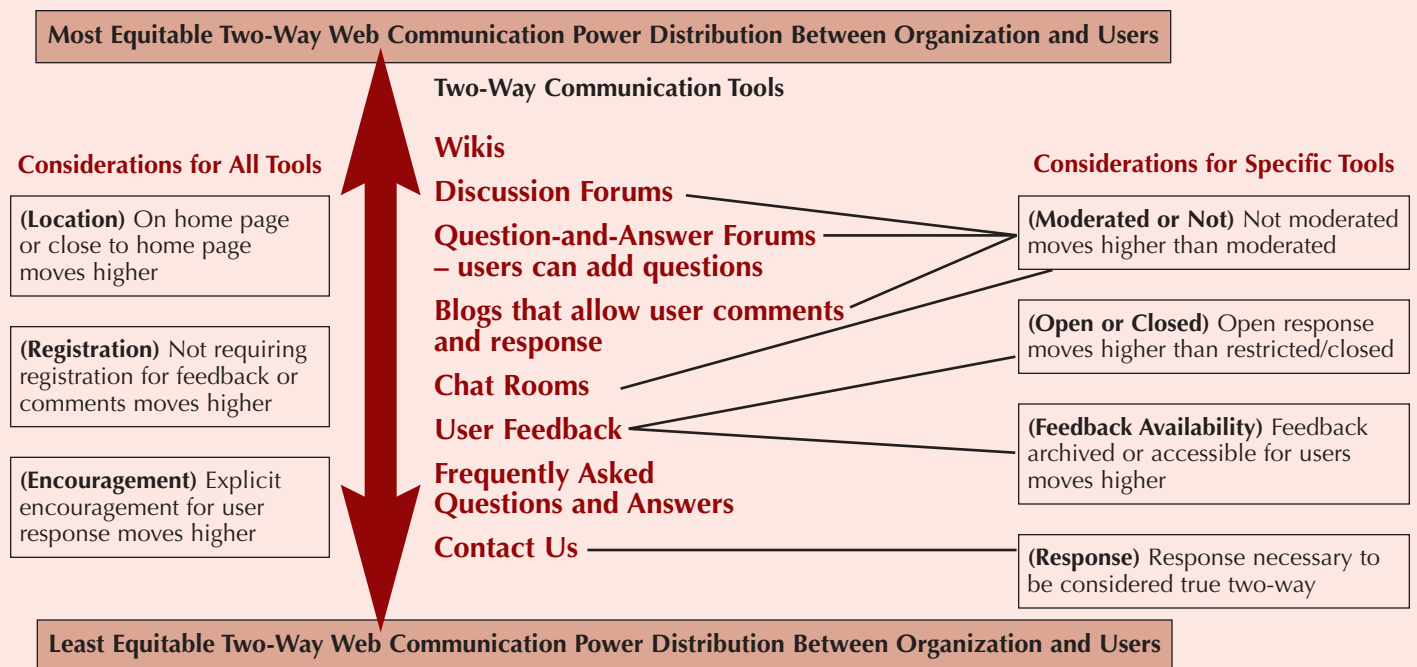
Drawing on the literature and coding variables used in studies investigating two-way communication on the Web, a list of tools for two-way Web communication was compiled. Individual tools were grouped into representative categories, as shown in Table 1, and placed on a power-equality continuum depending on the degree of feedback enabled and encouraged, the openness in which users can provide input, the amount of information provided on how the feedback was used and/or access to organizational responses, whether users are able to communicate with each other as well as with the organization, and whether previous communications from the public are accessible for retrieval and reference.

Table 1
Two-Way Web Communication Tools: Highest Equality in Power Distribution to Lowest

Category	Components
Discussion forums	Discussion boards or groups, online forums, bulletin boards, message boards
Question-and-Answer Forums – users can add questions	
Blog that allows user comments and response	
Chat Room	
User Feedback – open response, archived or reported for all users’ access	Public opinion polling, comments, suggestions, complaints, open-ended surveys
User Feedback – restricted response archived or reported for all users’ access	Closed-ended surveys, voting
User Feedback, not archived or reported	Public opinion polling, comments, suggestions, complaints, open- and closed-ended surveys, voting
Frequently Asked Questions Section	
Organizational Contact Information/Contact Us	Directories and/or e-mail links for general topics, specific organizational areas, and/or personnel. – Information request forms

The above categories of two-way communication tools have been inserted into the two-way Web communication model presented below:

Table 2



In placing tools on the proposed power differential continuum, some of the tools inherently contain elements of equality in power distribution. For example, discussion forums, question-and-answer forums that allow users to add questions, and blogs that allow user comments, permit communication between users and the organization, allow open communication, and provide for third-order dependency, so they are placed at the highest end of the continuum. Discussion forums and question-and-answer forums that allow users to post questions are open in subject matter, while blogs are normally limited to the blog topic. Therefore, blogs allowing user comments are placed lower than discussion forums or question-and-answer forums. Chat rooms offer the same elements as the tools above them, but are restricted by the necessity of a user being online at a specific time to participate, so they are placed lower on the continuum.

Power distribution in all of the above mentioned categories of two-way communication tools are dependent on whether or not the communication is moderated. Moderation gives more power to the organizations while non-moderated tools allow more user freedom. If the organization moderates the communication tool, that tool would fall lower on the continuum than if it was not moderated.

When addressing the category of user feedback, the model identifies a sliding continuum placement depending on two factors. The first consideration is whether the user feedback is open, rather than restricted. An example of restricted feedback would be surveys or click polling in which the user has a choice of responses, but cannot create an open-ended response. The second consideration is whether users’ feedback is archived or reported in a manner in which all users may see the results. Archiving and reporting results is also a way of differentiating between actual two-way communication and only the

appearance of two-way communication. For instance, if a company makes a provision for user feedback but simply deletes all such information, it cannot be considered true two-way communication. Furthermore, if feedback is used only by the organization rather than shared with users, the organization retains more power with the information exchange.

Even though frequently asked questions represent two-way communication, they are compiled by the organization (organization controls selection of questions posted) and are static in nature (no additional input allowed by users) so they fall lower on the continuum of equal power distribution. Frequently asked questions sections are placed higher, however, than a "contact us" tool because the latter does not share any user input and lacks third-order dependency. The most important consideration in "contact us" provisions is whether or not responses are made by the organization. In other words, the provision of a "contact us" section on an organizational Web site does not qualify as genuine two-way communication if no organizational response is given to a user's request for information, for example. Interestingly, research has found that response rates to users' request for information is less than 50% (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003).

Lastly, for all two-way communication tools, consideration must be given to the location of the two-way communication tool, whether or not the organization explicitly encourages user feedback, and whether or not registration is required to use a tool. These elements can either facilitate or retard public feedback in two-way communication. Placement of the tool should be on the Web site home page or easily locatable and within a couple hyperlinks from the home page. An additional consideration for all tools is whether user feedback is explicitly encouraged; to rise on the continuum, the organization should offer explicit encouragement for users to provide feedback. A final consideration for all tools is whether registration is required for a user to provide feedback. Requiring registration empowers the organization over the user and often deters user feedback from those who do not wish to share private information that registration often requires. Therefore, requiring registration would move an item lower on the continuum.

CONCLUSION

There has been much scholarly attention regarding the importance of two-way communication in building organization-public relationships. However, there has not been the same amount of attention given to discussion of the differences, characteristics, and considerations associated with various two-way Web site communication tools from an organizational-public power standpoint. In order for students to more effectively use two-way communication on the Web, teaching a deeper understanding of two-way communication tools is necessary. How each tool reflects power differentials between the organization and the public in the communication process provides a framework from which the public relation practitioners of tomorrow can select the desired degree of openness, or equality, in two-way communication that is structured into an organizational Web site.

The model of two-way Web communication presented in this paper provides conceptualization of two-way Web communication tools on a continuum of levels that vary from granting most communication power to the organization to granting equal communication power to publics. By incorporating the theoretical concepts and research findings presented in the literature review with discussion of two-way communication considerations and the proposed model, instructors can produce an applicable teaching module on power continuums in organizational-public two-way communication on the Web. Such a teaching module would help to facilitate better understanding for students of one of the key concepts of relationship building in public relations—that of two-way communication.

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