Maximizing Media Relations: A Web Site Checklist

By Michael L. Kent and Maureen Taylor

Most organizations believe that a Web site is an important part of their corporate communication efforts. Web sites, for better or worse, are the windows through which organizations are viewed. Every day journalists visit organizational Web sites for specific reasons — gathering information for news stories, confirming rumors, to write features, etc. Unfortunately, many journalists leave dissatisfied with what they find. It does not have to be this way.

The purpose of this article is to provide public relations practitioners with a checklist to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their Web sites as a media relations tool. This diagnostic tool will help practitioners assess the effectiveness of their Web site for meeting media needs. Before we explain what makes an effective media relations site, pull up your Web browser and go to any site other than your organization's. Once there, open the prefer-

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ences menu on your browser and delete the cache of stored images and list of visited links (on *Microsoft Explorer:* edit/preferences/Web browser/ advanced/history/"clear history" and edit/preferences/Web browser/advanced/cache/"empty now"; on *Netscape:* edit/preferences/advanced/cache/ "clear disk cache now" and edit/preferences/navigator/history/"expire now." *Note:* this procedure will not affect anything but how fast Web pages load the first time you visit and whether previously visited links are highlighted).

Once you have made these changes in your preferences, you are ready to go back to your organization's Web site. Be sure to pay attention to how many seconds it takes the page to load when you are visiting your site "for the first time." Once your site loads, place a check in each of the check boxes from the list below if the item is present on your organization's home page or within one "obvious" (or easy to locate) click.

Now that you have completed the checklist, score it according to the following scale: 0-10: poor media site; 11-15: a good start on media relations but a long way to go; 16-25: A useful site for meeting the needs of the media; 26-30: Great job! You are maximizing your media relations potential. Since most organizations are not in the 26-30 range, let's look at each category on the checklist in more detail. The remainder of this article is dedicated to explaining how you can maximize your media relations on the Web. The first item is "attracting media."

Attracting Media

How do you get the media to visit your Web site? Adding your organization's Web address on company publications is a good start. News releases, ad-

vertisements and promotional materials all should have your organization's Web address printed on them. But having the media know where to "find" your organization is only the beginning. The speed at which your site loads, and the quality of the homepage are also important. How long does your Web site take to load? From a networked computer, most Web sites load in a matter of seconds.

Web Site Checklist

Attracting Media
- ❑ Links to the organization's home page prominent on every page
- ❑ Important information relevant to your organization on home page
- ❑ Fast loading (<4 sec)
- ❑ Link to media section loads immediately
- ❑ Posted last update time and day

Easy to Use
- ❑ No advanced applications (plug-ins, downloads, etc) needed to view site
- ❑ Limited use of graphics and special effects
- ❑ Table of contents
- ❑ Search engine box on the first page
- ❑ No links to other sites on home page

Media Relevance
- ❑ Contact information for public
- ❑ Bios of key organizational members
- ❑ Backgrounders, fact sheets, position papers, news releases
- ❑ Annual report(s)
- ❑ History of organization
- ❑ High quality, downloadable graphics
- ❑ Downloadable speeches/commercials
- ❑ E-media kits
- ❑ Searchable archive
- ❑ Links to stories about your organization

Value Added Design
- ❑ "Bookmark now" and invitation to return
- ❑ Calendar of events (updated regularly)
- ❑ FAQ's or Q&A's
- ❑ Downloadable/requestable information
- ❑ Product, stock, donation, volunteer, information

Interactivity
- ❑ Mailing addresses, telephone numbers, e-mail contacts
- ❑ Visitor comments box
- ❑ News/chat forums
- ❑ How long before you respond?
- ❑ Offer breaking information via e-mail listserv

However, more than half of all Americans access the Web from home. And a majority of those connections will still be through slow modems. Given this dynamic, organizations that want to attract media professionals and encourage them to devote some time to exploring their site need to employ a few simple principles. First, put all important information (or links to this information) on the first page (links to how to contact the organization, how to order products, how to invest, etc.) Second, create lean pages that load fast and are easy to navigate.

Perhaps the best example of a lean site is the search engine Google(.com). In only a few years Google has paid back its investors and is earning tens of millions of dollars a year in profit. Google is one of the most used search engines in the world and is used by many other "mainstream" companies to supplement their own search engines. Indeed, China recently announced that it would outlaw Google's use in China because it works so well.

Google makes its money from advertising just like the other search engines out there. However, Google's home page contains no advertisements. Compare Google to Lycos (.com) or Yahoo (.com) and you'll see that Google's home page contains only a small menu of choices and one graphic (the logo), while Lycos and Yahoo's home pages contain two pages of advertisements, graphics, links, and other assorted "flashing" text. However, they aren't selling any more advertisements than Google. Google's home page took three seconds to load on my (one year old) home computer while Lycos' took 18 seconds! Which one do you think most users will use from home and visit regularly?

The media are not coming to your Web site to see your whirling, spinning, flaming, musical, logo.

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Rather, they come because they want information (Kent, 2001a). If your site loads fast, previews the key features, and is easy to navigate, virtually *every* visitor will continue to explore the site. However, sites that are slow, difficult to navigate, and rely on only the latest software/hardware features will lose many potential journalists. This leads to our second item on the checklist: easy to use.

Easy to Use

Since the logic of the Web is one of pull rather than push (Boutie, 1996), and since a majority of visitors to Web sites have come because they know what they want, it makes sense that Web sites should be easy to use (Kent, 2001b). The most important thing to keep in mind is to "simplify!" Get rid of the multiple frames, flashing advertisements (even your own), java script, special effects (spring loaded menus, etc.), and multiple screens worth of information. Design a clean home page that loads fast and has a clear table of contents to each major area (media/products/services). Ensure that contact information is easily seen and up to date and locate navigational tools (search boxes, site maps, etc.) prominently. And provide obvious links to FAQs and company information.

Stay away from the desire to do everything on the first page. Many Web sites make the mistake of assuming that only customers visit their Web site. Instead, tailor your site for the media as well. Make it easy for media representatives to find the specific part of your organization's Web site dedicated to media relations. One of the first icons to load on your site should be the link that tells the media folks where to go for information specific to their needs; don't hide media links behind other links or in tiny text at the bottom of the page. You should create a specific section of your Web site for the media. Some organizations call this space the "Press Room," or "Journalists." It is important that this link be prominent, perhaps on the upper left side of the homepage (like reading a newspaper) so that media representatives do not have to hunt around to find it. Creating easy to use sites leads to the third category on our checklist: relevance to the media.

Relevance to the Media

Once a journalist clicks on the media link, s/he should arrive at your media relations center. This is the part of your organization's Web site that the public relations department must control. The Internet and the WWW have become important information gathering tools for electronic, print, and Internet media organizations. Each type of news organization requires different tactics. For in-

stance, radio thrives on sound actualities, print supplements text with graphics and photographs, television uses all three, and Internet journalists are no different, they want to integrate graphics, video, sound, and text into their stories as well. Does your Web site have copyright-cleared, high quality, graphics and fact sheets and backgrounders on the organization, its members, products, and services? You should! Are your documents in both HTML (so that text can be easily imported) and Portable Document format (PDF) so that your documents are easy to download and will retain all of their formatting? They should be!

According to several recent studies by Steven Ross and Don Middleberg (studies of the print and broadcast media), the Web is the first place that reporters go after the official spokespeople (or if they

> # Get rid of the multiple frames, flashing advertisements, java script, special effects.

cannot reach a spokesperson) for information about an organization in a crisis (contact Middleberg and Associates at http://www.middleberg.com for copies of the studies). Informational documents can easily be uploaded to Web sites as PDF files accessible to anyone with a browser, (and in camera ready form). In fact, a full color brochure can be uploaded with all its graphics and text in a few moments. Additionally, organizations should consider including speeches, high quality graphics (with copyright clearance), and copies of annual reports, so that representatives of the media, both print and broadcast will have "your-side" of the story at their fingertips when they can't get an organizational spokesperson on the telephone.

At the very minimum your media relations Web site should include the following: First, include news release links in reverse chronological order by date and headline. Be sure to include a search box for keywords. Second, upload speeches (as text and as sound) by date, title, occasion, and a high quality graphic image of the speaker already cleared for publication. Third, provide links to annual reports as HTML and PDF files. Fourth, provide backgrounders and fact sheets with vital organizational/product information. Separate these fact sheets into clear categories — products, employee data, investor information, etc. The importance of organizing materials by intended audience cannot

be overstated. No professional wants to waste his/her time wading through irrelevant information. More importunately, however, by creating categories and emphasizing *your vocabulary*, organizations maintain more control over how issues will be discussed by the media. Fifth, ensure that you have up to date contact information for the public relations staff (department telephone, fax, e-mail, mailing address). If members of the public relations team specialize in particular areas, then list their area of responsibility. Finally, offer journalists the opportunity to sign up for new information as it becomes available. But don't send out too many announcements through this listserv. Use it judiciously and media representatives will appreciate getting breaking information from your organization. Having journalists sign up for new information will also help you to update your media lists and give you a sense of which media outlets or activist groups are interested in your organization.

Additionally, if your organization has the resources, other tactics can also help to maximize media relations. First, provide related links to other organizations, government officials, legislators, etc. Second, provide E-Press kits for products and services that might be especially helpful to Internet journalists. Third, include links to recent stories that appeared in both electronic and print media about your organization. Fourth, a searchable news archive is useful. Fifth, offer online demos of products to the media. Finally, add a keyword search engine for journalists to explore all of your online documents. Providing relevant information to media representatives is one thing, organizations must also encourage repeat visits and "value added design."

Value Added Design

The Web is arguably one of the greatest tools to come to public relations practitioners in the last fifty years. With the Web organizations have complete control over their messages — which they can create and change cheaply and easily — and with the Web organizations can conduct sales, marketing, advertising, distribute information, and influence public policy debate. Ultimately, every organization wants media visitors to come away with the information that they sought and a positive impression of your organization.

The logic behind value added design in organizational Web sites has a lot to do with the logic of how visitors reach your Web site. Reminding journalists to "bookmark now" is important because so many Web sites are reached via links from other Web sites and visitors are sometimes unable to find their way back to sites that they forget to book-

mark. This random aspect of the Web is underscored by the fact that one of the most popular and effective search engines, "Google.com," uses a programming logic that ranks sites by their relatedness to other sites. Simply stated, Google assumes that if many people find your site useful enough to link to from their site, then your site must be important. Given this dynamic, effective Web site designers are advised to remind users to bookmark their sites so that they can get back easily in the future, and to find ways to make visitors want to come back in the first place.

Another aspect of value added design is the irritating practice by some organizations of constantly changing the look and navigation of their pages. Updating information like calendars of events and news releases should not be confused with changing the design, or look, of organizational pages, which should only be done when the current design is no longer useful. When longtime visitors to a site discover that the site has been changed and they can no longer easily locate the information of interest, their response is not one of elation. Rather, longtime site users are often dismayed to find sites changed. New visitors, of course, do not care because they did not know what the site was like before. The point here is that media professionals come to Web sites for specific reasons, not to be dazzled with fancy graphics and constantly changing web design. Provide information of substance to journalists on your Web site and they'll love you. But change that interface all the time and all you'll do is irritate long-time visitors. The final feature of our Web site checklist has to do with "interactivity."

Interactivity

The final Web site design aspect has to do with increasing visitor interactivity by acknowledging the inherent value of media visitors to the organization. The Web is becoming ubiquitous in the business and education world. Indeed, the latest crop of high school students are being trained to turn to the Web *first* as a research tool. Given the increasing use of the Web by citizens at all levels, Web sites that include "easy-to-locate" contact information (or a link to it) on all pages will better serve the needs of multiple publics.

Interactivity is more than just providing a dialog box where journalists can write to your department. Interactivity requires making a commitment to publics and what they have to say. It may require appointing someone trained in interpersonal communication or public relations (or hiring someone) to respond to questions and properly direct requests for information from individuals who visit

the organization's Web site.

Several ways that interactivity can be encouraged is to include (as mentioned previously) backgrounders on key organizational members, as well as multiple means by which individuals might contact the organization (by mail, telephone, e-mail, or even, in person at some event). At the minimum, organizations should also include places where visitors to a Web site can write for information or with questions or comments. Organizations in highly regulated areas, (or organizations that serve multiple publics) should consider hosting on-line chats with CEOs, technicians, or communication specialists, or starting up listservs where interested individuals can subscribe to discuss organizational issues.

Journalists contact organizations to ask technical questions about a product/service, to request a media kit, or to inquire about timely issues. All of us have contacted organizations for one reason or another. Sadly, as all of us probably know already, *most* organizations do not even respond to Web site

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Design a clean home page that loads fast and has a clear table of contents to each major area.

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visitors who write in with questions. Indeed, in a recent study of organizational Web sites we found that fewer than one third (44/150) of the organizations contacted actually responded to messages (Kent, Taylor, and White, 2002; see also, Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). Give some thought to how responsive *your* Web site is. Send some realistic test messages using the various e-mail addresses and comment boxes available (provided it's not your job to answer these) and see what sort of response you get. Be sure that you use an e-mail account from outside of the organization so that the inclination to respond is not increased. The odds are good that at least half of the messages sent will never be returned.

Although *actually responding* is perhaps the most important step an organization might take to foster interactive relationships with its publics, an equally important step to take is to tell visitors to the Web site how long they can expect to have to wait for a response. Will it be minutes, hours, or days? What if a crisis occurs, how long will it take journalists to form an opinion about your organization? Be sure to indicate next to comment boxes and e-mail addresses how long it might take your

organization to respond to a question. This sort of information can be automatically forwarded to people who send messages to your organization.

Conclusion

Journalists see the Internet as *the* place to go for information. Within a very short period of time, every citizen who has Web access (college graduates, professionals, etc.) will be using the Web as a primary research tool. Shouldn't your organization have a role to play in fostering relationships with these individuals and shaping the media coverage that your organization receives? This checklist is one step in that direction. It includes both design features and content features that can be used to improve Web sites and increase their usability for media relations. Don't let your Web site be used as nothing more than a sales tool. Take advantage of the medium of the Web and maximize your organization's media relations potential.   PRQ

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Prof. Adams Dies Suddenly

William C. Adams, a 25-year corporate PR veteran and a PR professor the past 12 years at Florida International University, North Miami, died suddenly March 13.

Adams was named the Outstanding Educator of 2000 by PR Society of America and Advisor of the Year to PR Student Society of America. He was with Phillips Petroleum Co. from 1978-88, rising to PR director, and was a member of PR Seminar.

He wrote the "Ask the Professor" column for *PR Tactics* of PRSA since the paper was founded in 1994.
— Jack O'Dwyer's Newsletter

(Adams was a frequent contributor to PRQ)