Public Relations Quarterly

If We All Want It, Why Can't We Have It? Replay Officiating as a PR Issue for the NFL

William N. Swain

"A very large industry in America, professional football, is taking some hard hits from its customers."

Does Your Web Site Attract or Repel Customers?

Three Tests of Web Site Effectiveness

By Michael L. Kent

With the popularization of the world wide web in the news media and popular consciousness has come a predictable appropriation of this new technology by organizations and the general public (cf. Bobbitt 1995; Santoro, 1994). Unfortunately, for those of us in the information business, the web's utility and value have been overrepresented. Communication professionals have been sold a bill of goods. The situation we currently face is one where web presence is seen as inherently valuable, and where content takes a back seat. Because of this, many organizations have poorly conceived web sites and seem to be interested in impressing the wrong audiences.

The web is one of the first places that many individuals go to for up-to-the-minute information, and is reportedly the one of the first places that news media representatives turn in the event of a crisis. Ross and Middleberg in their 1997 survey of 2,500 managing and business editors of newspapers and magazines suggest that, "[w]hen reporting a breaking story after hours, journalists try for the source first, almost every time, but indicate they turn to company web sites second for information" (section I). Similarly, web sites are one of the first places that many customers turn for up-to-date information or to purchase products. In spite of the obvious importance attached to organizational web sites, many web sites, perhaps a majority, are poorly administered and lose as many sales and organizational advocates as they gain.

As public relations texts suggest, and as practical experience teaches, public relations functions in large part to complement advertising and marketing efforts (Wilcox, Ault, and Agee, 1998). For a web site to do this effectively it needs to adhere to principles associated with effective information and persuasion:

motivation, clarification, and retention. This article will offer three critical tests that any effective web site should be able to pass. When applied to organizational web sites, these tests will lead to increased public satisfaction and the development of long-term relationships with key publics.

Test #1: The Dialogic or Feedback Loop[1]

Having effective dialogic loops in organizational web sites is perhaps the single most important reason that a web site exists. Just as organizations have come to rely heavily on telephones for contact with their publics, organizations with web sites must be vigilant about maintaining effective web communication channels. "Effective dialogic loops"

---

[1]For a detailed discussion of dialogic communication strategies and other web site tests such as those discussed in this article, see Kent and Taylor, 1998.
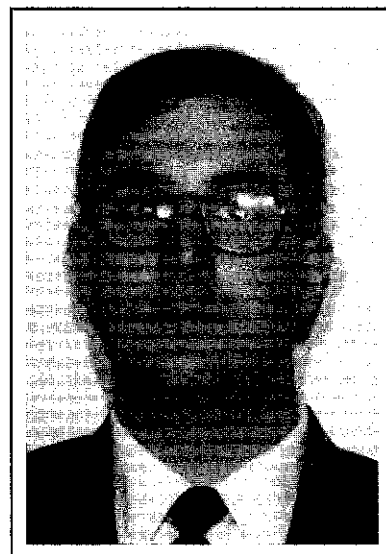
Michael L. Kent

mean more than just having an e-mail address for a webmaster and a place for visitors to leave "comments" on a web site.

Dialogic communication is about the process of open and negotiated dialogue and is characterized by give and take on the part of all parties involved (cf. Arnett, 1981; Buber, 1970, 1982; Christians, 1988; Habermas, 1984, 1990; Johannesen, 1971, 1990; Pearson, 1989; Stewart, 1978). Effective dia-

---

Web sites that are constructed with dialogic loops will lead to more positive interactions between publics and organizations.

---

logic communication requires open channels of communication and a commitment on the part of organizations to value the ideas of publics.

For web sites to be dialogically effective, organizations must provide contact information for media representatives, customers, or interested publics to write with specific questions; and these questions must be answered. Unfortunately, the present state of affairs is that many web sites from all across the spectrum, political, business, publishing, education, and computer sales do not even respond to customer or professional inquiries.

Do you know if your web site regularly responds to inquiries, or even has an e-mail address where individuals can write with questions? More importantly, if your web site *does* respond to questions from interested publics, is the person who answers questions a trained communication specialist, or a technology specialist who is primarily responsible for maintaining the organization's web site? Dialogically effective web sites should respond individually to questions from interested publics, route questions through individuals capable of responding effectively to an assortment of organizational issues, and be capable of interacting with individuals from across the organizational hierarchy.

In meeting the test of the Dialogic Loop, public relations representatives for an organization should visit their organization's web site from time to time and ask themselves several questions: Is the information here accurate and up-to-date? Is there an avenue(s) for me to respond to the organization's policies and practices, to ask questions regarding its products, or to interact with a knowledgeable individual? If I write with a difficult question do my concerns get answered in a timely fashion?

To test the responsiveness of your organization's

web site, try to access the site from a modem-based connection — preferably one with a modem speed in the average range (28K) (Silverio, 1994) — and try to get information on a variety of topic areas: organizational background, customer service, technology support, current affairs or events, etc. It may be necessary to write several messages over the course of a few weeks to accurately judge the effectiveness of the web site and its dialogic capacity.

Web sites that are constructed with dialogic loops will lead to more positive interactions between publics and organizations. They will also serve as public relations extensions of the organization by effectively fielding issues of public concerns, responding to time sensitive issues, and allowing the organization to advance its own position on issues without having to rely on the whims of media gatekeepers.

Test #2: Come Back Again-ness

The second critical test of an organization's web site refers to the likelihood that it leads to return visits by various publics. Effective web sites should offer information that is of value to a variety of publics and not just customer or industry specific publics. As suggested by Ross and Middleberg (1997), 93% of newspaper and magazine editors indicate that they or their staffs in some way use on-line services at least occasionally. Indeed, some of the major publishers of high school and college textbooks regularly use the web to verify facts and gather information. Web sites that are not of value to an assortment of publics communicate at best an attitude of elitism, and at worst, an unconcern for a segment of their audience.

As suggested by the dialogic test above, the test of come back again-ness involves an attempt to assess the utility of the information on the site for a variety of publics and whether the site even contains relevant information. A corporate site that contains little information of value to potential customers is likely to lead customers to a competitor who offers better product support. Similarly, media representatives who visit web sites to gather background for stories or to explore possible news angles should find useful and timely information available to them. Finally, other publics such as investors or professionals should find features of the site valuable.

As Elmer (1997) has pointed out, "Five of the top ten web sites (measured by user 'hits' or visits) still consist of indexical apparatuses (search engines)." In other words, sites receive visitors because they offer "services" of ongoing value to a variety of publics. Organizational sites can provide ongoing value to publics by hosting on-line forums with organizational members. These forums, in turn, create avenues for publicity in their own right.

Other features of come back again-ness include providing historical information about the organization, FAQ's (frequently asked questions), information regarding product ingredients, explanations of what ingredients are, explanations of how products are produced or services delivered, and information regarding known side effects if any.

Web sites that make an effort to foster come back again-ness become informational resources for publics and media representatives. If as Ross and Middleberg suggest, web sites are one of the primary sources of information for media representatives, then web sites that foster come back again-ness are better able to manage public issues and organizational image.

Test #3: Intuitiveness or Ease of Use

Visitors who come to web sites for informational purposes, or even for curiosity, should find sites easy to understand and efficient to use. Home pages that take more than a minute to load when accessed on a 28K (or slower) modem need to do something to improve the speed of their site. In practical terms this can include everything from text-only versions of sites, to sites that contain only a single graphic, or a few graphics when they load. As suggests, visitors will be more likely to return to a site if it contains information of value to them. Similarly, visitors avoid sites that are too slow to be of general utility or are difficult to navigate.

In keeping with the intuitiveness or ease of use, a great deal of a web site's content should be textual rather than graphical — text loads faster than graphics, and well-typeset pages can actually be more effective attention getters than a graphical interface that takes 30 seconds or more to load. Tables of contents can be useful if they are well organized and hierarchical. Visitors should not have to follow seemingly "random" links to discover what information a site contains and where it is located.

The focus of web sites should be on the organization, product, or information located there, and not the "whirling, flaming logo" the organization creates. While the web is a communication environment designed to be rich in content, graphics and sounds are not the most useful tools for providing publics with information.

The three web site tests suggested here are the most basic and important tests of an organizational web site. Web sites must be easy to use, they must provide information that is useful to a variety of publics, and they must contain dialogic loops so that visitors can effectively interact with organizational individuals, divisions, and problem solvers. Obviously some disagreement exists regarding how web sites should be structured or what their orga-

nizational focus should be. This is likely a good thing because it means that organizations will continue to be creative and innovative. However, what all web sites should have in common is the desire to appeal to their publics and meet the needs of their publics. The three tests advanced here are a means for evaluating organizational web sites and, one would hope, improving the relationships that exist between organizations and their publics. **PRQ**

References

Arnett, R. C. (1981). Toward a phenomenological dialogue. *Western Journal of Speech Communication.* 45 (Summer): 201-212.

Bobbitt, R. (1995, Fall). An Internet primer for Public Relations. *Public Relations Quarterly.* 40 (3): 27-32.

Buber, M. (1970). *I and Thou.* Trans., Walter Kaufmann. New York: Scribners

Buber, M. (1982). Elements of the interhuman. In (Ed.), John Stewart, *Bridges not walls.* Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Christians, C. G. (1988). Social responsibility: Ethics and new technologies. Paper presented to the 1988 Speech Communication Association, New Orleans, LA. Reprinted in (Ed.) R. L. Johannesen. (1990). *Ethics in human communication.* Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.

Elmer, G. (1997, June). Spaces of Surveillance: Indexicality and solicitation on the Internet. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication.* 14, (2): 182-191.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action. Volume 1: Reason and the rationalization of society.* Boston: Beacon Hill Press.

Habermas, J. (1990). *Moral consciousness and communicative action.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Johannesen, R. L. (1971). The emerging concept of communication as dialogue. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech.* 57: (4): 373-382.

Johannesen, R. L. (1990). *Ethics in human communication.* Prospect Heights, L: Waveland.

Kent, M. L. and Taylor, M. (1998). Building Dialogic Relationships Through the World Wide Web. *Public Relations Review.* In Press.

Pearson, R. (1989). Business ethics as communication ethics: Public Relations practice and the idea of dialogue. In, C. Botan and V. Hazleton, Jr. [eds]. *Public Relations Theory.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Ross, S. S., and Middleberg, D. (1997). *Survey on the Media and Information Networks.* Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Santoro, G. M. (1994, April). The Internet: An overview. *Communication Education.* 43, (2): 73-86.

Silverio, (1994). *Why the Web Sucks, II.* Personal "rant" located on the authors home page (http://WWW.spies.com/~ceej/Words/rant.web.html), pp. 1-8.

Stewart, J. (1978). Foundations of dialogic communication, *The Quarterly Journal of Speech.* 64, (2): 183-201,

Wilcox, D. L., Ault, P. H., and Agee, W. K. (1997). *Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics.* New York: Longman.

Michael Kent, Ph.D. *teaches introductory and advanced courses in public relations at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas. He received a B.A. degree in Communication with a Journalism/Broadcasting minor from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks; a M.S. degree from the University of Oregon in Rhetoric, with cognates in Mass Communication and Political Communication; and a Ph.D. from Purdue University in Communication.*
Department of Communication and Theatre, Box 4033, 1200 Commercial Ave., Emporia KS 66801-5087, 316-341-5711.