

Chapter 13

13 Public Relations and the Internet

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Objectives

At the end of this chapter students will be able to:

- Define the computer and the Internet
- Understand the connection of the Internet and public relations
- Demonstrate public relations in the communication medium
- Understand and explain the challenges and the problems in the Internet as communication channel
- Deal with the media online

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Public relations was born in the Industrial Age and reached maturity in the Information Age. Now that we have entered a new era, the Digital Age, we cannot help but marvel at how the profession – and society - is being transformed. As you prepare to enter the 21st century workplace, you may be wondering how these changes will affect you and how you can better prepare for them.



It is easy to be in the awe of new technology. In many ways, technology can help us be more productive, healthy, happy, fulfilled, and self-confident. And technological advances have paralleled the tremendous growth of public relations. Practitioners have always been among the first to adapt technological advancements to their needs. Technology significantly contributes to every step of the public relations process: research, planning, communication, and evaluation. With a computer, a modem, and a telephone or cable line, today's practitioners have access to a world of information and opportunities.



13.2 DEFINING THE COMPUTER AND THE INTERNET

The computer processor is no longer exclusive to personal computers. Many of smart devices used by public relations professionals use computer processors. Personal organizers, calendars, and contact lists reside on personal digital assistants (PDAs) and even on wristwatches. Computers enable the automation of office procedures so that tasks can be completed faster and more extensively than the old do-it-by-hand methods were capable of. As a research tool, computers make an immense amount of information easily accessible through secondary analysis of data. E-mail and chat forums enhance environmental scanning and issues management. Three skills that are essential to the success in public relations – project management, time billing, and digital presentation – all are made more efficient and flexible through the use of computer. Most importantly, the computer should be viewed as the vehicle that can carry the practitioner into the maze of the Internet and World Wide Web. Communication and information resources abound in the online world, making life for public relations professionals more interesting and efficient.



Internet use increased when graphics and sound were added, forming what came to be called the World Wide Web. A web site consists of one or more web pages, the first of which is the home page. A person can visit a home page by typing its URL address, which is made up of letters, numbers and punctuation marks, into a browser. An effective home page is a colourful mixture of text and graphics on which the sponsoring organization introduces itself.

13.3 KEY ASPECTS OF THE INTERNET

There are several key aspects of the Internet. The public relations professionals should keep in mind the following important facts about the Internet:

- ◆ **Its reach is worldwide.** A message intended for local or regional use may draw reactions, good or bad, from unexpected places.
- ◆ **The content of the Internet is virtually uncontrolled.** Anyone can say or show anything without passing it through “gatekeepers”, the editors and producers who approve the material that reaches the public through traditional media channels. Lack of editorial control permits unfettered freedom of speech, but it also permits distribution of unconfirmed, slanted or even potentially libellous material.
- ◆ Issue tracking can be more thorough using the Internet and far more immediate. Services such as NewsEdge monitor Web-based news and wire services and alert users when relevant topics appear in the Internet news sources. By monitoring the Internet, practitioners can keep track of what competitors, opponents, and the general audience are saying. Thus informed, practitioners can better shape their own tactics and messages as well as respond in real time to forestall erroneous or unbalanced stories from gaining momentum without correction.

13.4 THE INTERNET AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

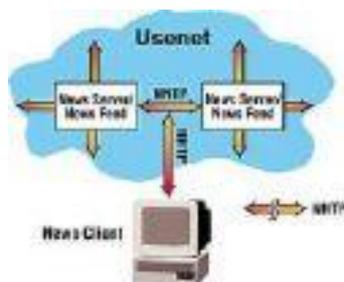
The Internet gives public relations practitioners a multifaceted form of worldwide communication, primarily involving message exchange by e-mail, information delivery and persuasion through the Web, and extensive access to audiences for strategic research opportunities.

The following are the primary uses of the Internet by public relations professionals:



- ◆ **E-mail distribution.** E-mail includes messages to individuals: newsletter to staff members; transmissions of news releases, photos, and pitch letters to media offices; and dispatch and receipt of copy between public relations firms and clients, including fully formatted documents using software such as Adobe Acrobat.
- ◆ **World Wide Web sites.** These sites provide a way for organizations to tell Internet users what they do, to publicize projects and to advocate policies.

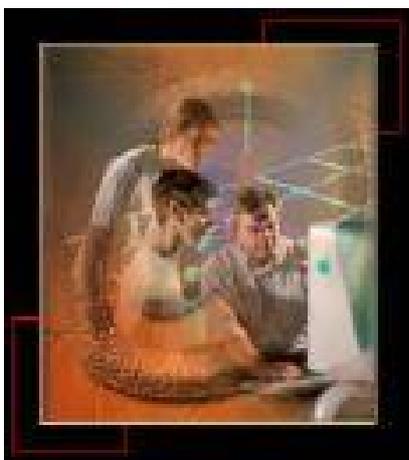
◆ **Brochureware.** Although this term is used ironically by those who envision Web sites as a unique new channel, much of the content on Web sites is little more than online versions of the brochures and collateral materials that organizations provide to stakeholders. Public relations professionals should increasingly capitalize on the interactive and multimedia characteristics that distinguish Web communication from traditional print materials.



◆ **Usenet discussion groups.** Individuals concerned with a certain issue discuss it by making comments and reading the responses of other participants. Sometimes this exchange is called newsgroup. Usenet groups also are used for audience research, in which a participant requests opinions and facts. An estimated 10,000 such groups exist. One of the most popular sources of newsgroup is Google Groups, which is managed by the Web search engine Google.

13.5 THE NET AS COMMUNICATION MEDIUM

Every organization from the largest corporation to the smallest non-profit, today has a Web site. Web sites serve as an organization's "first face" to the public. Public relations



departments now have interactive specialists and groups responsible for communicating via the Net. Journalists meanwhile, still the primary customers for most in public relations have also embraced the Internet as their primary source for research and reporting. The vast majority of reporters today are online and prefer e-mail as their primary source of public relations correspondence. Nonetheless, personal contact with a journalist is still the best way to ensure that your message will be heard. For individual public relations practitioners then, although the Internet in many areas has fallen short of the full measure of its promise, familiarity with it, mastery of it, and knowledge of its effective use has become frontline requisites of the practice.

13.6 PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE INTERNET CHALLENGE

Use of the Internet by public relations practitioners inevitably will grow in the future for three reasons in particular:

◆ **The demand to be educated versus being sold.** Today's consumers are smarter, better educated, and more media savvy. They know when they are being hustled by self-promoters and con artists. So communications programs must be grounded in education-based information rather than blatant promotion. The Internet perhaps the world's greatest potential repository of such information.

◆ **The need for real-time performance.** The world is moving quickly. Everything happens instantaneously in real time. Public relations professionals can use this to their advantage to structure their information to respond instantly to emerging issues and market changes.

◆ **The need for customization.** There used to be three primary television networks. Today there are more than 500 television channels. Today's consumers expect more focused, targeted, one-on-one communications relationships. More and more organizations must broadcast their thoughts to narrower and narrower population segments. The Internet offers such narrowcasting to reporters, shareholders, analysts, opinion leaders, consumers, and myriad other publics.

13.7 THE INTERNET PROBLEMS

In addition to its multiple benefits, the global spider web of interlocking computer networks also offers some challenges. The following should be kept in mind when planning Internet communication program:

◆ The difficulty in finding desired information frustrated some users. Increasingly, search engines are prioritizing search results based on fee payments from companies and organizations, biasing search results.

◆ Controversial security problems and legal questions of copyright infringement, libel, invasion of privacy, and pornography remain unsolved.

◆ Time-consuming procedures for online transaction or product registrations can be terminated by an error message that the procedure was not successful, generating scepticism about the efficiency of the Web and its reliability as a communication tool.

◆ Malicious and irritating practices nag at online users. The Internet offers many opportunities for spammers to clutter e-mail channels with bogus or dubious offers.



13.8 SUMMARY

In just a few short years, the Internet has evolved into an indispensable marketing tool for organizations and a favoured weapon for angry customers, disaffected employees, and consumer activist bent on attacking those same organizations. The computer is not just a tool to handle office procedures; it is also on-ramp to the Internet.

One of the primary uses of the Internet is for communication, both in the form of e-mail and in information delivery and research opportunities. Its reach is worldwide, but keep in mind that Internet content is virtually uncontrolled. Users can become frustrated in trying to find information online. There are also problems with security and copyright infringement.

Public relations practitioners use computers in the following tasks: dictation and voice generation, expert system programming, processing of news releases, e-mail, desktop publishing, mailing list generation, online conferencing, graphic production, and facsimile transmission. They also use computers as management tools.

13.9 QUESTIONS**Section A:****Short answer questions**

5. What is the Internet, and what are some of its most promising uses in public relations?
6. How has e-mail changed the ways people and organizations communicate?
7. How has the Internet influenced preferences of the media?
8. Why should public relations people monitor the Web?