Chapter 18: Public Relations and the Internet

Based on Seitel on The Practice of Public Relations

In the 21ˢᵗ century……

☐ It's a wired world. The Internet has become the world's dominant form of communication.

☐ Yet, the Internet hasn't replaced human relationships. This is true both for:

- Societal communications
- The practice of public relations

The Internet is but another tool in the PR arsenal.

Defining the Internet

What is it?

- The Internet is a cooperatively run, globally distributed collection of computer networks that exchange information through a common set of rules.

- It began as the ARPANET, developed by the Department of Defense during the Cold War in 1969.

- The World Wide Web was developed in 1989 by physicist Tim Berners-Lee to enlarge the Internet for multiple uses.

Defining the World Wide Web
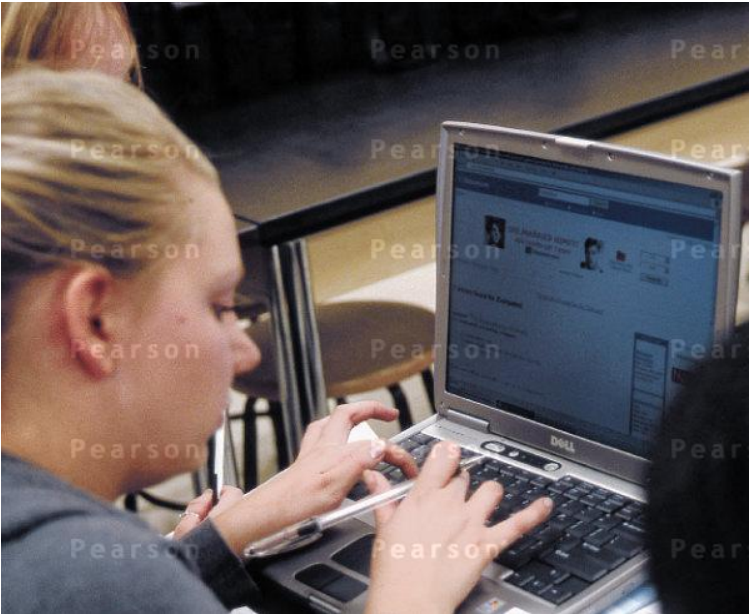
□ The World Wide Web is a collection of millions of computers on the Internet that connect using information in HTML, or hypertext markup language.

□ Multimedia can be combined using sound, graphics, video and animation to create a powerful tool in cyberspace.

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By the numbers……

In 2005:

- 15% of the world's population used the Internet. That's 972 million people.

- Nearly 70 of North Americans used the Internet.

- 332 million people logged on in Asia.

- 285 million people logged on in Europe.

A question for you……

What is the "digital divide?"

Answer:

It is the gap that exists between those who have access to computers and the Internet, and those who do not.

What implications does this concept create for the public relations practice?

The Internet as communications medium

- The Internet has transformed the way that people communicate and contact each other.

- Virtually all organizations have websites today. PR departments utilize interactive specialists and groups to manage web operations.

- Journalists have embraced the net for research and reporting.

Public relations' Internet challenge

With tremendous growth expected, practitioners face these challenges:

- ☐ The demand to be educated rather than sold.

- ☐ The need for real-time performance.

- ☐ The need for customization.

What do each of these mean to YOU?

Other areas of "cyber-practice"

Beyond the Internet, PR work has become prominent in:

- ☐ E-mail
- ☐ Websites
- ☐ Blogs
- ☐ Online media relations
- ☐ Online monitoring
- ☐ Product promotion
- ☐ Investor relations
- ☐ Webcasts

With opportunity comes challenge

□ Organizations can now "go direct" with investors, consumers, the media and other publics.

□ In this setting, there is no filtering of the message by third parties such as the press.

□ This poses both a tremendous opportunity and challenge for PR practitioners in the 21st century.

E-mail: the dominator

- E-mail has become far and away the most pervasive organizational communications vehicle.

- It is the internal method of choice for newsletters, bulletins, announcements.

- E-mail tends to produce more honest and immediate feedback for employees.

- E-publications have now replaced many print publications.

Guidelines for e-mail newsletters

☐ These are mostly used for external communication to customers, investors, or the media.

☐ When designing an e-newsletter, remember these guidelines:

- no more than one page
- link content
- regular dissemination

Developing a winning website

In many ways, the organization's website is the most important public interface. Before developing one, answer these questions:

- ☐ What is our goal?
- ☐ What content will we include?
- ☐ How often will we edit?

- ☐ How will we enhance design?
- ☐ How interactive will it be?
- ☐ How will we track use?
- ☐ Who will be responsible for the site ?

In summary, your website is a first line of communication to the public. It requires full-time attention.

A question for you……

What is a "sticky" website?

Answer:

One that provides the information that visitors seek.

- ☐ The more this objective is achieved, the more "sticky" your site becomes.
- ☐ "Stickiness" is measured by the amount of time visitors spend at the site and how many pages they view.

Exercise

Visit your university's homepage and evaluate its stickiness. Is your college website a strong site?

Defend your answer.

(Insert link to your university's home page here.)

Blogs: the latest phenomenon

- Weblogs, or blogs, are used to communicate personal views on every topic imaginable.

- They are growing at the rate of 70,000 per day.

- Every day, 700,000 to 1.3 million bloggers post their unfiltered opinions online.

PR practitioners can use blogs to:

- ☐ Deliver information, such as product uses, sales data and consumer tips.

- ☐ Interest potential consumers in a firm's expertise.

- ☐ Expand readership by registering on blog search engines.

- ☐ Monitor any blogs that are deemed influential. These may be negative.

Where are PR professionals blogging?

For some ideas, go online at:

http://www.theflack.blogspot.com

Dealing with media online

□ In the 21st century, reporters use the Internet extensively to research organizations.

□ When asked how they prefer to gather news, journalists said they preferred:

- E-mail, 61 percent
- Telephone, 51 percent
- In person, 23 percent
- Fax, 4 percent

Dealing with media online

The basics of online media relations include:

- Website newsroom
- News releases
- Executive speeches
- Annual/quarterly reports
- Annual meetings
- FAQs

- Interviews
- Digital press kits
- Photos, profiles, ad copy
- News releases via newswires
- Online publicity

Monitor the Internet…or else!

☐ In the 21st century, this has become a front line public relations responsibility.

☐ The net is free, wide open, international and anonymous. Anyone can start a movement and ruin your organization's reputation.

☐ Closely watch:

  ■ Discussion groups and chat rooms

  ■ Rogue websites

  ■ Urban legends

Product promotion on the Internet

- The Internet provided the shift from a "bricks" to "clicks" economy.

- Buyers can quickly access your information without interference.

- Adlinks are small display ads that promote another site or page.

Investor relations on the Internet

☐ Here, the Internet can be used as a more controlled communications mechanism to deal with investors.

☐ Investors can use the Internet to keep track of their investments and the market.

☐ Online financial reporting is growing because:

- ■ E-versions integrate well with other communications.
- ■ E-reports are less static than print reports.
- ■ E-versions last longer.

Of Intranets/Extranets, Wikis, Podcasts, and RSS feeds……

- ☐ **Intranets** expand internal communications capabilities.

- ☐ **Extranets** allow the organization to use the Internet to communicate to targeted external targets.

- ☐ **Wikis** are collaborative websites that combine the work of many authors.

- ☐ **Podcasting** makes audio programs available for download to any MP3 player.

- ☐ **RSS** or "real simple syndication" is an easy way to distribute content on the Internet, similar to a newsgroup.

PR people must remember that Internet technology changes every day. Professionals must change along with technology!

Summing it all up……

☐ As a PR professional, much of your career will involve mastering and monitoring the Internet.

☐ At the same time, traditional skills will prevail. These include:

  - ▪ Writing and speaking

  - ▪ Media relations

  - ▪ Overall communications knowledge

An exercise

- ☐ As a group, create a rough website design for a non-profit organization of your choice.

- ☐ Start out with thumbnail sketches. What do you want your site to communicate?

- ☐ Provide the links you feel are important. Be prepared to show and tell to your classmates.