

Short communication

# The importance of appearing competent: An analysis of corporate impression management strategies on the World Wide Web

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Received 26 July 2006; received in revised form 26 February 2007; accepted 1 May 2007

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## Abstract

Web sites have become important impression management tools for corporations because they represent a constantly available source of information for an organization's publics. This study used quantitative content analysis to assess current corporate impression management techniques, using Jones' typology of impression management strategies: ingratiation, competence, exemplification, supplication and intimidation. Findings indicate that corporate Web sites focus on competence and exemplification strategies, and that they are not using the full two-way communication capabilities of the Web.

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*Keywords:* Internet; Impression management; Corporate identity; Two-way communications; World Wide Web

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## 1. Introduction

Modern corporations certainly go to a great deal of time and expense in their attempts to build favorable images with consumers. Corporations employ a variety of communications for image building purposes, including public relations, advertising, event sponsorships, sales promotions and shareholder communications. In the 21st century, the corporate Web site has emerged as one of the corporation's most essential image building tools. However, all kinds of communications with a corporation's publics constitute a very important and strategic form of impression management.

Impression management is the goal-directed activity of controlling information about a person, object, entity, idea or event. All people and corporations engage in impression management in an attempt to increase the chances that they will be able to fulfill their financial and social goals, secure cooperation or support from others, vie effectively with or discourage competitors, and avoid the consequences of negative actions. However, while interpersonal impression management has been widely studied in the field of social psychology, little academic work has focused on impression management from a corporate perspective. Using one of the modern corporation's most visible impression management tools, the corporate Web site, this study seeks to provide further scholarship in the area of impression management and public relations by describing the impressions of corporate identity offered to publics in the Internet environment.

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An important aspect of impression management is feedback. Corporations require information from their publics to gauge the relative success of both their actions and their images. Public relations theory underscores the importance of feedback to the success of corporate actors in terms of two-way communications. Considering the two-way communications possibilities of the Internet environment, the current study seeks to provide scholarship in this area by describing the extent to which corporations practice two-way communications on their corporate Web pages. Additionally, to determine the presumed targets of the corporations' Web site communications efforts, this study seeks to examine the specific publics targeted on the sites.

Investigators chose 110 companies from the top 500 companies on Fortune magazine's list of leading businesses. The companies were picked using a random numbers table. To determine the impressions of corporate identity presented, each of the 110 Web sites was content analyzed for the presence or absence of the five possible impression management strategies: ingratiation (appearing likeable), competence (appearing intelligent), intimidation (appearing threatening), exemplification (appearing virtuous), and supplication (appearing weak). The relative prominence of the five strategies was also recorded.

To determine the extent to which corporations use their Web sites to promote two-way communication between themselves and their publics, the amount of feedback and interactivity available was measured by coding whether or not the Web site offered an e-mail address, a guest book, a visitor counter, an online real-time help function or a survey. A visitor's ability to tailor the Web sites' content was measured by coding whether the sites contained a customer profile or an option to personalize the content every time the visitor accessed the page.

In order to examine the internal and external publics addressed by the organizations' Web sites, coders recorded whether or not the site contained specified links for customers, investors, employees, and the media. They also recorded whether or not the sites offered material in other languages and which other languages were available.

The Web sites were coded online by a trained undergraduate coder who saved an electronic copy of each Web page. To establish intercoder reliability, the authors re-coded a 10% sub-sample of the Web sites. Intercoder reliability was calculated at 0.917, using Holsti's formula.

## 2. Findings

### 2.1. *Impression management strategies*

All of the 110 Web sites studied utilized the competence strategy as part of their Web site. Only one of the Web sites (0.9%) used the intimidation strategy. The exemplification strategy was used by 74.5% of the Web sites, ingratiation by 63.6% of the Web sites, and supplication by 31.8%.

As an indication of the prominence of the various impression management strategies on corporate Web sites, a paired-sample *t*-test was used to compare the mean number of clicks to get to the different impression management strategies. Competence strategy was the easiest to find, users needing significantly fewer clicks ( $M = .71$ ) to get to the competence strategy than to get to ingratiation ( $M = 1.06$ ),  $t(69) = 4.208$ ,  $p < .001$ , exemplification ( $M = 1.40$ ),  $t(81) = -9.097$ ,  $p < .001$ , and supplication ( $M = 1.46$ ),  $t(34) = -5.087$ ,  $p < .001$  strategies.

### 2.2. *Strategies and Fortune 500 ranking*

Using Mann–Whitney tests, the impression management strategies were compared with the companies' positions on the Fortune magazine listing. The test indicated that the ranking of companies that include the ingratiation strategy had a mean rank of 45.07, significantly higher than those not using the ingratiation strategy, which had a mean rank of 73.75 ( $z = -4.536$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Therefore, the higher the Fortune 500 ranking (and the lower the rank number) the more likely the company Web site used an ingratiation strategy.

### 2.3. *Two-way communications and interactivity*

All but four Web sites (96.4%) offered an e-mail address for consumer feedback, and 74.5% offered an active e-mail link to a help desk. Customer surveys were a feature on 21.8% of the sites. Less than half (45.5%) of the Web sites asked visitors to fill out a customer profile and 37.3% required a completed customer profile in order to access certain portions of the Web site. Only 10% of sites offered a way to personalize the site content on each visit.

## 2.4. *Publics targeted*

All of the Web sites coded featured a link for current or potential employees. Current customers were offered links on all but two of the Web sites (98.2%). Most of the sites (96.4%) contained links for investors and for media/press contacts. Additionally, many corporations are actively exploiting the international nature of the Internet to communicate with non-English speaking visitors. Company Web sites were available in at least one other language 32.7% of the time.

## 3. Discussion

Corporate Web sites were dominated by competence—every site exhibited some kind of competence strategy. Based on the number of clicks necessary to reach the various strategies, it is clear that establishing a corporation's competence is a critical function of a corporate Web site.

Providing feedback appears to be another important function of the corporate Web sites—almost all of them included some kind of e-mail link for visitors to correspond with the corporation. With increasing access to the Internet by key publics, such two-way, online communications are doubtless playing an increasingly significant role in corporations' environmental scanning efforts.

The collecting of demographic data from visitors in the form of customer profiles may indicate that formal scanning is taking place. Almost half of the Web sites allowed customers to fill out a customer profile, and nearly 40% rewarded visitors who shared information through a personal profile with some form of enhanced access to the Web site.

The results indicate that corporations are using the Internet to communicate with a wide range of publics, both internal and external. Every Web site studied provided information for current or future employees. Additionally, the findings may indicate the growing importance of the World Wide Web as a recruitment tool. Key external publics were also important to the corporations studied, with more than 95% of Web sites containing special sections for current customers, investors, and the media. Only about one-third of the sites in the sample provided information in a language other than English. Of these, the most common additional language offering was Spanish. Fifteen of the sites were available in more than two languages, however, indicating an attempt by at least some corporations to reach a more global audience.

### 3.1. *Limitations*

Because the researchers used the Fortune 500 list as their sampling frame, results may not be generalizable to smaller corporations. As with all Internet content analysis, the study presented here represents a "snapshot" of the conditions that existed at a particular time. Current visitors to the same URLs may find a very different environment than the one encountered by the researchers.

## 4. Conclusion

Normative public relations theory indicates that excellence in public relations is based on two-way communication. Web sites offer corporations an important impression management tool because they represent a constantly available source of information for an organization's publics, as well as a means to gather information from members of those publics.

Because of the essential nature of establishing corporate credibility in all corporate communications, corporate Web sites are most likely to employ the impression management strategies of competence and exemplification, which are related to the two most salient elements of corporate credibility: expertise and trustworthiness.

Many corporations have not fully embraced the promise of the World Wide Web. In particular, multiple language capabilities of Internet communications should be explored. Corporate Web sites may also benefit by utilizing the emerging personalization capabilities of the Internet medium to build associations with all kinds of audiences, enhancing corporate image among relevant publics.