# Using cultivation strategies to manage public relationships: A content analysis of non-profit organisations' websites

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## Abstract

*This study utilises a content analysis of 129 non-profit organisations' websites to explore how they are managing their web relationships with publics. While most organisations in this sample are engaging in all six of the relational strategies (access, positivity, openness, shared tasks, networking, and assurances), the level at which these strategies are engaged is low. Positivity was the most often used strategy, which shows a difference between non-profit organisations and Fortune 500 companies. Assurances was the least engaged strategy, thus making it the one most in need of improvement.*


## Introduction

Non-profit organisations lag behind Fortune 500 companies in terms of technology use (Spencer, 2002). This lag is problematic because non-profit organisations touch the lives of every American in some way (Steinberg & Powell, 2006). Some 65 million people volunteer their time with a non-profit organisation in some form (Bortree & Waters, 2008).

Public relations continues to be an area of communication study that needs to be researched through theoretical and practical approaches. Furthermore, the Internet is a medium that is not fully understood. Thus, an area of interest for research in public relations is how practitioners utilise the Internet. Specifically, this research will address how practitioners in the non-profit sector utilise the Internet for the purposes of relationship building and maintenance. This study will build on previous research by using the relationship management model, developed by Hon and Grunig (1999), and Internet research to examine non-profit website. Specifically it will examine how non-profit organisations.

## Literature review

*Defining relationship*

Ledingham (2006) defined public relations as the management function that establishes and maintains relationships. However, an exact definition of relationship is not agreed upon by researchers. A definition for relationship is long in the making, with roots in social psychology, interpersonal communication and other public relations research (Dindia & Canary, 1993; Thomlison, 2000; Toth, 2000; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, et al., 1992; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Ledingham, 2000; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Ledingham, 2006).

The model set forth by Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997 & 2000) was revamped by Hon and Grunig (1999) and Grunig and Huang (2000). Rather than using the antecedents, relationships, and consequences model, current methods of examining and measuring relationships break the model into three phases or stages: consequences, strategies, and outcomes (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Grunig & Huang, 2000). The phase involving consequences describes how public relationships form. The second phase includes relationship strategies. For development of these strategies many interpersonal theories, as well as conflict-resolution theories, are utilised to develop the concepts for maintenance in relationships.



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These concepts are: access, positivity, openness, assurances, networking, sharing of tasks, integrative, distributive, and dual concern (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.14).

Access is defined as allowing for contact between the organisation and the public (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Either the public or the organisation could initiate communication. Both parties are engaged in communication whether it be in person, on the phone, via email, or on the Internet, and are willing to answer questions and respond to the concerns of the other. Therefore if a member of the public were to contact an organisation via its website, access would be achieved. Since this willingness to communicate exists on both the organisation's and the public's side, the notion of two-way symmetrical communication is at work in this strategy.

Positivity is anything that an organisation or a public does to make the relationship a pleasant experience for both parties (Hon & Grunig, 1999). An example of positivity would be any benefits that are gained in the mutual relationship. Regarding the Internet, this strategy has been interpreted as any attempt to achieve simplicity of the website for users (Ki, 2003; Bortree, 2007). A website that is deemed 'user friendly' invites the user to stay on the website rather than leave with confusion or unanswered questions. A positive website experience can help in building the relationship because it allows for two of Hon and Grunig's (1999) relational outcomes. Both trust and satisfaction have connection with the relational strategy of positivity. First, trust is defined as "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (p.19). Furthermore, Hon and Grunig state that trust is based in dependability, as well as competence. In addition, having a positive website experience can be linked to the relational outcome of satisfaction. Hon and Grunig (1999) state that satisfaction can occur when one party believes the other party's relationship maintenance behaviours are positive. For a website, the organisation must make sure to maintain high levels of navigation ease, sitemap clarity, search function, and audiovisual elements.

Openness is a type of two-way symmetrical communication strategy (Hon & Grunig, 1999). When both the organisation and the public are willing to share their thoughts and feelings, transparency is achieved. Examples of this strategy are: when an organisation explains what it does; provides organisational history; discloses how funds are used; and shares organisational news, both positive and negative.

Assurances are attempts by organisations to guarantee other parties that they and their concerns are genuine (Hon & Grunig, 1999). These assurances mean following up on communication efforts and other means of facilitating understanding. If an organisation engages in communication with a public, listens to the needs and wants of the public, and provides the public with these items, then the organisation has shown the public that it is valuable. In other words, the organisation has used assurances to better the relationship.

Networking refers to the building of coalitions with other groups to which the other party in the relationship is connected. An example would be when organisations network with environmental groups, unions, or community groups (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 15). Networks can be built with groups that are both similar and dissimilar to the organisation.

Finally there is the sharing of tasks. Having shared tasks means that when organisations and publics engage in a relationship they will share in the joint solving of problems or creating policy (Hon & Grunig, 1999). If a public and an organisation were to join forces to help increase employment opportunities in their community, they would be sharing tasks. Both parties would be working together to build a better society and thus would be forging a stronger relationship.

These relationship strategies, according to Hon and Grunig, produce outcomes. Through their research on organisations and interpersonal relationships, four reoccurring concepts appear for relationship outcomes: control mutuality, trust, relational commitment, and relational satisfaction (1999, p.42).



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*Public relations' move to the Internet*

Kent and Taylor (1998 & 2002) were at the forefront of bringing the two areas together through their discussions of dialogic theory and creating relationships online. Dialogic theory, according to Kent and Taylor, refers to dialogical communication as the part of Grunig and Hunt's two-way symmetrical communication. They state that it is a procedural issue where two-way communication is the process, and dialogue is the product that results from that communication. Kent and Taylor suggest that the web is a great place for fostering dialogic communication. However, in regard to relationships and the Internet, most of the research after Kent and Taylor has been done either at a broad level, meaning that its focus is on online dialogue and relationships, or between Fortune 500 companies and the publics of Fortune 500 companies. The amount of research on non-profit organisations is marginal in comparison with that of Fortune 500 companies.

*Online dialog and relationships*

Another area in which Internet dialog and relationships were examined is the engagement of activist publics. Taylor, Kent and White (2001) examined 100 websites created by activist organisations and determined that while most of the websites were designed for two-way communication, ultimately they did not utilise or engage in two-way communication. Furthermore, the organisations focused more attention on non-media publics, such as their member publics, or those who were involved within the organisation, than they did on the media.

Online relationship building was further researched by Jo and Kim (2003). Surveying college students, they reported that the technological advancement of the website does not correlate with a number of favourable attitudes, such as trust, commitment, or satisfaction, toward the website. They state that organisations must utilise the web to engage publics and not simply rely on the medium of communication to produce a relationship.

Similarly, Kent, Taylor, and White (2003) looked at how organisations utilise their technology to engage stakeholders. They examined 150 websites of activist publics and watchdog publics. When attempting to solicit information from the web masters there was a return rate of only 16 percent. That lack of response meant a low number of these websites were engaging publics. The authors suggest that organisations that rely on relationships with their publics need to solicit, consider, and adjust to stakeholder feedback.

Therefore it seems that online communication supplements the relationship building process rather than replaces it (Duhé, 2007). Relationship building can occur both online and offline and not solely in one place. Since there are still things that cannot be encompassed by the Internet, such as face-to-face communication, offline relationships still have a place in public relations.

Most relevant to the study at hand is Bortree. In 2007, Bortree examined how Hon and Grunig's relationship strategies were used on children's non-profit organisation websites. This study found that all six strategies are engaged by non-profits and that most websites viewed actually contained four of more of the strategies. This research is influential as it is one of the few to actually apply relational strategies to any website, profit or non-profit. Bortree's constructions of access, positivity, openness, shared tasks, networking, and assurances all play a part in the foundation for this study.

*Non-profit organisations*

Defining a non-profit organisation may seem obvious but there are specific details to note. Kinzey (1999) argues that it is hard to define non-profit organisations because a non-profit is not part of a public or private sphere because it actually operates somewhere in between. For the purposes of this study, non-profit will be defined as an organisation that promotes a public service objective and is not invested in monetary gain for profit. Kinzey (1999) states that while a wealth of research has been done on public relations and non-profit organisations as separate entities, little has been done in the area of researching how non-profit organisations can utilise public relations strategies.

*Non-profit organisations, public relations and the Internet*

Just as the Internet has helped to change the face of public relations, it also has helped to shift the appearance of non-profit organisations. Zeff in 1996, and later revised by Johnston in 1999, published the Non-profit Guide to the Internet. Both editions stressed the beneficial tools that the Internet can provide to non-profit organisations. Through the Internet, a non-profit can yield improved internal and external communication. Along with improved communication, non-profit organisations' integrated use of the Internet can provide better access to information and the ability to take action.

Since this time several researchers have suggested that the use of the Internet could be even more important to non-profit organisations. For example, in 2002 Boeder stated that the Internet could be used to increase giving, to carry out missions, and to communicate with publics such as the media. Spencer (2002) also claimed there were great benefits for non-profit organisations using the Internet, but many non-profits were not using the technology. Spencer argued that the Internet could be an excellent way for non-profits to distribute educational materials, but warned that in doing so the information must be kept current. Most recently, Kenix (2008) discussed the current situation regarding non-profit organisations and their web usage. Using seven focus groups composed of representatives from the non-profit sector who were responsible for Internet communication, Kenix reported that many of the participants did not believe the Internet as democratising their cause. Furthermore, the Kenix study reveals that most practitioners are using their websites in a one-way dissemination of information model. With regard to these one-way messages there is little planning involved in what the message says or for whom the message is meant.

The focus group also points out that there is lack of Internet training for non-profit staff. Kenix suggests this could be due to the perception non-profits have that the Internet is not valuable to their cause. Rarely are these non-profit organisations using interactive content to engage with their publics. Kenix states this lack of usage is cause for concern because other studies show that engagement of publics in an online setting can cause an organisation to grow. While the focus group data cannot be generalised, it does explain why some non-profits do not use the Internet to its fullest extent.

Based on this literature, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: Are non-profit organisations utilising the web to engage their various publics in dialogic relationships?

RQ2: What relational strategies are non-profit organisations' websites using?

## Method

This study aims to understand and to expand the knowledge of online public relations and non-profit organisations. More specifically it evaluates how non-profit organisations utilise the Internet as a tool for relationship building and maintenance. To do so, this study employs content analysis and tests reliability via intercoder reliability.

*Content analysis*

Content analysis in its most basic form has been called a procedure to examine the content of recorded information (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Non-profit organisation websites were selected and analysed by explicit rules, so that the study could be replicated and so that data could be understood through statistical analysis.

*Unit of analysis*

The unit of analysis was the organisation's website at three levels deep. This concept has been used before in Bortree's 2007 study. This procedure refers to using the main page of a website, and two links or clicks into the website (p.8). This concept is supported by other Internet research such as Dochartaigh (2002).

*Categories*

A code sheet was constructed, which adapted previous studies such as Bortree (2007) and Ki (2003). Specific directions for assessing each relational strategy were given in a codebook. However, a very general overview of that codebook is that an item was coded as high when everything was clearly labelled, content accessed was what was to be expected, and all links worked well; an item was coded as medium when labels were confusing; and an item was coded low when inaccessible or nonexistent.

*Access*

Access is the first relational strategy investigated. The three areas of access coded for this concept are: (1) telephone contact information – which refers to telephone numbers by department, branch or division, as well as names of contacts and positions; (2) physical address – provides physical address by department, branch or division, as well as names of contacts and positions and; (3) email address – provides email address by department, branch or division, as well as names of contacts and positions.

*Positivity*

A website that is deemed 'user friendly' invites the user to stay on the website rather than leave with confusion or unanswered questions. Thus, items coded for this concept are: (1) ease of navigation – every item is clearly labelled, content accessed is what is to be expected and all links work well.; (2) search functions – the website provides advanced search capabilities as well as tips for searching; and (3) site mapping – the website provides clearly hierarchical structure, content is easily found. Additionally, this study follows Bortree's addition of a fourth element, which is audiovisual. This strategy component means inclusion of photographs, illustrations, video, or music.

*Openness*

For this strategy items are coded as: (1) organisation overview (also known on the Internet as an 'About Us' section) – this will include information on an organisation's history or creation as well as goals and objective; (2) organisational news; and (3) annual reports and records.

*Shared tasks*

Since these organisations are already non-profit organisations, and not vested in a bottom line, it is important to think of this construct as more engaging in community or educational activity (Bortree, 2007). Thus, the items coded in this area are: (1) community activity – programmes that engage the community; (2) educational activity – programmes that educate the community about a problem or issue; and (3) donation of time or money – volunteering or giving monetary contribution.

*Networking*

The items in this section were coded as: (1) networking with similar non-profits; (2) networking with dissimilar non-profits; and (3) networking with for-profit organisations.

*Assurances*

Assurances are the final relational strategy in this research. On the web this strategy would mean for websites that there are places for computer-mediated communication. Thus, three items were coded for in this area: (1) presence of a chat room; (2) presence of a message board; and (3) presence of a blog.

*Sampling*

For the purpose of studying non-profit organisations and their websites, the population for this study comes from the website www.idealist.org. Idealist.org is highly recognised as an influential non-profit directory through popular press, awards and recognition (Hainer, 2005; Special Report, 2005; Employment, 2006; Zimmerman, 2008). Idealist.org is a free web directory that through keyword search database enquiries will link a web user to a non-profit that fits his/her search description. It is not only free to users who



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wish to search the database; it is also free to those organisations that wish to post their websites. Given the nature of the web and the possibility of broken links or unavailable sites, as demonstrated by the previous studies (Liu, Arnett, Capella, & Beatty, 1997; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Callison, 2003; Ki, 2003; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Bortree, 2007), a sample of 150 was chosen to ensure at least 100 would be usable. The sample sizes for previous studies have utilised sample sizes of 100.

A random number generator was used via the web tool randomizer.org to generate 150 numbers from the sampling frame. After obtaining the list of 56,702 websites, each was automatically assigned a number via the search results list and the 150 were recorded by name and website address. Of the 150 websites selected, 129 were usable at the time of coding; the other 21 were no longer available, meaning they were broken and inaccessible.

*Reliability*

The equation used to calculate reliability for this content analysis is:

$$\frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$

M is the total coded items agreed upon, while N is the total items for coder. This formula comes from Holsti, and has used in public relations research by Stacks (2002). Good coder reliability is obtained at the .9 or 90 percent level. Intercoder reliability for this study is calculated at 90.6 percent based on the coding of 20 websites.

## Results

RQ1: Are non-profit organisations utilising the web to engage their various publics in dialogic relationship?

This research question seeks to understand how non-profit organisations engage their publics via the web. Descriptive statistics were used to express if the relational strategies are high, medium, low, or not at all. Access was coded in three areas – telephone contact, physical address contact, and email contact. Of the 129 websites, the majority were coded as having low access in all three areas. For example, 87 (67.4 percent) were coded as having low telephone contact information, 96 (74.4 percent) sites were coded as low physical address, and 65 (50.4 percent) were coded as low for email address. See Table 1.

### Table 1 Access engagement

| Variable | Level | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Telephone** | High | 18 | 14.0% |
| | Medium | 14 | 10.9% |
| | Low | 87 | 67.4% |
| | Not available | 10 | 7.8% |
| **Physical address** | High | 5 | 3.9% |
| | Medium | 15 | 11.6% |
| | Low | 96 | 74.4% |
| | Not available | 13 | 10.1% |
| **Email** | High | 37 | 28.7% |
| | Medium | 16 | 12.4% |
| | Low | 65 | 50.4% |
| | Not available | 11 | 8.5% |

Findings for positivity were mixed. For example, while most websites were coded as high for navigation ease and sitemap availability, the majority of the websites had no searchable function. The final element, audiovisual presence, was also mixed with 42 (32.6 percent) websites coded as high, 34 (26.4 percent) coded as medium, 43 (33.3 percent) coded as low, and 10 (7.8 percent) coded as not available. See Table 2.

### Table 2 Positivity engagement

| Variable | Level | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Navigation** | High | 79 | 61.2% |
| | Medium | 28 | 21.7% |
| | Low | 18 | 14.0% |
| | Not available | 4 | 3.1% |
| **Search** | High | 3 | 2.3% |
| | Medium | 1 | 0.8% |
| | Low | 35 | 27.1% |
| | Not available | 90 | 69.8% |
| **Sitemap** | High | 85 | 65.9% |
| | Medium | 18 | 14.0% |
| | Low | 7 | 5.4% |
| | Not available | 19 | 14.7% |
| **Audiovisual** | High | 42 | 32.6% |
| | Medium | 34 | 26.4% |
| | Low | 43 | 33.3% |
| | Not available | 10 | 7.8% |

Most websites provided some overview of the organisation and news. However, annual reports were not available on 110 (85.3 percent) websites. See Table 3.

### Table 3 Openness engagement

| Variable | Level | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Organisation overview** | High | 20 | 15.5% |
| | Medium | 60 | 46.5% |
| | Low | 45 | 34.9% |
| | Not available | 4 | 3.1% |
| **News** | High | 21 | 16.3% |
| | Medium | 19 | 14.7% |
| | Low | 50 | 38.8% |
| | Not available | 39 | 30.2% |
| **Annual reports** | High | 4 | 3.1% |
| | Medium | 8 | 6.2% |
| | Low | 7 | 5.4% |
| | Not available | 110 | 85.3% |

Results for this shared task were also mixed. The majority of the websites were coded as low for community activity and nearly one-third of the sample had no information available about educational activities and donation of time/money. See Table 4.

**Table 4 Shared tasks engagement**

| Variable | Level | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Community activity** | High | 34 | 26.4% |
| | Medium | 23 | 17.8% |
| | Low | 48 | 37.2% |
| | Not available | 24 | 18.6% |
| **Educational activity** | High | 31 | 24.0% |
| | Medium | 22 | 17.1% |
| | Low | 34 | 26.4% |
| | Not available | 42 | 32.6% |
| **Donation of time/money** | High | 31 | 24.0% |
| | Medium | 25 | 19.4% |
| | Low | 31 | 24.0% |
| | Not available | 42 | 32.6% |

Similarly, the majority of the websites examined were not providing high levels of information about networking. See Table 5 (below).

**Table 5 Networking engagement**

| Variable | Level | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Similar** | High | 6 | 4.7% |
| | Medium | 34 | 26.4% |
| | Low | 33 | 25.6% |
| | Not available | 56 | 43.4% |
| **Dissimilar** | High | 3 | 2.3% |
| | Medium | 26 | 20.2% |
| | Low | 24 | 18.6% |
| | Not available | 76 | 58.9% |
| **For profit** | High | 1 | 0.8% |
| | Medium | 20 | 15.5% |
| | Low | 18 | 14.0% |
| | Not available | 90 | 69.8% |

The last strategy examined was assurances. None of the websites had a chat room function. Only one had a low-level functioning message board, and 112 (86.8 percent) of websites did not have a blog present. See Table 6.

**Table 6 Assurances engagement**

| Variable | Level | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Not Available | 129 | 100% |
| **Board** | High | 0 | 0% |
| | Medium | 0 | 0% |
| | Low | 1 | 0.8% |
| | Not available | 128 | 99.2% |
| **Blog** | High | 1 | 0.8% |
| | Medium | 2 | 1.6% |
| | Low | 14 | 10.9% |
| | Not available | 112 | 86.8% |

RQ2: What relational strategies are non-profit organisations' websites using?

All six strategies were present in some form on non-profit websites. However, the level at which they were coded range. The uppermost frequency coded as high was sitemap, which is part of the positivity strategy. The second largest concentration of high coding was navigation which is also a part of positivity. The lowest of all the six strategies was assurances.

## Discussion

The Internet has greatly impacted the day-to-day activities of most people. One can check the weather, follow a sports team, purchase a sweater, find a date or even donate to a favourite charity or cause. It is only logical that if what people do in their daily lives transpires to the Internet then so would their volunteerism and charity involvement. Although non-profit organisations have begun to use the Internet for building and maintaining relationships with their publics, the levels at which they are engaging in these activities could be higher. When comparing this study's data to the results of the Fortune 500 content analysis by Ki (2003), most of the non-profit websites are lagging behind in their use of relational strategies. This assertion supports the research conclusions drawn by Spencer (2002) that non-profit organisations are behind for-profit organisations when it comes to technology.

*Access*

Access has been defined as the contact information provided by an organisation. This information is a vital step in the communication process. The website's display of this contact information serves as a catalyst for the many objectives of the organisation, whether it is fundraising, advocacy, or outreach. Without having the primary, as well as specific, point of contact, the first step in the communication process is lost. If a first-time website viewer is performing a preliminary search of organisations and cannot find out how to take part in the previously mentioned objectives, then that viewer might move on to the next website that does offer the information. In an age of rapid communication, items such as the phone number and email address are quintessential because of their ability to tailor communication to a specific face of the organisation. When an organisation has a high access level, it projects a willingness to communicate. It is especially important as it allows publics to know whom to contact for specific needs. In today's technical society everything is moving at a quicker pace, thus knowing the specific person to contact saves time and energy on the part of a volunteer, donor or stakeholder and will make him/her more likely to engage in a relationship with the not-for-profit organisation. This two-way communication is vital because it allows for linkages between publics and organisations (Zeff, 1996; Johnston, 1999).

*Positivity*

In addition to access, positivity must be present on non-profit websites. Positivity refers to the efforts made to keep the relationship enjoyable. In an Internet setting this refers to ease of navigation, site mapping, audiovisual and search functions. All of these abilities allow for a more user-friendly experience while surfing on a website. Again, in a world of competition, if a website lacks these features and frustrates the user, he/she will simply move on to the next organisation that satisfies his/her needs. Furthermore, these elements facilitate an element of professionalism. Donors and volunteers are more likely to participate in an organisation when they feel the group has the skill and/or experience to make effective use of the participation. Positivity was one of the strongest for-non-profit organisations, and contrasts interestingly with for-profit organisations. This comparison reveals a difference between non-profit organisations and for-profit organisations. It seems that for-profit organisations may be more invested in disseminating information, while non-profit organisations are more interested in creating an enjoyable environment for their publics. This contrast is noteworthy because non-profit organisations have to make effective use of their websites to show the return in the relationship, whereas the return in a for-profit scenario is some product or service. For-profit organisations are based on commerce; interactions with non-profit organisations are based on charity.

In this study, ease of navigation and sitemap availability both scored highly. Having a clear structure to a website allows for quick movement between web pages and finding information that is clearly labelled. Quicker access to information fits in with the fast paced momentum of today's society. This availability of information is important because it prevents discouragement and abandonment on the part of the website viewer.

Positivity is also important because it has been linked with relational outcomes of trust and satisfaction. When an organisation maintains its website properly, it is deemed dependable. This dependability is generated because information is constant and reliable; a user at any moment in the day can log-on and expect the information to be in the same place. When a non-profit organisation website can properly display current photographs and news items on a day-to-day basis this website can be deemed reliable and dependable. It is perceived this way because it is making good on the return in the relationship, showing a product to the public for their investment. The website itself can be a demonstration of tax and donor dollars at work. Furthermore, this illustration also demonstrates the concept of competence because it shows that an organisation can actually do what it claims to do. Reliability, dependability, and competence are important to building relationships between non-profits and volunteers and/or donors.

*Openness*

A third relational strategy that should be present is openness. It is a critical component of relationship building and maintenance. Most non-profit organisations in this study are demonstrating openness, but at a level much lower than might be expected. Of the 129 websites, 125 (96.8 percent) have some type of organisational overview and 90 (69.7 percent) have some type of news. Only 19 (14.7 percent) have some access to annual reports. Of the six strategies Ki (2003) explores, openness was the highest. This is interesting in comparison with the non-profit data collected because for-profit organisations are more forthright with their information on websites. This finding could be due in part to the requirements of for-profit organisations to report certain financial data.

Openness is critical to transparency; without transparency an organisation will have much-stifled success. By failing to disclose information upfront organisations run the risk of the public finding out via alternative means, i.e. the news, etc. If the information is negative the organisation could fare even worse. By being open with publics, non-profit organisations benefit by increasing trust. When trust is present in the relationship each party can rely on the other to maintain the relationship.

Furthermore, when discussing openness one can consider emotional appeal versus appeals to logic. While emotional appeals are persuasive in the short term, a person will be hesitant to donate time and money to an organisation they know nothing about. Thus, organisations that use emotion-laden images will need to demonstrate the clear facts of how their budgets are spent. If donors and volunteers find out that their non-profit of choice is in fact keeping 80 percent of all donated monies there will be a significant lapse in trust and commitment. Without trust and commitment from the volunteers and donors, a non-profit organisation might lose funding and advocacy.

*Shared tasks*

Shared tasks is another aspect of relationship building. These tasks are the ways in which the organisation and the public actually come together to accomplish goals. In this study, websites provide places to donate or information about volunteering. However, the amount of information is lacking. The amount of information from website to website is inconsistent. Some websites contain great details about specific community involvement, educational concerns, and the specifics about how donated money and time are spent. Consistency is critical. Providing clear and consistent information about what the organisation is doing will help it to meet its objectives.

One website coded in the study, The Sustainable Food Center, a regional non-profit organisation, did an excellent job of supplying this information. That organisation is able to show an itemised list of how much resources cost, and supply this data at the site of donation. This breakdown of information shows exactly where every cent of a donor's contribution is being spent. This disclosure is important because it allows the publics to evaluate what an organisation says versus what the organisation does, as well as how well the organisation is accomplishing its goals which make up two aspects of trust – dependability and competence. On the other end of the spectrum, many non-profit websites simply include a link to an offsite donation page where financial contributions can be made without the donor ever knowing where his/her money goes. If members of the public cannot see how financial contributions are working they may not choose to donate again. Again, this situation is cause for concern in terms of fostering relational outcomes. If publics cannot trust non-profit organisations, the relationship is not growing and as such the organisation may lose support and future funding.

*Networking*

The strategy of networking is related to shared tasks. Networking is an important part of the relationship, where connections become very prevalent. Networks emphasise who and what organisations are communicating with. It is not only important for organisational members, donors, and volunteers to know what the non-profit is doing, but it is also important for them to know with what other organisations the non-profit is interacting. For example if an animal rescue organisation was receiving large donations from a known supporter of puppy mills, this information could cause conflict with other donors. This specific conflict could arise because most people who are involved in work with animal rescue groups are opposed to puppy mills because they are often perpetrators of animal abuse. Most individuals who get involved with non-profits have strong convictions that motivate them to volunteer in that capacity. Thus, when a disturbance or conflict in ideology presents itself, it can be unsettling to the volunteer. Distressed volunteers are likely to quit volunteering or move on to a different organisation if they feel they and the non-profit no longer share the same convictions.

*Assurances*

The final aspect looked at in the study is assurances. These are the instances in which concerns are given legitimate focus and attention. For non-profits, the most popular choice of assurance tool was the blog tool. However, most blogs were poorly maintained. A blog is a great way to incorporate not only assurances, but also many of the relationship maintenance strategies. In addition to assurances, blogs can facilitate openness by disclosing information, foster positivity by use of audiovisual elements such as videos, photos, etc, and show where the organisation is networking and sharing tasks. If an organisation chooses to instate a blog on its website it must make sure to exercise caution and care.

A blog needs to have one clear voice, which represents the organisation; it must also have one cohesive message. Having multiple voices could cause an inconsistency in the organisation's message. Additionally, the blog must be updated frequently and with clear information. If the blog is updated on an infrequent basis then perhaps a user will not return to read it on a regular basis. If weeks pass between blog updates then a user may completely stop trying to gain access to the blog. Similarly, if the information is simply recycled and never new, a user may stop returning because he/she may believe the blog information is predictable and not news. These situations would do more to harm a relationship with a potential or current donor or volunteer than to build one.

Furthermore, the blog must allow for a place for the public to engage back with the organisation (such as a commenting feature). While this may be perceived by the organisation as time consuming or perhaps



Williams, K. D. & Brunner, B. R. (2010). Using cultivation strategies to manage public relationships: A content analysis of non-profit organisations' websites. *PRism 7*(2): http://praxis.massey.ac.nz/prism_on-line_journ.html

even scary, it could allow for a quick insight into the mind of the volunteer or donor. And, it would allow for much quicker feedback than using traditional research tools such as a survey or focus groups. Therefore, organisations should embrace blogs as a form of two-way communication.

*Limitations*

This study is only exploratory. Much of the information is adapted from two previous studies. The first, Ki (2003), provides the framework for many of the variable constructs. However, since Ki focused on for-profit organisations, it was sometimes difficult to adapt some items for this study. For example, annual reports became a slight issue in the study as non-profits are not legally bound to produce such documents. In the future, an alternative to annual reports should be the IRS Form 990. Furthermore, the second study, Bortree (2007), is specifically tailored to look at children's non-profit organisations and adaptations are made for this study to explore all types of non-profits.

A second limitation to consider is the category of donation of time/money that fell under the shared task strategy. In the future it would be helpful to separate the categories out to see if more significant results occur. While both are similar it could be helpful to see if publics are more willing to give time or money. Furthermore, the importance of where monetary donations get spent might be deemed more important than where volunteers are being used.

Finally, the very nature of a website is that it is created and maintained by the organisation. Thus, the data on the website is self-reported. Even if the data, such as a news article from an outside source, is posted on the website, the non-profit organisation's web master or web designer chose to include such information and thus there is a filter. However, if non-profit organisations are utilising the web as an enhancement in their relationship building it would be wise for the organisation to stick to its moral obligation to reporting the truth, lest the organisation wish to foster the relational outcome of distrust.

*Future research*

Much research needs to continue as a result of this study. First of all, this study looks at many types of non-profit organisations. More studies can branch out and look at how specific non-profits, such as health or environmental, use the web to engage their publics using the six relational strategies. It is important to study the differences among non-profit organisations because they are all unique. Perhaps further studies might show that certain types of non-profits only require minimal levels of engagement.

Furthermore, research should look more at the perceptions publics of non-profit organisations have. Survey data can be collected from publics who affiliate themselves with a non-profit. The survey data could then investigate perceptions of relationships between the publics and the organisation that are based on the web. This information would allow for a different type of quantitative analysis to get the full scope of how effective non-profits are in terms of their relationship building and maintenance. This is an important area to consider because when only looking at the website itself, you are only looking at the organisation. To get the other side, the publics' side, data needs to be collected so the full relationship is understood. Finally, another possible area to explore would be the addition of admiration as a relational outcome. Upon further investigation of the research based in Bortree and Waters (2008), admiration could become a fifth relational outcome.

## Conclusion

Overall, this study is important because it is among the first to look at non-profit organisations and how they are using the Internet as a means to communicate and maintain those relationships with their publics. In the current economic climate, as well as most times of economic crunch, public relations budgets are often cut to the bare minimum or eliminated all together. Understanding how to utilise the tools of online relationship building can help to be a cost-effective means of promoting an organisation's ideas and objectives. Non-profit organisations must learn how to be resourceful with their websites and public relations functions.

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