Help or hype: Symbolic or behavioral communication during Hurricane Katrina

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Abstract

Public relations professionals increasingly rely on the World Wide Web to communicate with their publics on a variety of issues, including the corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts the organization has undertaken. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there is an opportunity to discover how the Best 100 Global Brands used their corporate websites and the power of their brand equity to help the victims of the disaster, as well as to communicate their own CSR efforts. Results show that 51% of these Top 100 firms had messages on their homepages about Hurricane Katrina, and 86% of those firms made donations totaling $105,000,000. The remaining 14% of firms exhibited symbolic communication only, with links to philanthropic organizations aiding rescue efforts.

1. Introduction

Public relations practitioners increasingly rely on the World Wide Web to communicate with their publics on a variety of issues, including internal, corporate communication as well as external or social responsibility efforts the organization has undertaken. Previous research on Fortune 500 firm websites by Esrock and Leichty (1998) suggests that while firms are using the Web to describe their efforts, they are not using the Web to monitor public opinion or advocate policy issues. In other words, a monologue about *what* the organization is doing occurs more often than a dialogue to engage its publics in *how* it is doing. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there is an opportunity to discover how global brands use the power of their brand equity to help the victims of the disaster, to promote their own corporate social responsibility efforts, as well as to examine whether changes in Web communication have taken place since Esrock and Leichty's (1998) study.

2. Background

Hurricane Katrina is considered one of the worst natural disasters to hit the United States, killing at least 1200 people in the fall of 2005 (Goodnough, 2005). While the City of New Orleans was prepared for an impending disaster,

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its citizens were not prepared for a disaster of such magnitude, much of which was a result of levees that could not withstand the torrential rain and flooding that resulted from the category 5 storm. None of the major decision makers – the city, state or federal governments – were adequately prepared to deal with such a catastrophe resulting in $34 billion in damage alone for insured property. As a result, many non-governmental organizations, including The American Red Cross and The Salvation Army, stepped in to both provide survivor assistance as well as to raise funds to help those affected by this tragedy.

3. Literature review

Relationship management theory (Grunig, 1993) differentiates between the use of symbolic communication and behavioral communication to build relationships with an organization's publics. Symbolic communication is described as what the organization says about itself, whereas behavioral communication extends from an organization's actions. Public relations professionals use a variety of media to build those relationships with their publics. Electronic communication is becoming more and more prevalent, for many reasons, including cost, convenience, and the ability to instantaneously update information about company initiatives. Kelleher's (2001) analysis of public relations managers and technicians found that both use electronic communication equally in their day-to-day activities. Sallot, Porter, and Acosta-Alzuru (2004) found that the Web allowed practitioners to target their communications with their publics more narrowly, as well as monitor online communications about their organizations in order to respond more quickly.

Kent and Taylor (1998) also found that firms can benefit from building relationships with their publics using electronic communication, specifically, the Web. This dialogic relationship (implying that a relationship exists) is ideal because it allows both parties to communicate with each other, create a conversation, and ultimately community. The authors feel that public relations professionals, who are already good at building those close relationships, can use the Web to identify and communicate with those constituents who might be more isolated. They demonstrate that the Web has been good for one-way communication – getting the word out – but not as effective in building dialogue because mechanisms have not been put in place to allow for feedback from constituents in order to build a long-term relationship.

Previous research on Fortune 500 websites has concluded that it is not always easy for external stakeholders to find the information they are looking for about a firm online. Callison (2003) found that the majority of Fortune 500 websites do not have dedicated press rooms where journalists can easily find company information. Callison also found that higher-ranked firms have better information about a firm's operations than lower-ranked firms. Easy access for journalists is important because their jobs are getting more difficult and they rely on the Web more for research and information gathering purposes.

Accessibility is also important for consumers and other important stakeholders to find the information they need about a firm from its website quickly and efficiently. Mitra, Willyard, Platt, and Parsons (2004) found that the clean and uncluttered appearance of a webpage influenced preference for that website. Additionally, users make an immediate first impression about the credibility of the content and their desire to continue a relationship with the organization based on their judgment of the external aesthetics and subsequent usability of the website interface (Tractinsky, Katz, & Ikar, 2000).

The other challenge for a firm is that it is presenting information on its website to multiple publics. Esrock and Leichty's (2000) analysis of Fortune 500 websites found that these sites appealed to at least two or more publics. In addition, they examined the prominence given to a public and/or issue on the corporate homepage. They concluded that if a public is important enough to a firm, then there must be a way to engage that public interactively from the homepage.

Finally, there is the issue of how prominent a firm's social responsibility effort should be on its homepage. Esrock and Leichty (1998) investigated the role of the corporate webpage and how it presented social responsibility issues and found that there were two ways of presenting this issue: the firm either did no harm, or did good deeds. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts are one aspect of how firms can communicate with publics either symbolically or behaviorally. If a firm is serious about its CSR efforts, its publics are more likely to perceive its communication efforts as behavioral communication whereas one-time or inauthentic CSR efforts are more likely to be perceived as symbolic communication efforts (Grunig, 1993).

4. Corporate social responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is defined here a firm's responsiveness to social issues as well as its responsibility for its own ethical behavior (Clark, 2000). There has been debate about the view of the responsibility of organizations (Pinkston & Carroll, 1996), starting with Friedman's (1970) view that a business' only responsibility is to its shareholders. Critical theory, however, views the organization as getting in the way of "the social development of humankind" because of the hegemony that exists between an organization and its publics (Phillingane, 2005). L'Etang (1994) views the issue of CSR from a philosophical viewpoint, wondering if it is ethical. She interviewed public relations practitioners at several U.K. firms and noted that a majority engage in environmental efforts, and began these efforts as a result of public outcry. She found many firms are primarily concerned with their company image, which Grunig (1993) would argue is merely symbolic. She believes that this concern is more morally questionable than if a firm is helping its constituent community, which Grunig (1993) would argue is an example of a behavioral effort. L'Etang (1994) argues that real impact in CSR must have substantial effort behind it in order to appear as more than "window-dressing."

Marketing researchers Lichtenstein, Drumwright, and Braig (2004) used both empirical and experimental research to determine what affects consumers' perceptions of corporate-sponsored donations to non-profit organizations. They found that as consumers identify with organizations, they are likely to support a firm's CSR initiatives, and that this goodwill extends to the non-profits they support, as well. This implied endorsement has implications for the brands that support the Hurricane Katrina victims to understand whether or not it is better for the firm to encourage customers to support The American Red Cross or just to know that the firm donated to The American Red Cross. If the endorsed non-profit does not perform as expected, this could have a negative effect on the corporate CSR effort.

Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) examined how consumers perceive the corporate CSR efforts. They built on prior research that has shown that CSR information can "provide consumers with insight into the company's 'value system'" and that "consumers are more likely to identify with a company when the domain of its CSR efforts is one that they themselves support" (p. 228). Therefore, consumer support of the CSR effort is determined by sensitivity to a firm's CSR effort. Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) found that when consumers go to a corporate website looking for information, they are likely to look for CSR information *prior* to company or product-specific information.

Therefore, the way in which a firm utilizes its website to highlight its CSR efforts can have an impact on public perception of its CSR image and awareness of its CSR efforts. Research on a firm's online CSR efforts can bridge the gap in understanding how firms are utilizing both symbolic and behavioral communication to build long-term relationships with their publics. Due to the nature of dynamic online data (and subsequent analysis), a research question is posed instead of a hypothesis.

5. Research question

How do the InterBrand Top 100 Companies' websites reflect support for Hurricane Katrina victims?

6. Method

This study examined the websites of the Best 100 Global Brands of 2005 (Business Week, August 1, 2005), as designated by InterBrand (www.interbrand.com), to determine how firms use the brand equity on their homepage to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina (see Table 1 for a complete list of brands and their financial contributions). InterBrand, a leading brand value management group, partners with Business Week Magazine each year to analyze leading consumer products firms and prepare a list of the Top 100 Global Brands based on a combination of brand awareness, profits, and market leadership. Previous research on homepages has shown that message placement on the homepage reflects the prominence a firm wishes to convey about a particular issue (Esrock & Leichty, 2000), establishing the homepage as the research condition for this study.

This study will determine if there are differences in a firm's concern with respect to Hurricane Katrina victims based on their symbolic or behavioral communication. Symbolic communication is operationalized as a message on a firm's homepage with an external link to a non-profit agency, such as The American Red Cross or The Salvation Army. This type of message communicates to a constituent that the firm is concerned about the victims

Table 1
2005 InterBrand Top 100 brands

Rank	Brand	Dollars given
1	Coca Cola	5,000,000
2	Microsoft	
3	IBM	
4	GE	22,000,000
5	Intel	
6	Nokia	
7	Disney	2,500,000
8	McDonald's	5,000,000
9	Toyota	5,000,000
10	Marlboro	
11	Mercedes	1,100,000
12	Citi	
13	Hewlett-Packard	3,000,000
14	American Express	1,000,000
15	Gillette	
16	BMW	
17	Cisco	
18	Louis Vuitton	
19	Honda	5,000,000
20	Samsung	
21	Dell	7,000,000
22	Ford	6,000,000
23	Pepsi	2,000,000
24	Nescafe	
25	Merrill Lynch	1,500,000
26	Budweiser	
27	Oracle	
28	Sony	
29	HSBC	250,000
30	Nike	
31	Pfizer	
32	UPS	
33	Morgan Stanley	
34	J.P. Morgan	3,000,000
35	Canon	1,000,000
36	SAP	
37	Goldman Sachs	
38	Google	
39	Kellogg's	
40	Gap (Corporate)	2,000,000
41	Apple	
42	Ikea	1,000,000
43	Novartis	
44	UBS	
45	Siemens	1,000,000
46	Harley-Davidson	1,000,000
47	Heinz	1,000,000
48	MTV	
49	Gucci	
50	Nintendo	
51	Accenture	
52	L'Oreal	100,000
53	Philips	
54	Xerox	800,000
55	eBay	
56	Volkswagen	
57	Wrigley's	

Table 1 (*Continued*)

Rank	Brand	Dollars given
58	Yahoo!	
59	Avon	
60	Colgate	
61	KFC	
62	Kodak	500,000
63	Pizza Hut	
64	Kleenex	
65	Chanel	
66	Nestle	
67	Danone	
68	Amazon.com	
69	Kraft	1,000,000
70	Caterpillar	2,000,000
71	Adidas	
72	Rolex	
73	Motorola	50,000
74	Reuters	
75	BP	10,000,000
76	Porsche	
77	Zara	
78	Panasonic	1,000,000
79	Audi	
80	Duracell	
81	Tiffany & Co.	
82	Hermes	
83	Hertz	
84	Hyundai	
85	Nissan	
86	Hennessy	
87	ING	1,000,000
88	Smirnoff	
89	Cartier	
90	Shell	3,000,000
91	Johnson & Johnson	5,000,000
92	Moet & Chandon	
93	Prada	
94	Bulgari	
95	Armani	
96	Levi's	
97	LG	
98	Nivea	
99	Starbucks	5,000,000
100	Heineken	
	Total	105,800,000

of Hurricane Katrina and wants to support the efforts of those who directly help the victims and also directs a constituent to do so. Behavioral communication is operationalized as not only a message on a firm's homepage, but links from that homepage that provide internal links to information about what the firm is doing to assist the victims either through a cash donation or through donations of time, products or services, employee involvement, as well as other external links to other non-profit agencies, such as The American Red Cross or The Salvation Army.

Each brand's homepage was assessed for (1) whether or not a message about Hurricane Katrina is found on its homepage, (2) whether that link is an internal or external link (as explicated above), and (3) an evaluation of the internal or external link. If the link is internal, the content was evaluated to determine what the firm is actually doing (behavioral) to help the victims and how their act(s) of social responsibility are portrayed. If the link is external

(presumably symbolic), it was analyzed for where the link ends (e.g., The American Red Cross, The Salvation Army, etc.).

Finally, the information on each website was assessed to determine if there is room for a dialogic response (Kent & Taylor, 1998) in the form of customer feedback, e-mail links or a blog. This assessment would ultimately be the most effective way to increase both customer loyalty and long-term customer relationships with their constituents.

A content analysis was done of all 100 websites from September 18 to 24, 2005, after Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005. Each website was coded for:

1. Whether or not a message about Hurricane Katrina is found on its U.S. homepage, including the words Hurricane Katrina, support the victims of Hurricane Katrina, or some type of indication that the firm is supporting the victims of Hurricane Katrina.
2. Whether that link is an internal or external link (as explicated above), or both.
3. An evaluation of the internal or external link. If the link is internal, what the firm is actually doing (behavioral) to help the victims and how their act(s) of social responsibility are portrayed; if the link is external (presumably symbolic), where the link ends (e.g., The American Red Cross, The Salvation Army, etc.).
4. The dollar amount given by that firm to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

7. Results

Out of the Top 100 brands, 51 had messages about Hurricane Katrina directly accessible on their homepage. On 49 homepages, there was no symbolic communication, not even recognition that Hurricane Katrina had occurred in the United States. Granted, some of these brands, such as Samsung, are not U.S. brands, but others such as Toyota and Nokia, which are also not U.S. brands, did mention Hurricane Katrina on their U.S. homepages.

Out of the 51 homepages with links about Hurricane Katrina from their homepages, 44 (or 86%) were internal links, keeping the readers within the corporate website, linking to a news release or internal webpage about the company's involvement in providing products or services, noting employee involvement, as well as highlighting their financial donation to the victims of the hurricane. The remaining seven (13.7%) links were external links that led directly to an external non-profit agency, encouraging readers to make donations directly to that agency helping victims of the hurricane.

Of those with an internal link, 23 did not provide an external link to any other non-profit agency. Of the remaining 21 firms that did provide an external link to other relief agencies, two used The American Red Cross logo on their internal link, but it was not functional during the coding timeframe, meaning when you clicked on it, it did not go to The American Red Cross website. The others linked to a variety of agencies including The American Red Cross, The Salvation Army, state recovery efforts, NBC's Telemundo, relief concerts, supplier efforts, the Dell Foundation, World Vision, the Second Harvest Food Bank, F.E.M.A., the Bush–Clinton Katrina Fund, AmericaCares, the Points of Light Foundation, and 1-800-volunteer.org. The variety of philanthropic organizations highlights the breadth of CSR involvement and choices by those brands in their communities.

Of those 44 firms with internal links describing their efforts to aid the victims of Hurricane Katrina, 33 provided information detailing the products, services, and employee involvement occurring in the aftermath of the hurricane. These efforts ranged from providing food and water products, to financial services, to auctioning off a Harley Davidson, to providing the profits from sales of their existing products (see Fig. 1).

Finally, this research examined how much money those Top 100 brands gave in response to the human crisis. As of September 24, 2005, those 51 firms that had information on their homepages indicating their support for the victims of Hurricane Katrina had pledged support of $105,800,000. One of the ethical dilemmas of CSR is whether or not a firm has responsibility to anyone other than its shareholders (Friedman, 1970). In the case of Hurricane Katrina, it appears that these firms made a strategic decision that their corporate social responsibility was to their employees, neighbors, and fellow Americans in the Gulf Coast. As Table 2 shows, those firms ranked in the top 25% of brand value pledged more than 50% of the total funds to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. These firms communicate through their leadership giving that their CSR efforts provide help, and not just hype.
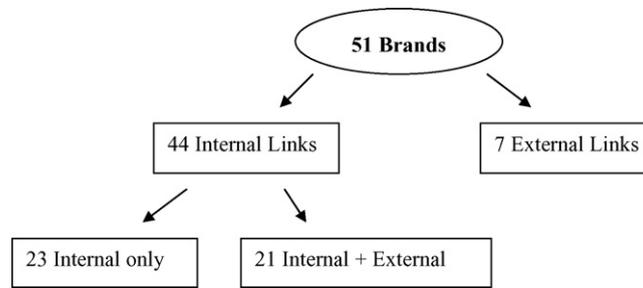
Fig. 1. Hurricane Katrina mentioned on the Homepage.

Table 2
Giving by brand rank

Brand rank	Dollars given	Percent of total giving (%)
1–25	66,100,000	62.4
26–50	10,250,000	9.6
51–75	14,450,000	13.65
76–100	15,000,000	14
Total	105,800,000	

8. Discussion

The Top 100 brands already have substantial consumer awareness and can help highlight both the need to provide relief for human suffering as well as to demonstrate their efforts to provide that relief. Just over 50% of these firms used their brand equity to encourage others to give, as well as to highlight their CSR initiatives in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. While this examination of CSR initiatives occurred during a time of crisis, these firms can use their brand equity during times of no crisis as well, to help alleviate human suffering or to help the communities in which they live and work.

Additionally, firms can transfer their brand awareness into *CSR awareness*. This approach can potentially become a selling tool for firms because consumers who feel tied to a firm's CSR efforts are more likely to purchase that firm's goods and services (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). A firm can then take its symbolic CSR communication efforts and transfer them into a behavioral CSR communication strategy for developing long-term relationships with important customers. Loyal customers have been proven to provide above-average returns for firms over time (Reichheld, 2001). CSR awareness can become a competitive advantage for a firm.

Interestingly enough, the aid did not end with this analysis. As an example, Cisco Systems highlighted the need with a link to The American Red Cross immediately after the Hurricane, with no information about any financial donation. On October 25th, however (after the coding was completed), Cisco officials announced a $40 million investment in the Gulf Coast region over three years to invest in the education infrastructure. Cisco CEO John Chambers was reported to have met a woman from Mississippi who pleaded with him at a chance meeting to return to his company and tell his employees of the devastation they had all suffered. The story tells that he was so moved that he not only pledged Cisco funds, but his own (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

In addition, it seemed odd that three firms, Disney, Starbucks and Sony did not show their support on the homepage, given their propensity towards CSR. Information about their giving, however, appeared several levels down from the homepage. Esrock and Leichty (2000) suggest if a public is important enough to engage, that the engagement must be from the homepage. For these firms, then, their misuse of their homepages results in their inability to highlight their CSR initiatives. A firm may not engage in CSR merely for image building, but as long as it is going to the effort to pledge millions of dollars in financial assistance, it might as well use the homepage to advance its image with its publics at the same time. Also, it is interesting to note that two months after the original analysis was conducted, many of the top financial donors did not have any information about Hurricane Katrina on their homepages. After giving

$5,000,000 or more, it would seem important to extend the goodwill of that generosity as long as possible, even if it meant leaving a CSR link on the homepage.

Finally, the webpages were examined to see if any companies used them to build a dialogic response with their publics, as Esrock and Leichty (1998) suggest would be a positive strategy. During the time of analysis, only one firm was using a form of two-way communication to carry on a dialogue about Hurricane Katrina: Siemens. This German-based firm not only gave $1,000,000, but set up a blog where employees could talk to each other and to management.

9. Limitations and future research

While this study was limited by the time frame in which it was conducted, it was also prompted because of the crisis that occurred. Future research on the prominence of CSR communication on the homepage should consider examining CSR efforts that are not tied to such a timely event. Another limitation is the use of the Top 100 Global Brands. This approach does not take into consideration what other firms, both large and small, have done and continue to do in their CSR efforts on their homepages and in response to community crises. Future research should consider different firm sizes to examine the differences between large and small, public, and private CSR efforts.

Future research should examine the links between brands and non-profits, and what messages that approach might send to the public, as all seven corporate websites with external links led directly to The American Red Cross, implying strong brand support for that non-profit agency. If a consumer identifies with a brand, this brand support for the non-profit might be enough to encourage the consumer to support the non-profit as well, similar to a celebrity endorsement. Interestingly enough, however, The American Red Cross received some negative press during the hurricane aftermath for its lack of responsiveness, including the resignation of its Executive Director (NY Times Editorial, 2005; Terhune, 2005), and The Salvation Army, in contrast, received positive attention for its better use of funds and personnel to aid the victims in a swift and professional manner. This negative publicity for The American Red Cross could have a backlash effect on the brand itself.

In addition, future research should consider the role of two-way communication tools on a corporate website. Online tools such as surveys, blogs, or hypertext e-mail can be positive methods for engaging consumers in conversation, thus planting seeds of community.

Finally, future research should investigate the level of trust stakeholders have in brands with and without significant CSR initiatives to determine what, if any, affects those CSR messages have on brand trust. With the billions of dollars spent on building and maintaining brand awareness each year, firms will want to utilize the prime real estate of their home webpage to maximize their CSR awareness the way they spend money to maximize their brand awareness. Building long-term relationships through behavioral communication provides mutual benefits for firms and their publics.

Acknowledgment

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