

# Relationship and the Internet

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In recent decades, “public relations” has fallen from favor and “corporate communications,” “marketing communications” or similar terms have taken over to describe the function. If conventional wisdom about the internet holds true, department titles should change back to emphasize interactive communications and relationships between individuals and organizations

Today, there is citizen, or participatory, journalism. There are blogs with comment sections and alternative web-based media where individuals report and discuss news. There is a blossoming of “media democracy” to make media more responsible to readers and readers more visible to reporters. There are tools to get individuals involved with companies and companies responsive to consumers.

But, has it increased the depth of relationships between organizations and citizens? There is evidence the internet has yet to change existing relationships among organizations and individuals all that much.

## What is relationship?

Go to a dictionary and check the definition for “relationship.” You may find an ambiguous explanation, such as “the condition or fact of being related (American Heritage Dictionary.) But, what in an organizational context constitutes “being related.” The root of relationship is “logical or natural association” as the dictionary puts it or “connectedness.” Linkage becomes complicated because some claim there is no relationship between an individual and an organization in the sense of people relating to one another. That is, one may relate to a person in an organization but not the organization itself. However, that view is narrow. Branding by its nature attempts to forge connections between what a company and/or product or service stands for and those who use and/or consume them. Companies seek to position themselves correctly to those who have expectations of them through logos, trademarks, copyrighted words and concepts. Companies try through advertising and/or publicity to define the 5 Ws of existence (Who, what, where, why, when and how) and their business’ importance to economic and civic environments. If a company lives up to its brand and consumers accept it, there is a relationship. As in all relationships, association is voluntary.

The internet factors into relationship because it extends “connectedness” and “association” beyond geography and time as all secondary media have done.

Further, the internet's interactive capability allows "association" and "connectedness" to be bidirectional as the telegraph, telephone, radio and television have done. The principal difference between the internet and those media is the vast reserves of information and potential means of "association" and "connectedness" the internet brings. Other than the telephone, the internet is the closest medium to ubiquity in the developed world.

Because of its sheer size and depth, it is impossible for all people to use even a small part of the internet at any one time. Thus, users self-segment their connectedness and associations online. They choose, if they wish to do so, their own logical or natural associations. Each person can connect widely or narrowly given constraints of time to eat, sleep and attend to business. The internet's ability to transcend geography, time and artificial barriers is what has made it powerful and serendipitous by comparison to other media. One never quite knows who or how far a communication extends through the internet's global reach. Early users and readers of the author's web site [online-pr.com](http://online-pr.com) ([www.online-pr.com](http://www.online-pr.com)) were PR practitioners in India, a country I have never visited. From a business perspective, Indian practitioners present no immediate worth to me. On the other hand, if my aim is to achieve connectedness beyond business, global reach is advantageous and Indian PR practitioners are welcome – indeed, valued. They provide another view of public relations from the perspective of their cultures – a view US-centric practitioners would not recognize. Enlarging the body of knowledge about PR is useful to everyone and worth the association.

The boundaries of logical association between an individual and organization are expectations brought to the relationship. One segments by self-interest. If a relationship is based on economic transactions, one expects sufficient value from wealth handed over to an individual or organization. If the relationship is based on service, one expects attention for value transmitted. Attention may be a hovering attendant in a clothing store or continuous service in the home without a hovering repairman when plugging into a wall socket or using plumbing. If the expectation is based on shared beliefs, one expects support for those beliefs in communication. Value has a wide range of relevance, as does relationship. One expects a food item to be sanitary, even though it costs pennies. One expects an auto to work as advertised, especially since one pays tens of thousands of dollars for it.

The argument is that internet users, although they have the means for choosing associations through the internet, may have few reasons for doing so, if their need for relationship is fulfilled otherwise. That is, the internet's offer of interactive communication and connectedness may be a redundancy that many users don't need or want. Prior means of relationship are sufficient. Particularly if one defines interactive relationship as two-way communication, there is evidence the internet has not yet replaced other media, such as the telephone, the growth of which has been extraordinary.

## Talking to a vacuum

Consider talking back. The internet's easy interactivity makes it a fundamental tool for conversation among individuals. Many media provide e-mail addresses for reporters. Blogs have comment boxes. Web sites provide ways to submit e-mail messages or talk live through internet messaging. The ability to start one's own web site, bulletin board or blog is so easy with the internet that tens of millions have done so. In many ways, the internet allows individuals to be soapbox orators. Anyone can go to its *Bughouse Square*<sup>1</sup> and begin speaking.

However, *talking at* publics is still what most journalists and PR practitioners do rather than *conversing with* as a few reporters have achieved<sup>2</sup>. Anyone who has a blog can tell you the actual number of individuals to whom one relates through conversation is small. Having written a blog for a number of years, I can testify that I talk *at* others more than *with* them, as I would prefer to do. Internet pundits forget that frequently one party isn't interested in communicating to another on the internet. That is, many people prefer to remain silent and unconnected. Internet experts also forget responders may be self-appointed "experts" and a subset of the individuals one wishes to reach. Their "expert" opinions may not reflect the majority, but they are noisier than the majority and create an impression they are more important.

In the early years of electronic communications – the 1980s – before general internet availability, there were efforts to create forums for interest groups to relate to one another across geographic and time zones. The biggest forum for public relations was on CompuServe, once the largest electronic medium but now a shadow and part of AOL. The PR section was called PRSIG (Public Relations Special Interest Group). It started bravely with growing participation, but ultimately stalled with a small number of individuals who spoke to themselves. Finally, it was put out of existence. This was the first time I witnessed the demise of such groups, but it wasn't the last. What I learned is that a fraction of potential professional communicators actually respond in interactive communications. Most skim for information or don't look at all. Even high-traffic web and bulletin board sites have but a fraction of their readers participate in commentary. Think, for example, of Slashdot.org or Fark.com or Rantburg.com. If professional communicators see little value in interactivity, what about the rest of the citizenry? It could be generational. That is, the younger generation participates more. Or, as likely, it could be a matter of time. Who has hours to sit in front of a terminal and type responses to others' opinions?

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<sup>1</sup> BugHouse Square was the name given to Washington Square Park in Chicago where during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries soapbox orators would gather and deliver their views. BugHouse refers to a mental institution.

<sup>2</sup> See the Live Online section of [www.WashingtonPost.com](http://www.WashingtonPost.com)

## Role Playing

Even when there is conversation through the internet, there may not be a relationship because it could be role playing, not unlike Second Life (<http://secondlife.com/>), as my friend, Peter Shinbach, points out. Role-playing has been recognized since the early days of the internet as a distortion of relationship building. There are *flamers* who are more interested in venting than relating and *trolls* who seek to provoke conversation by deliberately posting controversial messages. Both were disruptive to bulletin boards before the web came to prominence. Role-playing may be a kind of relationship, but it is a relationship built on dissembling— the avatar, which may or may not describe accurately the person behind the online appearance, and the poseur, men playing women or older women passing themselves off as younger. So too, marketers have created phony blogs anonymously that, once revealed, destroy connections built with readers because readers feel they have been fleeced.

If one does succeed in engaging another in conversation, what has one gained in terms of logical association? Conversation doesn't mean a PR practitioner has established a relationship with a key member of a target audience. One individual does not necessarily stand for a universe of individuals with similar characteristics. On the other hand, if the one person is a known influential, that person could be sufficient. A question one should ask is whether the internet provides entrée to the influentials one wishes to reach?

## Passivity and influence

Is passivity bad or a harmful diminution of the internet's interactive capabilities? Passive observation may still yield benefit to a person who is talking *at* rather than *with* others. After all, that is what traditional media have done for centuries. A reader who elects to remain silent may agree with what one writes and use it to guide a point of view or action. This, then, is influence, if not association. The difficulty is that a message sender is less able to verify either influence or the possibility of nascent relationship. Further, many readers neither agree nor disagree with what is written. They are skimmers, gathering ideas that blend into a larger understanding of the world about them. What any one person writes is less influential than the totality of ideas, facts and opinion from diverse individuals with multiple viewpoints. So why bother?

A truism answers that question. Failing to communicate ensures failure in influence or relationships. One may talk to a seeming vacuum, but a relationship is guaranteed to fail only when one stops communicating. Witness, for example, writers who stop making blog entries. They lose readers and any possibility of influence. On the other hand, they might never have had readers in the first place, although the internet is better in letting one know who shows up than other

media. (That, however, doesn't tell one how serious or committed those readers are.)

## Technology and relationship

The internet's technology seems to support connectedness through click counting, tracking and linking, but in many ways the promise of the technology still exceeds performance. Linking and link passing, for example, may not be about relationship. Just because I place a link from your site or blog onto my site or blog does not constitute connectedness beyond technology. I may rarely, or never, click on the link and rarely or never visit your site. The link may be there as a convenience for others. The author's web site, [online-pr.com](http://online-pr.com), is built on that premise. It carries hundreds of links to help PR practitioners find information they need. It doesn't seek to build relationships with any one practitioner. Further, if I request you to carry my link or vice-versa, it may mean we are attempting to build traffic between our sites through affiliation. Affiliation doesn't necessarily rise to relationship. On the other hand, linking can signify relationship, if there is intent by both parties to support each other's communications. I.e., I'm linking to you because I agree with you and what you have to say.

The number of links to a site doesn't constitute relationship either, although it might constitute influence. That is the premise that Google is built on with its algorithm that ranks sites by links to them. On the other hand, there is an industry and plenty of chicanery in manipulating Google links to get higher search rankings. That written, click tracking and linking may be a prelude to a relationship. Frequent visitations to a site provide a reason for outreach to the visitor to initiate association.

## Same old, same old?

Has the internet changed the nature of relationship for PR practitioners, or is relationship the "same old thing" in a new package? To answer this question, one must accept what the internet is. The internet is a tool, a medium with incredible power to reach billions of people. It does not guarantee association, but it extends far beyond other media in opening the potential for relationship. My friend, Peter Shinbach, commenting on this added the following:

*What the Internet does is to extend interpersonal relationships beyond an individual's immediate physical, geographic and familial environment. It also provides a means to complement and supplement existing relationships.*

The internet moves the chance for relationship from local to global, but the communicator still has work left to build relationships. The marketing acronym of AIDA (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action and Reinforcement) still applies with the internet. If one has low awareness, there is little chance of relationship

building and use of direct means, such as face-to-face communication is preferable. If one has high commitment to action, the internet helps guide and reinforce action. (See illustration). What this means is that PR practitioners may use traditional marketing concepts to determine if relationship is possible with target individuals and whether it is cost-effective to try. There isn't yet a different formula for establishing relationships through the internet.

On the other hand, the internet allows for self-driven connectedness rather than marketing-driven segmentation. That is, a web site, blog or other internet site is open to all passersby and one may stop, if one wishes. Practically speaking, marketers increase general awareness of a web site and allow consumers to connect and identify themselves and their state of relationship. Marketers then classify visitors by each individual's movement through a site and response to appeals. None of this means, however, that one has achieved an interactive relationship with site visitors. Just because Amazon.com uses cookies to tailor its site to my interests doesn't mean I will buy from Amazon more frequently or take any of its suggestions.

Should we worry about building relationships online then? Should communications continue to talk *at* rather than talk *with* targeted individuals? The answer to that depends on the kind of target audience involved – one that is apt to engage in a synchronous, *talking with* relationship or one interested in an asynchronous *talking at* stance. In reality, most PR practitioners will continue to talk *at* because a majority of consumers are not action-oriented. Talking *at* is what the public wants: Consumers prefer to keep most of their relationships at a distance until such time it serves their interests to be closer. As result, there are few two-way relationships among the general internet populace. This may change as social networking, exemplified by services such as Second Life, MySpace, del.ici.ous and their peers mature. But, for now, most organizations use web sites to tell you primarily who they are and what they do. They want to expose and make aware. Involvement is a complication in the process of content transfer from message sender to message receiver.

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Illustration:

