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# Can you see the writing on my wall?
# A content analysis of the Fortune 50's Facebook social networking sites

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*Currently, there are more than 45 million active user groups on Facebook and more than 10 million users become fans of Pages each day (compared to 4 million users in March 2009). While public relations research has investigated how organizations are using blogs and websites, few have analyzed social networking sites such as Facebook. A content analysis of 55 Facebook member and fan pages was conducted to determine how the 2008 Fortune 50 companies used Facebook. The sites were analyzed to determine how many "fans" an organization had, what organizational information was included, use of photos and videos, use of discussion boards, level of engagement, whether the site generated feedback, and whether there was a discussion of community relationships or social responsibility. Overall, most companies in the Fortune 50 were taking advantage of the opportunities of Facebook, but were not utilizing this medium to its fullest extent. While some corporations posted news releases and mission statements, most organizations were not using the site to disseminate news and information about the organization, both internally and externally. Finally, there needs to be more in terms of engagement and relationship-building strategies, as well as incentives to encourage users to revisit the sites.*

## INTRODUCTION

The study of social media is one of the most popular research topics in public relations today. Weber Shandwick and KRC research (2007) surveyed Fortune 2000 companies and found 69% currently used social networking sites, while 37% planned to use more of them over the next five years. Similarly, social media Web sites, such as Facebook, are not only becoming commonplace in large corporations and nonprofits, but are also frequently utilized by journalists, thereby demonstrating its importance in public relations (Melcrum, 2007; Nursing Standard, 2007; Poynter Institute, 2008).

One such social networking site that has exploded in terms of growth is Facebook. According to the Facebook Web site in September 2009, there were more than 300 million active users (those who logged on in the last 30 days), a 70% increase from only six months earlier. Currently, there are more than 45 million active user groups on the site and more than 10 million users become fans of pages each day

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(compared to 4 million users in March 2009). The fastest growing demographic is users 35 years and older, and more than 6 billion minutes are spent on Facebook each day worldwide. Most organizations are reaching existing and future publics through the use of member pages, fan pages, and friend requests. While research in public relations has investigated how organizations are using blogs and Web sites, few have analyzed social networking sites such as Facebook. This paper analyzed member and fan pages of Facebook to determine how corporations are using them in terms of relationship maintenance, information dissemination, and engagement.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The nature of public relations and how organizations engage their publics has changed a great deal in the past several years thanks to the Internet. Pan and Xu (2009) contend the ability to use the Internet effectively is a basic requirement for organizations to survive in a competitive market. Moreover, the uses of Twitter and Facebook have exponentially increased and impacted how public relations does business as evidenced in such social media crises experienced by Skittles, Motrin, and Dominoes Pizza. Wright and Hinson (2009) wrote, “It’s an understatement to suggest that social media have had a huge impact on the practice of public relations since the first weblogs, or blogs, appeared more than a dozen years ago” (p. 2).

### Web Sites and Blogs

Past public relations research has studied the influence of Web sites and blogs primarily in the areas of engagement and relationship maintenance. Most research has found organizations are not using controlled media to its fullest potential. Using Hon and J. E. Grunig’s relationship scale, Jo and Kim (2003) found that interactivity and multimedia-oriented Web sites do have a significant positive effect on relationship building and reputation, especially when that interactivity is high. The authors did note that even though the medium may enhance the relationship, simply relying on it does not guarantee a “good relationship” (p. 217). Moreover, Jo (2005) cautioned users that while online public relations may save money and time, the quality and credibility of information is the most important aspect in regards to relationship building.

Regarding Fortune 500 companies, a 2007 study found only 37 of the Fortune 500 companies maintained corporate blogs, based on a Web site list claiming to offer an exhaustive list of Fortune 500 blogs (Cho, 2007). Of the companies that did have corporate blogs, Cho found most had interactive features incorporating positivity (defined as the presence of multimedia), openness (defined as having a comment function), assurance (defined as providing policy statements), and social networking building (defined as offering blog rolls), while none employed an application of access (defined as having contact information). Similarly, Ki and Hon (2006) examined Fortune 500 Web sites and found openness (defined as having public relations materials online) was the most frequently employed relationship maintenance strategy. Most of the time, however, only one-way communication was employed in this strategy. Few of the sites

studied actually employed relationship building tasks on the sites, such as sharing of tasks and networking.

Other studies have analyzed dialogue and interactivity on the web, or how to engage with publics and respond to their needs (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). In an analysis of design responsiveness on Web sites, Kent et al. found membership organizations compared to environmental watchdog organizations were more likely to identify their membership bases, provide information on joining the organization, and solicit donations (thereby engaging in two-way communication). Weblogs were also found to include dialogic features and have a potential for relationship building (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). Cho (2007) suggested blogs should be used to engage in two-way symmetrical public relations, by allowing blogs to have comment functions to promote openness, and to offer blog rolls to promote social networking. However, merely allowing users to post comments to blogs doesn't necessarily engage in relationship building.

**Social networking**

Some public relations researchers have suggested the benefits of forming and building relationships on social networking sites. According to Kent et al. (2003), online communication allows individuals to discover shared interests or unite together for a cause. While this may be true for some forms of media, most studies regarding Facebook have found people use Facebook to connect with their offline relationships, and not to make or engage in new relationships (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) discussed how Facebook helped users maintain relationships as they change offline communities, and suggested colleges and universities should capitalize on this medium to maintain alumni relationships when students graduate.

Research has also found Facebook is beneficial for users to maintain a large, diffuse network of friends, and to enhance their "social capital," defined as the benefit one receives from one's relationship with other people (Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Ellison et al., 2007). This is especially true for users with low self-esteem (Steinfield et al., 2008). Hazelton (2009) found while most students (57%) use Facebook to have fun, 30% do use the site to build professional relationships. However, most research investigating the uses of Facebook has been conducted with student samples to determine how they communicate with their friends, and not organizations. As formerly mentioned, the college student demographic has been replaced by users 35 and older as the fastest growing demographic.

Only a handful of studies have investigated Facebook use in organizations. An analysis of nonprofit Facebook profiles found most organizations analyzed posted a description of the organization, but many did not provide the mission statement, did not distribute organizational news, and did not provide methods for how supporters can be involved in the organization (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Waters et al.

concluded when organizations "create a profile and then abandon it, they will create only minimal exposure for the organization, and it could turn off potential supporters if they witness inactivity on the site" (p. 105). Therefore, a boomerang effect may be created.

For the past several years, Wright and Hinson (2009) have released an annual study investigating how public relations practitioners are using social media. One finding was practitioners, more often than not, used sites such as Facebook to find out about news in general and even PR or communication-related news, even though they're still heavily reliant on traditional sources for information. The authors discussed how social media have changed the public relations landscape:

> The development of various new technologies has significantly empowered a wide variety of strategic publics by giving them dynamic new media many are using to communicate effectively with a variety of internal and external audiences. Social media are changing the way organizations communicate with strategic publics such as employees, customers, stockholders, communities, government, and other stakeholders (p. 25).

While some organizations appear to be embracing social media, others still have a great deal of work to do. Research indicated some organizations have the tools for promoting their organization, but need to work on the strategy behind it (Solis, 2008).

**Corporate Social Responsibility**

Corporate social responsibility is steadily growing in importance in the public relations literature. Regardless if it's called social responsibility or other frequently used terms such as citizenship or social performance, much of the activities are similar. One definition that encompasses many aspects is Wood's (1991), who defined it as , "a business organization's configuration of principles of social responsibility, processes of social responsiveness, and policies, programs, and observable outcomes as they relate to the firm's societal relationships" (p. 693).

Research in public relations has investigated whether organizations are taking advantages of opportunities to discuss their civic behavior on controlled media, such as Web sites and blogs. Capriotti and Moreno (2007) conducted a survey of corporate Web sites and found nearly 70% have a section devoted to issues relating to corporate social responsibility. They explained, "The presence of a specific CSR section implies an explicit recognition of the issue, which serves as an indicator of the recognition and importance of CSR for the enterprises on their corporate Web sites (p. 89).

Similarly, Pan and Xu (2009) randomly selected Fortune 500 companies and found most U.S. corporations valued social responsibility online not only in terms of social and environmental issues, but also overall contributions to society. Esrock and Leichty (1998) found similar results 10 years earlier in a systematic sample with more than half of the sampled Web sites posting materials relating to community/civic

involvement, ecology/environment, and education. Most information on the sites related to information dissemination and "top-down/information push" communication with few sites engaging proactively with publics (p. 317).

Considering the tremendous impact of social media on public relations, how corporations are using Facebook is important. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to analyze how corporations are using Facebook, what information the company posted on its sites, how it engaged with its publics, and whether it integrated social responsibility activities on its pages.

## METHODOLOGY

A quantitative content analysis of Facebook member and fan pages was conducted between February 21, 2009 and March 7, 2009 to determine how the 2008 Fortune 50 companies use Facebook. Neuendorf (2002) defined content analysis as "a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method, and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented" (p. 10).

A Facebook page was defined as a "public profile that enables you to share your business and products with Facebook users" (Facebook, 2009). When this study was conducted, there were two page options: member and fan. This has since been changed, and while there are fan and member groups, they more closely resemble a person's profile. Both member and fan pages allow users to posts logos, wall posts, discussion boards, videos, minifeeds, links, and photos. One of the main differences between member and fan pages is who can post the content. The member page is officer controlled and the person who oversees the Facebook page is listed on the site. A fan page doesn't display who developed or who controls access to the site. Therefore, the only way a visitor would know who controls the site is if the individual self-disclosed their affiliation. For instance, Scott Monty of Ford Motor Company identified himself on Ford's fan page, which had more than 25,000 fans in March 2009. On McKesson's site, visitors with questions were directed to an email address in the corporate communications department: corpcommunications@mckesson.com. Fans do not necessarily control the Facebook page, and in some cases as evidenced above, the corporation developed and maintained the fan page. Fans can post photos (sometimes not flattering), and if the corporation controls the page, then it may choose to sanitize (or remove) the photos.

This study analyzed Facebook pages available for public view to determine how many "fans" a corporation had, what corporate information was included on the site, the use of photos and videos, the use of discussion boards, the level of engagement, whether the site generated feedback, and whether there was a discussion of community relations or social responsibility.

Some Fortune 50 companies did not qualify because the groups were internship-related (usually a closed group) or "conversation on" groups, etc. In addition, some of

the groups had sites for their products, but not the corporation itself, such as CVS Caremark. Dissolved companies (such as Lehman Bros) or others bought out by other companies were disqualified from this study. Therefore, the following companies were excluded from this study : ConocoPhillips (#5), Berkshire Hathaway (#11), American International Group (#13), Valero Energy (#16), Cardinal Health (#19), CVS Caremark (#24), AmeriSource Bergen (#28), Wellpoint (#33), Wachovia (#38), Dow Chemical (#43).

One criterion for inclusion was the member page and/or fan page had to have at least 100 members or fans. The member or fan page with the most fans or members was coded. If a corporation had a member and a fan page with at least 100 participants, then both pages were analyzed. Facebook fan or member page was the unit of analysis and a total of 55 pages were coded. Twenty-seven of these were member sites and 28 were fan sites. The six sites with the highest number of members or fans were:

1. Target (#31): 191,071
2. Verizon (#17): 154,420
3. Microsoft (#44): 68,408
4. Ford (#7): 25,106
5. Dell (#34): 24,757
6. Costco (#29): 19,459

To find the pages of the Fortune 50 corporations, a search was conducted. Some issues experienced in the coding process dealt with how Facebook allowed users to sort search results. Once the corporation was found, the site with the most participants in the first five search pages of the results was coded. The page also had to be available for public view. Another disadvantage was Facebook doesn't allow the user to sort the pages in the search results by the number of members.

Fifty-two (94.5%) out of 55 sites were positive. Three negative member pages were coded since they had a high number of participants. In negative member pages, participants were fairly active and as expected, most posts were negative. All three were member pages and included "Anti-Walmart (2791 members)," "Boycott Exxon Mobil (212 members)," and "Verizon Sucks (325 members)." Overall, most of the member sites were devoted to current employees, employees at specific stores, former employees, interns (most were closed to public access), and customers. Nineteen out of 28 member sites had one officer who controlled the page; the remaining nine had two or more officers. Employees (n = 12) most frequently controlled these sites, followed by students (n = 8) who ran all three of the negative pages (see Table 1).

Table 1 *Position of Officers*

| *Positions (N = 27)* | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Employee | 12 | 44.4 |
| Student | 8 | 29.6 |
| Unknown | 6 | 22.2 |
| Competitor | 1 | 3.7 |

## RESULTS

### Information Dissemination

The 55 Facebook pages were coded to determine what was posted or published about the company. Fifty-eight percent of the pages posted an official logo, while 42% did not. Only one corporation, Procter & Gamble, had a disclaimer on the site about its use:

> The Procter & Gamble Facebook page is intended to be a fun space for you and other fans. Please note that The Procter & Gamble Company (P&G) do not necessarily endorse nor are responsible for the accuracy of information, opinions,claims, or advice shared here by P&G fans.
>
> P&G strongly encourages users of this page to respect fellow community members and the posting guidelines of Facebook, and to understand that P&G reserves the right to remove postings that are:
>
> ● (a) abusive, defamatory, or obscene;
>
> ● (b) fraudulent, deceptive or misleading;
>
> ● (c) in violation of any intellectual property right of another;
>
> ● (d) in violation of any law or regulation, or
>
> ● (e) otherwise offensive, graphically or in tone.
>
> Anyone repeatedly posting material that falls into the above categories will be banned from participating in this Fan Page. Again, this space is here for us to all enjoy – let's respectfully have fun here!

Corporations also have the ability to post news updates on their Facebook pages. Eighty percent of the pages did not have any recent news posted. If a corporation posted information on its site or added material to its site such as photos, articles, etc., an update may appear in the minifeed. Only 24% of pages had a minifeed

with recently updated material, which indicated corporations were not updating their materials.

**Wall Posts**

One of the most frequently accessed areas on a Facebook page is the user's wall. According to Facebook, (2009):

> The Wall is the center of your profile for adding new things like photos, videos, notes, and other application content. The Publisher at the top of your Wall allows you to update your status and share content through many different kinds of Wall posts. You can also add content to your friends' Walls by using the Publisher box that appears at the top of their profile.

A wall post is a blurb that can be posted by anyone visiting the site and in this case, postings were from current employees, former employees, fans, potential job applicants, solicitors, consumers happy with a product, consumers complaining, a headhunters for the competing corporations, or information seekers, such as journalists. Wall posts can be publicly viewed by anyone visiting the site and the site administrator has the ability to remove wall posts. The items coded included: the overall number of wall posts; whether the poster could be identified as an employee; and the date range of the posts. Finally, the most recent 40 postings on the wall were coded as being positive, neutral, or negative in tone. Regarding the overall number of wall posts, Verizon had the most (1,620), followed by IBM (469), Ford (422), Walmart (399), and Costco (333).

Considering the tone of the postings, the overall average was 12 positive posts for the last 40 coded. Ford had the highest number of positive wall posts (n = 40), followed closely by General Electric (n = 39), and Chevron (n = 38). The overall average number of negative wall posts was 4.25 (out of 40). The corporations with the highest number of negative postings came from the three negative member pages coded: Verizon (n = 39); Walmart (n = 33); and Exxon-Mobil (n = 23).

Employees contributed, on average, to 11 out of the 40 wall posts. A GE employee site had the highest number of employee wall posts (n = 40), followed by Chevron (n = 38), and Lowe's (n = 38). The date range of the postings was also coded. The five oldest wall posts were all posted in one month of each other from July to August 2006 and included respectively, Kroger, Boeing, Morgan Stanley, Bank of America, and McKesson.

Overall, there appeared to be several reasons why people post on walls. Some were current employees who identified where they worked and for how long, while some were former employees reconnecting with past coworkers. Headhunters posted jobs at competing corporations on the wall, and job seekers posted they were looking for employment. Customers having product problems, especially in the technology field, would post their issues on the wall hoping to find solutions. Janet at Dell was one of the few corporate representatives who posted suggestions and contact information for

customers to help resolve their issues. Journalists also posted on pages requesting interviews.

**Discussion boards**

Similar to a traditional web discussion board, member and fan pages also have discussion boards where anyone can post and reply. Discussion boards allow corporations to engage with their publics and provide requested information or answers to issues. The date range as well as the overall number of discussion board topics was calculated. The first corporation to have a discussion board posting was Microsoft in February 2006. In August 2006, Boeing became the second corporation to have a discussion posted. Within a month, three corporations had discussions posted and included respectively: Bank of America, Walmart, and IBM. In terms of the number of discussion board topics, Microsoft dominated the other companies with 1,097, followed distantly by Target (n = 206) and Verizon (n = 158). On average, corporations had 33.91 discussion board topics. Discussion board topics may also be deleted by the site officer or administrator, but unlike wall posts, the deletion leaves a "discussion board item deleted" note and the date in the empty space.

**Social Responsibility**

Using Wood's (1991) definition as the basis, social responsibility was coded as the presence of community-based or volunteer activities outside the scope of the corporation itself. The researcher looked for evidence of this within the minifeed, recent news, wall posts, discussion board, and photos. If there was some presence of a type of activity relating to social responsibility, such as a blood drive or Dell representing the RED campaign, then the page was coded as having social responsibility present. Only 12 (21.8%) of the Facebook pages had some sort of reference to social responsibility, indicating the majority of corporations did not.

**Photos, Videos, and Links**

The number of photos or videos posted on the Facebook page was also coded. Most (65.5%) pages had photos, while only 31% had videos. On fan pages, users could add photos, the majority of which were positive. Sixteen out of 24 fan pages had photos posted. Corporations also had the opportunity to provide links to other pages, such as the corporation itself or other fan or member sites. Only 36% provided links. In addition, on member pages, users could include favorite pages. Eleven out of 31 had favorite pages posted, with links to other pages, while 20 did not. Only two member corporations included items posted by the corporation itself.

Some corporations took advantage of the opportunities Facebook offers to engage publics. AT&T's site was geared toward college students so the company posted upcoming campus events and included pictures of past events. They also had a "work with me" section to recruit job applicants. Only a handful of corporations included the mission statement or news releases on the site. While some sites such as Microsoft

or Dell had promotions and giveaways encouraging individuals to return to the site, most did not. Other features a few corporations included were a YouTube link box, a Superwall, and My html.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Understanding Facebook and the strategy behind using Facebook is essential for corporations in this social-media driven environment. In this mostly controlled medium, corporations can take the opportunity to communicate with a wide variety of publics, including journalists, employees, potential employees, customers, and fans. Therefore, determining how corporations integrated public relations tools and strategies was important.

While some corporations posted news releases and mission statements, most corporations were not using Facebook for dissemination of information. Only slightly more than half included logos, and more than three-quarters of Facebook pages did not have any recent news or updates in the minifeed. Therefore, the same information posted on Web sites was not being included on Facebook pages, which is a missed opportunity.

Facebook wall posts offer an opportunity for corporations to show they are responding to or engaging with customers, especially in the case with product issues. When a corporation doesn't respond to a complaint by a customer, then it appears unresponsive from a customer service standpoint. Also, since many wall posts were from existing employees making an effort to connect with former employees or fellow employees, corporations should also take advantage of relationship-building in the age of social networking.

As far as potential employees are concerned, AT&T did have a "work with me" section with job postings. Recently, other corporations, such as UPS, have also jumped on the bandwagon and recruited future employees via Facebook. Therefore, corporations should spend time developing and maintaining employee sites on Facebook, since employees are joining these sites online.

Regarding the tone of the wall posts, it is unclear how many corporations "sanitize," or remove negative wall posts on their Facebook sites. On some pages, all older postings were positive while more recent postings were more negative in tone, indicating the corporation may sanitize its page but had not done so recently. Another indication of sanitization may be fan or member sites lacking any negative postings. On the other hand, some corporations obviously did not sanitize its postings. Dell, for example, added comments to wall postings to help resolve issues, which demonstrated the company was listening and responding to customers. Several corporations' discussion board postings had been deleted, however, this can be done by the poster and not necessarily the corporation. Also, few corporations had links to YouTube or videos posted on the site. Finally, there needs to be more in terms of engagement and corporations needs to give incentives or reasons for members or fans to revisit its site.

Results indicated when Facebook sites actually provided corporate information, it was more surface than actually in-depth. Moreover, the communication on the Facebook page was typically one-sided, posted primarily by the publics utilizing the site, and not the organization itself. Therefore, it appears many companies are not taking advantage of the two-way, relationship building capabilities Facebook may perform. Also, few sites were geared to specific publics. Some sites do have a strong fan base such as Ford, and others such as Dell and Microsoft responded to customer issues and offered product deals on their Facebook page. But, these companies were more exceptions to the rule.

Results suggested few companies were using Facebook as a medium for disseminating information about community relations or CSR activities. Only a small handful included any discourse or photos of how the corporation is engaging with these publics. Capriotti and Moreno (2007) argued including a CSR section on Web sites indicates the importance of CSR to the organization. Therefore, corporations should take advantage of this medium to show its contributions to the community.

There were several limitations to this study. The first dealt with the evolution of Facebook. Facebook changes its layout and format; in fact, how the companies were displayed in Facebook was even different from six months ago. Also, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Facebook users in the past six months so companies may have jumped on board the Facebook bandwagon since then. Also, with the economic crisis, some companies have dissolved or been acquired at a higher rate than average. Future research should employ a survey to the site administrators to determine how they manage the Facebook site as well as investigate other social networking sites, such as Twitter.

Overall, companies in the Fortune 50 were taking advantage of the opportunities of Facebook, but not utilizing this medium to its fullest extent. In fact, some companies within the Fortune 50 were not even on Facebook. While companies may be aware of the capabilities of Facebook, they may be unclear about how it fits within the corporate strategy. Therefore, companies need to remember to incorporate relationship building strategies not only on their Web sites and blogs, but also on their social networking sites.

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