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A study of the implications of the Internet upon two-way symmetric communication in public relations

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A STUDY OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE INTERNET UPON TWO-WAY

SYMMETRIC COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

by
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A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

El-Kharboutly, Tarek M.   *A Study of the Implications of the Internet upon Two-Way Symmetric Communication in Public Relations,* 1996. Thesis Advisor: Dr. Donald Bagin, Graduate Program: Public Relations.

This thesis examined the implications and ramifications of the advent of online communication technologies, such as the Internet, on the profession of public relations.

As brokers of information, public relations professionals must adapt to and incorporate online tools into their arsenals. As the consumer public takes to the Internet in search of information, the Internet provides a means by which organizations can gauge which issues are of concern. It is the only alternative to falling out of touch with a restless consumer public that demands ever-higher levels of customer service.

The author presented a case study of the Pentium microprocessor imbroglio that compromised Intel Corporation during 1994 and 1995. Implications of the case study were carried over into an analysis of the state of two-way symmetric communication in public relations.

Interview sessions with selected public relations professionals revealed that the practice of two-way symmetric communication has become a necessity. Two-way symmetric communication can no longer be regarded as a luxury by business organizations. Demanding increasing sophistication, society has progressed into the era of "feedback upon demand."

MINI-ABSTRACT

El-Kharboutly, Tarek M.

A Study of the Implications of the Internet upon Two-Way Symmetric Communication in Public Relations, 1996.
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A case study of the Pentium microprocessor imbroglio that compromised Intel Corporation during 1994 and 1995 was presented. Research included excerpts of interview sessions with selected public relations professionals.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Corporate public relations professionals generally acknowledge that constantly updated feedback is essential to the maintenance and improvement of a meaningful and effective public relations plan. Public relations professionals and scholars accredit the two-way symmetric communications model, proposed by James Grunig and Todd Hunt,[1] to categorize an audience-minded, feedback-driven style of communication:

> This communication is symmetric, because when feedback comes in, it does more than just signal that the communication got through. It helps to change the way both the organization and its publics look at each other. The organization uses the feedback to look at or evaluate its activities and messages.
>
> Today, many open communicators use this type of communication to signal that they are available to be changed by the feedback they're getting. Unfortunately, only a small number of organizations are using it--typically regulated businesses.[2]

Need For The Study:

As society stands perched on the brink of the 21st century, public relations professionals need to ponder the state of the art in business communication. Just how vital is

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[1] Anthony J. Fulginiti, "Reaching Your Audiences: Communication Strategies." *Power-Packed PR: Ideas That Work* (Blackwood, NJ: communication briefings 1988) 7.

[2] Fulginiti 7.

feedback to the successful public relations program? Can organizations in today's business climate survive by practicing anything less than two-way symmetric communication? These questions are hypercritical to today's public relations professionals who are under increasing pressure from management to prove their value in dollar figures:

> Companies are coming off a period dedicated to survival and are poised for growth in revenue, sales, profitability and professional development. How well a company collects, organizes, manages and uses information about itself and its industry, markets, customers, suppliers and competitors will determine its success.[3]

To their credit, many corporate public relations professionals employ a variety of feedback gathering methods--surveys, focus panels, forums, committees, interviews, etc. In spite of this, research indicates that today's consumers are dissatisfied:

> The consumers who made shopping a recreational sport in the 1980s now have less time, less money, and less stomach for the whole experience. . . . 'Besides being tightfisted, the consumer is increasingly stressed out and has lower tolerance for all the imperfections of retail,' says Mona Doyle, president of Consumer Network Inc., a Philadelphia market-research firm that surveys shoppers. . . .In almost every category, the answer to the question of what the consumer wants is disarmingly simple: more for less.[4]

Today's consumers, it would seem, expect business organizations (and their respective public relations departments) to know what they want--without the consumers having to take the time to be surveyed. But how are public relations professionals to make informed decisions and launch successful plans into winning campaigns? Under these circumstances,

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[3] Gary F. Grates, "How to Boost the Bottom Line," *Advertising Age's Business Marketing* Dec. 1995: 13.

[4] Mary Kuntz, et al, "Reinventing the Store: How Smart Retailers are Changing the Way We Shop," *Business Week* 27 Nov. 1995: 85.

how can corporate public relations professionals exchange information with their publics in such a way as to achieve legitimate two-way symmetry--the hallmark of the conscientious communications program?

The key to assessing current public interests begins with understanding the need to please consumers prior to marketing to them. Public relations professionals refer to this as the double bottom line theory:

> Pat Jackson, publisher of *pr reporter*, says that when companies act in the public interest, they act in their own interest at the same time. He suggests we look at a company's balance sheet as *two* bottom lines instead of one.
>
> In Jackson's scenario, an organization must please its publics before it can hope to do business. That's the *first* bottom line.
>
> The second bottom line, the traditional one that measures the success of an organization in sales, profits, etc., can't take place until publics are satisfied.[5]

As the consumer public becomes increasingly sophisticated in its ability to access and process information they seek, public relations professionals must adapt to the rigors of a "feedback upon demand" social structure. Simply put, everyone still wants answers to questions and changes on request--as always--but the answers, the improvements and the modifications are expected at people's fingertips instantaneously. Under these circumstances, the answer to the paradoxical question "How to gather feedback without seeming to take people's time to survey?" lies in the employment of online communication technologies such as the Internet. " 'This is clearly an evolving media and the way of measuring it is evolving,' said Bruce Judson, who is the head of the magazine publishers' task force on Internet measurement. 'This entire world is today in an experimental phase.' "[6]

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[5] Fulginiti 4.

[6] Dierdre Carmody, "Media Magazines; Old Distinctions Blur. Advertising On Line Now Involves Audience Consent," *The New York Times* 17, Jul. 1995, late ed.: D7. *The New York Times Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

Statement of the Problem:

The modern business environment is more fiercely competitive than ever. The 20th century is drawing to a close amidst the air of economic uncertainty. While there has been expansion, the general consumer public has not shared in the wealth:

> Although corporate profits have fattened and the stock market has soared, the average American family has not benefited from the boom. The gap between rich and poor is growing steadily, and people in the middle, . . . are going nowhere. Median household income has been flat for 20 years, and workers' real wages have dropped $23 or almost 5 percent since 1979. In a new *U.S. News* poll, only 22 percent say the economy is expanding; 67 percent say it is stagnating or declining.[7]

At the same time, the consumer public has grown accustomed to fierce competition for the shrinking pool of dollars. For every product or service, there is a wide array of alternatives from which the consumer can choose. How one organization distinguishes itself from its competitors is a matter of excellence in public relations efforts that strengthen the customer service effort. Brian L. Joiner expounded on this in his 1994 book, *Fourth Generation Management*:

> To customers, "quality" means more than just the characteristics of the product or service they receive. Customers pay attention to *all* their interactions with your company. The products and services you sell are not just the physical item or one-time experience that the customer gets but rather all the services that go with it: the 800 number for technical help, warranties, need-based selling, reservation services, and so on. You are selling a "bundle" of products and services to your customers to satisfy some need. Poor quality of the services associated with the product can drive customers away almost as quickly as poor

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[7] Steven V. Roberts, et al, "Workers Take It on the Chin," *U.S. News and World Report* 22 Jan. 1996: 44.

quality in the product itself. On the other hand, if the service and product

together are perceived as a good value, you will develop loyal partners who will

be pleased to do business with you.[8]

Clearly, consumers no longer consider the notion of "customer service" as avant-

garde, but rather as de rigueur. Consumer perceptions about the necessity of customer service

have changed dramatically from only a few years ago. Whereas companies who provided

"customer service features" a few years ago were regarded as visionary, companies who fail

to provide those features--and more--today are considered lacking. Joiner also elaborated on

the concept of the evolvement of customer perceptions:

> Remember, too, that customers are a moving target. We need to stay close to
> them if we are to serve them well. A Delighter one year quickly becomes a
> Must Be the next: TV remote controls were Delighters a few years back, but
> now they are Must Be's for most people. In addition, many times, customers
> cannot articulate their needs, either because they don't know how or because
> they don't think it's in the realm of possibility to have those needs met. It is
> *our* task to describe and deliver the means for greeting those needs if we want
> to delight our customers.[9]

To their credit, many corporations have seamlessly integrated top-notch customer

service programs into their management structure. On the other hand, some corporations have

had to learn their lesson via that harshest of extremes--media outcry of the public's enraged

sentiments. In such cases, public relations professionals have been harshly reminded of just

how strongly the public still associates images of insensitive, ledger-keeping executives clad in

gray with the word "corporation." This is still a serious problem facing all corporations and

their public relations efforts, as Stephen and Shannon Wall pointed out in their 1995 book, *The*

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[8] Joiner, Brian L., and Sue Reynard, *Fourth Generation Management: The New Business Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994) 68.

[9] Joiner, Reynard, 69-70.

New Strategists:

> Business people, and senior executives in particular, are generally portrayed in
> the popular culture as greedy, lazy, rigidly bureaucratic, and heartless. If the
> view seems extreme, pay attention to the next five movies or television shows
> you watch that involve characters in a traditional business environment. Which
> of these characters are shown as ethical, hardworking, flexible, or
> compassionate? Virtually none are.[10]

For public relations professionals, working to overcome such perceptions is essential
as the public grows accustomed to and actively seeks the input of "media judgment" on
virtually every subject. But that task is complicated by even more fear and mistrust--this time
coming from the executives themselves, as William Adams has pointed out: "Even though a
1994 study discovered some 70 percent of CEOs surveyed named 'media relations' as a
qualification 'most valued' in their communications officers, research indicates most business
executives continue to fear, distrust and misunderstand the news media."[11]

No company today is immune from the prying eyes of the media and the
overwhelming sway they hold with the public. As Adams has said: "Today the power of the
news media is unquestioned, whether one believes the media actually do 'set the agenda,' or as
Bernard Cohen wrote in 1963: The media don't tell us what to think, but they tell us what to
think about."[12] Public relations professionals are more likely to witness their organizations
become the object of judgment.

Companies judged as unfriendly discover the hard way just how much of a
promotional barrier the media can become, even to the rare corporation that enjoys the luxury
of a virtual monopoly in its industry. The barrier can arise from what are, initially, the most

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[10] Stephen J. Wall, and Shannon Rye Wall, *The New Strategists: Creating Leaders at All Levels* (New York: The Free Press,1995) 118-9.

[11] William Adams, "Marrying the Functions: The Importance of Media Relations in Public Affairs Planning," *Public Relations Quarterly* Fall 1995: 9.

[12] Adams 8.

trivial of circumstances--even in instances where the company has the most unique, sought after and technologically cutting edge product of its kind available. These circumstances described the Intel Corporation and its product line of microprocessor chips during the public relations debacle that befell the company in the second half of 1994 as the result of an obscure flaw in its Pentium processor.

Purpose:

The main objective of this thesis was to research how the advent of the Internet has influenced corporate public relations to advance the two-way symmetric model. Has e-mail helped to level the balance of information power between organizations and their publics? How vital a link is the World Wide Web to symmetrically-minded organizations?

In fact, some argue that the advent of online communication technology has shifted the bulk of communication power into the hands of the receiver:

> Yet those who do connect enjoy influence beyond even what they would appreciate. Congressmen and council members pay inordinate attention to their TV reception. Of course, when talk radio and other interactive media put a megaphone to the ordinary American, politicians listen all the more intently.
>
> Even the rarefied precincts of the Internet can swing the balance. As Mr. Burleigh [president and chief operating officer of E.W. Scripps, a leading media company] recalled, it was there . . . that the chain reaction took place that ultimately cowed mighty Intel over the Pentium chip's flaw.[13]

The implications of this fact raise a significant question for public relations professionals. If, as the saying goes, "information is power," then what does that make the modern-day receiver?

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[13] Tim W. Ferguson, "Business World: A Newspaperman Surfs the Internet," *The Wall Street Journal* 17 Jan. 1995: A18, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

Procedures:

The thesis sought to determine if the advent of the Internet has prompted corporate public relations to advance the practice of the two-way symmetric model of communication. The research consisted of the following elements:

1) A case study of the Pentium-related public relations crisis having befallen Intel in the latter half of 1994. The reader will see how seemingly minor developments led to a major public relations crisis, and that this crisis was fueled, in large part, by Intel's mishandling of online communication. The crisis is documented through to resolution, whereupon an intransigent Intel relented and set forth initiatives that improved the company's relationship with its publics. These initiatives focused strongly on supporting a two-way symmetric style of communication.

2) Primary and secondary research findings that demonstrate the influence that online services have wielded in the late-20th century.

3) Insight gathered from public relations professionals during telephone interview sessions that focused upon the extent to which computer-based online information services assist contemporary public relations efforts. How has the information gathered influenced essential elements of the modern-day proactive public relations plan? How are online services used to carry out public relations activities?

The result is a guide that enlightens public relations professionals about one of the most critical topics concerning relations management as the 20th century draws to a close. Armed with this knowledge, the public relations professional should have a greater sense of confidence that effective and open communication is possible in an era of rapid technological change.

Delimitations:

The scope of the public relations developments considered was limited to:

1) Secondary research gathered in the process of documenting the public relations crisis that befell Intel in the latter half of 1994.

2) Primary research gathered in the course of telephone interview sessions with selected public relations professionals.

3) Secondary research gathered in documenting the influence, if any, that the Internet has had upon consumer demand for information.

Definitions:

For the reader's benefit, this section defines the possibly ambiguous terms presented in this thesis in alphabetical order.

customer(s) — This mass public can be segmented in a variety of ways—Joiner presents the following categories: current customers, former customers, competitor's customers and users of substitute products or services .[14]

customer service — Usually a program instituted by an organization to facilitate communication and feedback with its consumer publics (*see customer*). It allows consumers to get questions answered, voice complaints, initiate sales orders, etc. In turn, the organization gains a communications conduit through which it can more accurately gauge strategic considerations.

Delighters — According to Joiner, one of three categories of Kano's Model of Customer Perceptions, named after Dr. Noriaki Kano. The other two categories are Must Be's and More Is Better. According to Joiner, Delighters are "the features or characteristics that surprise customers—in a good way! They solve a need the customer didn't know we could solve, or didn't think anyone would solve. Since they are unexpected, there is no negative effect if they are absent; but when present, they have a positive effect."[15]

double bottom line — A theory proposed by Pat Jackson, editor of *pr reporter*, which suggests that public relations professionals should acknowledge the existence of two

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[14] Joiner, Reynard 66.

[15] Joiner, Reynard 69.

bottom lines. The first is the reputational bottom line. The second is the financial bottom line. A company must please its publics before it can transact business.[16]

e-mail -- "Electronic mail messages sent or received by a person or computer on a computer network."[17]

feedback upon demand -- The relational evolvement between business organizations and their stakeholders as information technology develops.

hypertext link -- "An automatic link on the World Wide Web that connects a word, phrase or picture with other information elsewhere. When a user selects a linked phrase or picture, that user is automatically connected to the other data to which it is linked."[18]

Internet -- (colloquially referred to as the Net) -- "An international data communications pathway that links thousands of computer networks."[19] It was originally designed by the U.S. government and major academic institutions in order to maintain communications in the event of a nuclear attack.[20]

Intranet -- "These private Nets . . . use the infrastructure and standards of the Internet and World Wide Web but are cordoned off from the public Internet through software programs known as 'firewalls': Employees can venture out onto the Net, but unauthorized users can't come in."[21]

media -- This critical public can be segmented into a variety of categories and subcategories: local and national mass media, and local and national specialized media.

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[16] Fulginiti 4.

[17] Mark Veljkov and George Hartnell, *Pocket Guides to the Internet: Volume 4: The Internet E-Mail System*, (Westport: Mecklermedia) 50.

[18] "Digispeak," *An Executive's Guide To Sales & Marketing Technology* Mar.1996: 6.

[19] "Digispeak," 6.

[20] Robert P. Mark, "Online Public Relations: A Window Of Opportunity," *Journal of Corporate Public Relations: Northwestern University* 1995 - 1996: 15.

[21] Amy Cortese, "Here Comes The Intranet," *Business Week* 26, Feb. 1996: 76.

The local mass media include: print publications, newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations. National mass media include: print publications, broadcast or cable networks and wire services. Specialized local media include: trade, industry or association publications, organizational house and membership publications, ethnic publications, publications of special groups and specialized broadcast or cable programs and stations. Specialized national media include: general business publications, national trade, industry and association publications, national organizational house and membership publications, national ethnic publications, publications of national special groups and national specialized broadcast or cable programs and networks.[22]

More Is Better -- According to Joiner, one of three categories of Kano's Model of Customer Perceptions, named after Dr. Noriaki Kano. The other two categories are Must Be's and Delighters. According to Joiner, the More Is Better category describes instances where: "we are disappointed if a need is poorly met but have increasing satisfaction (and perhaps even delight) the better that need is met. For example, slow response to a customer query will disappoint that customer; instantaneous response may delight the customer; something in between would probably evoke no response at all."[23]

Must Be's -- According to Joiner, one of three categories of Kano's Model of Customer Perceptions, named after Dr. Noriaki Kano. The other two categories are Delighters and More Is Better. The Must Be category includes "characteristics or features we take for granted, like clean linens and hot water in a hotel room. Since we expect them to be there, we notice more when they are missing than when present. Thus 'absence' annoys us but 'presence' only brings us up to neutral."[24]

netiquette -- "Permissable-conduct rules among the online services and the thousands of newsgroups, listservs (mailing lists) and bulletin boards on the Internet range

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[22] Doug Newsom, Alan Scott, and Judy VanSlyke Turk, *This Is PR: The Realities of Public Relations*, 5th ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth) 142. Categories and listing developed by Jerry Hendrix.

[23] Joiner, Reynard 69.

[24] Joiner, Reynard 68-9.

from freewheeling to tightly controlled. Guidelines are regularly posted. . . .Even individual institutions and companies with hookups to the Net may have their own rules."[25]

online services -- By this designation the author refers to the gamut of database networks that a computer user can access with a modem. Subcategories of online services commonly referred to include: Internet, World Wide Web, e-mail and commercially available (for a fee) services like America Online, Prodigy, CompuServe, etc.

public relations -- There seems to be no single, resolute definition of "public relations." Most texts, rather, seek to define public relations via a description of what a public relations professional does:

> Public relations involves research into all audiences: receiving information
> from them, advising management of their attitudes and responses, helping
> to set policies that demonstrate responsible attention to them and constantly
> evaluating the effectiveness of all PR programs. . . .The complexity of PR's
> role prompted the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) to define
> fourteen activities generally associated with public relations: (1) publicity,
> (2) communication, (3) public affairs, (4) issues management, (5)
> government relations, (6) financial public relations, (7) community
> relations, (8) industry relations, (9) minority relations, (10) media relations,
> (11) press agentry, (12) promotion, (13) media relations,
> (14) propaganda.[26]

stakeholder(s) -- A generic term used to describe anyone who has any interest of any kind in a given organization.

two-way asymmetric communication -- "This first type of two-way communication seeks feedback from the receiver. . . .But don't mistake this feedback for anything more than verification that the message got through. In this style, public relations

[25] Margaret Mannix, "It's A Jungle Out There," *U.S. News and World Report* 29, Apr. 1996: 74.

[26] Newsom, Scott, Turk 4.

tries to form public attitudes to favor the organization. The organization doesn't change its activity or message because of the feedback."[27] Compare and contrast with two-way symmetric.

two-way symmetric communication -- "This communication is symmetric, because when feedback comes in, it does more than just signal that the communication got through. It helps to change the way both the organization and its publics look at each other. The organization uses the feedback to look at or evaluate its activities and messages."[28] Compare and contrast with two-way asymmetric.

World Wide Web -- "A collection of information located on many Internet servers that can be accessed with a browser by navigating via hypertext links."[29]

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[27] Fulginiti 7.

[28] Fulginiti 7.

[29] "Digispeak" 6.

Chapter 2

Related Literature

Background Information:

The research information presented in the following chapter was gathered primarily from the resources at Savitz Library at Rowan College of New Jersey. Most of the background information was found in periodicals, while most of the case study research emanated from the Wilsondisc CD-ROM database. Some additional supporting materials were also gathered from the microfilm resources available at the Gloucester County Library located in Mullica Hill, New Jersey.

This study corroborated others on the subject who have found support for the hypothesis that we are in an era of feedback upon demand. For example, in a survey conducted by the Weber Group, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 82% of online users surveyed reported that they relied on the Internet to provide "individual control over when and how they receive news and information."[30] Larry Weber, president of The Weber Group, summarized the findings: "The survey underscores that today's new breed of information consumer is demanding greater control of information."[31]

Online services are truly a burgeoning medium. According to a survey conducted by Jupiter Communications, 61% of online users said they were spending less time watching TV

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[30] "Cyber Surveys: Internet Users Demand More." *Public Relations Tactics* Mar. 1996: 12.

[31] "Cyber Surveys" 12.

because of the Internet. That study also revealed that the average online user spends approximately 20 hours online per week.[32] Another study,conducted jointly by Nielsen Media Research and CommerceNet, a California-based consortium of companies exploring the potential for business on the Internet, revealed that nearly 17% of all adults in the United States and Canada have access to the Internet.[33] With that many people exchanging so much information online, public relations professionals must master the online medium. "The key to successfully harnessing the Internet's power is to understand all of the people with whom you communicate. Your list might include current customers, prospective customers, vendors, employees, analysts, the media, your community, and competitors."[34]

The fact that online services allow the user to send and receive 'customized' information is a highly practical public relations application. The benefits can serve to make a media relations program significantly more productive. In a study of Canadian journalists, research revealed that, by the year 2000, 41% of journalists expect the Internet to be the primary vehicle of delivery for news releases.[35]

As powerful a tool as online communication technology is for communicating with external audiences, experts believe that its real power lies in how it can improve internal communications--via Intranets. "It's going to turn out that some of the most valuable applications of the Web are those internal ones that promote things like collaboration and faster turnaround times--benefits that are essential now, given the structural changes that have occurred in most corporations."[36] At present, most Intranet sites perform only rudimentary tasks like keeping track

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[32] "Bits and Bytes: Filling Cyberspace," *An Executive's Guide To Sales and Marketing Technology* Mar. 1996: 32.

[33] Tom Dellecave Jr, "The 'Net Effect," *An Executive's Guide To Sales and Marketing Technology* Mar. 1996: 18.

[34] Cynthia Hollen, "Integrating Your Web Site into Your Business Plan," *Public Relations Tactics* Mar. 1996: 10.

[35] Susan Fry Bovet, "38% of Canadian Journalists Use Internet, Survey Shows," *Public Relations Journal* Aug 1995: 54.

[36] Sheree R. Curry, "Getting Your Company's Internet Strategy Right," *Fortune* 18 Mar. 1996: 72.

of company job openings, internal phone directories or information on company benefits, but sophistication is fast approaching. Soon these Intranets will empower employees to file forms online, query databases and even hold virtual conferences with their peers.[37]

Clearly, all the research indicates that people are ripe and ready for more information—and they are looking online to get it.

> With so much information available online, the question becomes how much should public relations practitioners care what people might be saying about their companies or the future of their profession. The answer is that public relations specialists must be involved in the flow of online information if that is where their publics and stakeholders are looking for information. And increasingly, these groups are looking online for information.[38]

Case Study:

For Intel, the problem officially began on November 7, 1994. That was the date the *Electronic Engineering Times* [39] published the findings of Dr. Thomas Nicely, a mathematics professor at Lynchburg College in Virginia.[40] The findings involved rare occurrences where the Pentium processor yielded incorrect answers to mathematical equations, particularly complex division problems that employ a portion of the chip known as the floating point processor.[41]

Upon public discovery of the flaw, Intel admitted that company officials had known of the

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[37] Cortese 79.

[38] Mark 16.

[39] "Corrections," *The New York Times* 23, Dec. 1994: A2, *The New York Times Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995. Note: there have been articles that *incorrectly* identified the original publication as the *Electrical Engineering Times*.

[40] Don Clark, "Technology: Intel's Grove Airs Apology for Pentium over the Internet; But CEO, Defending Policy Not to Replace all Chips, Doesn't Silence Criticism," *The Wall Street Journal* 29, Nov. 1994: B6, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[41] Don Clark, "Some Scientists are Angry Over Flaw in Pentium Chip, and Intel's Response," *The Wall Street Journal* 25, Nov. 1994: B4, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

problem for several months, and that Intel had "recently changed its production process to eliminate the flaw."[42] Apparently, Intel considered the problem solved and the issue closed—"announcing that the flaws were a statistical trifle."[43] Technically speaking, computer experts agreed that the flaw might very well have been just that: "Dr. Nicely said the flaw occurs once in every 31 billion calculations when a computer is set to pick random numbers for division operations."[44]

However: " 'What Intel failed to see is that customer perception is what's driving concern that the Pentium's flaw could cause problems,' says Kevin Joyce, a Sequent Computer Systems Inc. group-marketing manager."[45] Apparently, the intensity of the outrage came as a surprise to Intel as well as members of the media: "The furor over Pentium is unusual in view of the fact that Intel experienced more serious problems with its 386 and 486 microprocessors. Many of the complaints have been aired on Internet discussion groups, which weren't as widely used at the time of the earlier bugs."[46]

Intel had failed to consider the implications of widely available market research:

> An October [1994] survey by the market research firm ARS. Inc. in six metropolitan areas, including Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles, found that Pentium-based machines accounted for as much as a third of all PC sales in consumer retail stores. . . .In the past, sales of the most powerful PC typically went first to so-called early adopters such as engineers who needed more power, then to

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[42] Clark, *Scientists Angry* B4.

[43] Don Clark, "Technology and Health: Intel Finds Pumped Up Image Offers a Juicy Target in Pentium Brouhaha," *The Wall Street Journal* 5, Dec. 1994: B5, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[44] Clark, *Scientists Angry* B4.

[45] Clark, *Pumped Up Image Offers Juicy Target* B5.

[46] Don Clark, "Technology: Fixed Pentiums Won't Be Available Soon; PC Makers Haven't Seen Samples of Intel Chip; Its Stock Slides $2.375," *The Wall Street Journal* 1, Dec. 1994: B7, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

corporations and finally to home.[47]

Intel underestimated the ferocity of a consumer public that was becoming the company's bread and butter. " 'You're dealing with a community that's very sophisticated in a technical sense but very unsophisticated in the business sense,' says Alexander Wolfe, managing editor of *Electronic Engineering Times*, the trade journal that unearthed the Pentium story. . . .'They're very raw and demanding; they want companies to respond to them on their terms.' "[48]

Intel's own intransigent response to the problem did little to alleviate tensions. In fact, it is arguable that the Intel Chief Executive Officer Andrew Grove's cyberspace response statement concerning the issue made matters much worse. To wit: "Mr. Grove noted that a division error is only likely to occur once in every nine billion random division operations. In the length of time that would be needed to encounter the problem, other parts of the computer would probably fail, he noted. Intel has run into thornier problems with its previous chips, and so 'breathed a sigh of relief' at such a minor issue, he said."[49]

In that same message, posted on the Internet, Mr. Grove also defended his company's stance "requiring customers who want a replacement chip to convince the company that they are performing sophisticated calculations that might encounter the problem."[50]

And with that, Intel cocooned itself in the belief that that the issue would resolve itself--if it hadn't already. "Throughout the next two weeks, the company continued to believe that its customers were listening to its explanation that the Pentium's computational errors were so infrequent that ordinary users did not need to worry."[51]

Not only did Intel not consider the ramifications of such a haughty attitude, but moreover,

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[47] Jim Carlton, "Computers: Consumers Lead the Run on Pentium PCs." *The Wall Street Journal* 7, Dec. 1994: B1, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[48] Bart Ziegler and Jared Sandberg, "On Line: On-Line Snits Fomenting Public Storms," *The Wall Street Journal* 23, Dec. 1994: B1, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[49] Clark, *Grove Airs Apology* B6.

[50] Clark, *Grove Airs Apology* B6.

[51] John Markoff, "Business Technology; Intel's Crash Course on Consumers." *The New York Times* 21, Dec. 1994, late ed.: D1, *The New York Times Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

Intel failed to adhere to what is known as netiquette--etiquette guidelines users expect each other to observe when employing the Internet. Specifically, Andrew Grove's cyberspace message "was sent from another Intel executive's Internet address--an electronic faux-pas--which made some think the letter had not originated with him."[52] The fashioned response came across so austerely that Mr. Otellini, Intel Corporation's senior vice president for worldwide sales conceded: "Intel officials set to work on a crisis the way they attacked all large problems--like an engineering problem . . ."[53]

But fate would demand that Intel confront the public relations problem head-on when the following headlines aired on December 13, 1994: "IBM fired a broadside at Intel Corp. yesterday in the controversy over the flawed Pentium chip, halting all shipments of its highest-power PCs and saying Intel Corp. has 'significantly' underestimated the potential for errors arising out of the Pentium problem."[54]

IBM's announcement of the suspension of sales of its own equipment containing the defective chip was startling and embarrassing for Intel. And there was every reason to believe that the move on IBM's part was as much motivated by sour personal feelings as it was by concern over finances: "IBM, one of Intel's largest customers, didn't learn of the Pentium flaw until it received a call Nov. 22 from an Intel representative, who told an IBM executive that there would be a report on Cable News Network on the chip problem. The Intel representative added, IBM said: 'But don't worry about it.' "[55]

Shortly thereafter, Intel began to gain understanding and awareness of the compromising

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[52] James Kimball, "Intel Wipes Out Surfing the 'Net: Few Master Online PR Wave," *Advertising Age's Business Marketing* Jan. 1995: 1.

[53] Markoff D1.

[54] Bart Ziegler and Don Clark, "Chip Shot: Computer Giants' War over Flaw in Pentium Jolts the PC Industry; Who Is Twisting the Truth? Intel Stands By Product as IBM Halts Shipments; 'I'd Be Totally Confused,' " *The Wall Street Journal* 13 Dec. 1994: A1, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[55] Bart Ziegler, "Technology: IBM, Intel Continue their Wrangling over Liability for Pentium Repair Bill." *The Wall Street Journal* 14, Dec. 1994: B6, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

juncture into which it had hurtled itself. "Only then, Mr. Grove said, did he begin to realize that an engineer's approach was inappropriate for a consumer problem . . . 'I didn't know the scope of the problem' Mr. Grove said. 'I didn't know till the end what the real objection was.' "[56]

In light of such admissions, it seems ironic that only a few months earlier Mr. Grove, in his keynote address at PC Expo--a major industry trade show--told audiences that " 'Communications is going to shape what is happening to the PC world. Conversely, PCs are going to shape what is happening in the communications world.' "[57] What a poignant twist of fate then, that IBM's suspension of Pentium-based PC is the event which prompted Mr. Grove and Intel to recant. Stated another way: "As plugged in as they were, Intel officials were out of touch with the new consumer market they had cultivated. They had based a big advertising campaign on the 'Intel Inside' theme, seeking to make their chips a household name."[58]

Realizing its error, Intel finally relented on December 20, 1994. "In a shift that rivaled the Christmas Eve transformation of Ebeneezer Scrooge, Intel Corp. yesterday pledged to replace--'no questions asked'--any of the approximately 4 million Pentium computer chips that it has sold in the last 19 months."[59] Perhaps even more importantly, there came a public apology and realization from Mr. Grove: " 'Before this, we talked with users about their problems' to determine whose work warranted a replacement. . . .'To some people this seemed arrogant and uncaring. We apologize for that.' "[60]

But Intel's lesson in public relations did not come without its price. Along the way to recovery, Intel's misstep resulted in a barrage of lawsuits and implications that could have led to federal investigation: "The Food and Drug Administration announced it was looking into whether

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[56] Markoff D1.

[57] "Technology and Health: Intel CEO Sees PC Growth Driven by Communications," *The Wall Street Journal* 29, Jun. 1994: B6, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[58] Markoff D1.

[59] Elizabeth Corcoran, "Intel to Replace Chips; Firm Reverses Itself on Pentium Policy," *The Washington Post* 21, Dec. 1994: A1, *The Washington Post Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[60] Corcoran A1.

the chip may have led to inaccurate data supplied by pharmaceutical manufacturers seeking approval for drugs."[61] At the same time, a nationwide barrage of litigation efforts began as consumers, corporations and government agencies alike voiced their discord: "On Wednesday [December 14, 1994], the attorney general of Connecticut, Richard Blumenthal warned company officials in a letter that its handling of the affair may have violated that state's unfair trade-practices law. Similar suits have already been filed in California, Michigan and Illinois."[62]

And what exactly was the driving sentiment behind the enactment of so much legal machinery? Patrick Coughlin, a partner at the law firm of Milberg Weiss Bershad Hyes and Lerach--which filed securities-fraud charges against Intel--summed it up thusly: " 'I think they made a deliberate decision, because of their market presence, that they could just kind of push this computer out, even if they had a problem. And I think that was wrong. It affects consumers and large companies, and shareholders.' "[63]

These and other legal actions culminated with reports that Intel had agreed to give financial restitution: "The Intel Corporation has agreed to pay $6 million in lawyers' fees and to pay claims by customers who used its flawed Pentium chip, The San Francisco Examiner has reported. Intel . . . negotiated the settlement to end 11 class action suits filed against it last year, the newspaper said Saturday."[64]

Intel's true cost for the blunder may never be known. But by Intel's own admission, the blunder clearly cost close to, if not more than, a half-billion dollars: "Intel said fourth-quarter profit fell 37% because of a $475 million pretax charge for replacing flawed Pentium chips, a figure higher than many analysts expected. The big semiconductor maker said net income came to

[61] Kimball 35.

[62] Richard B. Schmitt, "The Business of Law: Flurry of Lawsuits Filed Against Intel over Pentium Flaw." *The Wall Street Journal* 16, Dec. 1994: B8, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[63] Schmitt B8.

[64] Reuters, "Intel Agrees To Pay Claims by Customers," *The New York Times*, 3, Apr. 1995, late ed.: D6, *The New York Times Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

$372 million, or 86 cents a share, compared with $594 million, or $1.35 a share, in the year-earlier period."[65] Net income for the year 1994 also slipped, albeit only slightly, from $2.295 billion to $2.288 billion.[66]

Given these documented financial and reputational losses, how did Intel recover from this public relations embarrassment? The first major step was the announcement of change to the company's flaw disclosure policy on January 24, 1995. Specifically: "The company's new disclosure procedure will be to reveal any discovered flaws first to hardware OEMs and independent software vendors (ISVs), then to the general public through an addendum to the product databook (a design handbook)."[67] By comparison, the company's previous policy in this regard was merely "to review errata and internally determine whether it was worth reporting or so minor as to not be worth telling the outside world."[68]

Additionally, Intel announced the "introduction of a worldwide network of Pentium-replacement service centers."[69] Moreover, Intel learned the value of working synchronously with its business partners as Intel announced it was "working with major system vendors, including IBM Corp., Dell Computer Corp., Compaq Computer Corp., and AT&T Corp., to replace Pentium chips among users of those vendors' PCs."[70]

Just what was the philosophical change Intel underwent to mobilize such reforms? According to Dennis Carter, Intel's Vice President of corporate marketing, it was the realization that: " 'The Pentium problem is one of customer satisfaction. . . .So what we've focused on from

[65] Don Clark, "Technology and Health: Intel's 4th-Period Net Fell 37% on Big Charge for Pentium Woes," *The Wall Street Journal* 18, Jan. 1995: B6, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[66] Kate Bertrand, "Intel Starts to Rebuild: Centers Part of Image-Saving Effort," *Advertising Age's Business Marketing* Feb. 1995: 32.

[67] Jim DeTar, "Intel Alters Flaw Disclosure Policy," *Electronic News* 6, Feb. 1995: 32, *Magazine Collection*, Microfilm, 78A6176, Information Access Company. 1995.

[68] DeTar 32.

[69] Bertrand 1.

[70] DeTar 32.

a marketing point of view is the service centers. Beyond that, we're putting in place a wide variety of ways of communicating one-on-one with users.' "[71]

One of those ways was by continuing "to maintain a toll-free (800) customer information number that was set up at the height of the Pentium controversy."[72]

To effectively service its large-scale business clientele one-on-one, Intel flew marketing teams nationwide so they could visit with their corporate clients and replace defective chips. To quell retail consumers' fears, Intel placed its own employees in retail locations in the week prior to Christmas.[73]

Beyond these steps, which sought to amend concerns over the Pentium flaw, Intel also initiated policy changes concerning testing procedures for the P6--Intel's technological leap beyond the Pentium. In May 1995, Intel announced that "it will begin lending PCs containing an early version of its next-generation chip to selected users--like the professor who discovered the Pentium's flaw."[74] This was a change from their previous testing policy, which included sending prototypes for testing to PC makers--but not to individual users. Carl Everett, senior vice president in charge of Intel's microprocessor business, acknowledges that this change was fueled by a desire for improved public relations: " 'We've gotten a notice that the consumer is interested in computing and they need to be included. We have to stay in touch with that constituency.' "[75]

Thankfully for Intel, their lesson in public relations was learned quickly enough so that public furor over the Pentium problem subsided quickly once Intel understood the consumer perspective. In fact, it was reported that: "Data from personal-computer makers and retailers

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[71] DeTar 32.

[72] John Markoff, "Company News: Intel to Alter Disclosure of Chip Flaws," *The New York Times*, late ed., 24 Jan. 1995: D4, *The New York Times Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[73] DeTar 32.

[74] Don Clark, "Technology: Intel to Lend Early Version of Chip to Certain PC Users to Help Catch Flaws," *The Wall Street Journal* 16, May 1995: B5, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[75] Clark, *Intel To Lend Chips* B5.

indicate that the combined total return rate is less than 10% . . . compared with some predictions of about 25%."[76]

This irony demonstrates the necessity and value of continual public relations efforts as essential to business in modern society. Once Intel demonstrated the capacity to apologize, capitulate and respect the public demand, few among the public actually chose to exercise their right. Perhaps the best way to sate the publics demand for power is to give it to them. Or to put it another way: " 'What are the lessons in this? For one thing, it means that most PC owners have come around to Intel's original view--that the problem is not worth the trouble of installing a defect-free chip. It was Intel's imperious attitude, not the defect, that concerned them.' "[77]

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[76] Christian G. Hill, "Computers: Despite Furor, Most Keep their Pentium Chips," *The Wall Street Journal* 13, Apr. 1995: B1, *The Wall Street Journal Ondisc*, CD-ROM, UMI-Proquest, 1995.

[77] Hill B1.

Chapter 3

Procedures

The research information presented in *A Study of the Implications of the Internet upon Two-Way Symmetric Communication in Public Relations* was gathered primarily from the resources at Savitz Library at Rowan College of New Jersey. Most of the background information was found in periodicals, while most of the case study research emanated from the Wilsondisc CD-ROM database. Some additional supporting materials were also gathered from the microfilm resources available at the Gloucester County Library located in Mullica Hill, New Jersey.

The scope of the public relations developments considered was limited to:

1) Secondary research gathered in the process of documenting the public relations crisis that befell Intel in the latter half of 1994;

2) Secondary research gathered in documenting the influence, if any, that the Internet has had upon consumer demand for information;

3) Primary research gathered in the course of telephone interview sessions with selected public relations professionals.

The thesis sought to determine whether the advent of the Internet has prompted corporate public relations to advance the practice of the two-way symmetric model of communication. The research consisted of the following elements:

1) Primary and secondary research findings that demonstrate the influence that online communication technology wielded in the late-20th century;

2) A case study of the Pentium-related public relations crisis having befallen Intel in the latter half of 1994;

3) Insight gathered from public relations professionals during telephone interview sessions that focused upon the extent to which computer-based online information services assist contemporary public relations efforts.

The interviewees were: Donald Allen, director of public relations at Wonderware Corporation, an independent supplier of Windows-based software for the industrial automation marketplace; Steven Lubetkin, APR, director of seminar communications at Standard and Poor's Corporation, a financial analysis firm that offers online investment-rating services; Peter Shinbach, APR, president of The Birmingham Group, a management consulting firm that helps corporations develop technology-related strategic planning solutions; Ronald Solberg, APR, Fellow PRSA, president of EasyCom, Inc., a technology consulting firm that helps public relations professionals manage online solutions.

The interview sessions generally lasted about twenty minutes. The author asked open-ended questions to determine the extent to which the advent of online communications has influenced or changed the communications marketplace. More specifically, the author attempted to answer the question of whether the age of two-way symmetric communication has fully come-of-age as information becomes increasingly available to the consumer public.

The findings revealed that two-way symmetric communication has come to be considered essential among public relations professionals. Evolving online technologies, such as the Internet, have prompted an era in which the flow of business communication has quickened and expanded.

The author recommended that public relations professionals should specialize as online information analysts in the 21st century.

Chapter 4

Findings From Telephone Interviews

The research in this chapter consists primarily of responses garnered during informal interviews with four public relations professionals who have direct knowledge of the emerging importance of online communications in public relations.

The interviewees were:

1) Donald Allen, director of public relations at Wonderware Corporation, an independent supplier of Windows-based software for the industrial automation marketplace;

2) Steven Lubetkin, APR, director of seminar communications at Standard and Poor's Corporation, a financial analysis firm that offers online investment-rating services;

3) Peter Shinbach, APR, president of The Birmingham Group, a management consulting firm that helps corporations develop technology-related strategic planning solutions;

4) Ronald Solberg, APR, Fellow PRSA, president of EasyCom, Inc., a technology consulting firm that helps public relations professionals manage online solutions.

The interview sessions generally lasted about twenty minutes. The author asked open-ended questions to determine the extent to which the advent of online communications has influenced or changed the communications marketplace. More specifically, the author attempted to answer the question of whether the age of two-way symmetric communication has fully come-of-age as information becomes increasingly available to the consumer public.

The interviewees generally agreed on a fundamental point; the advent of online services

has obliged the public relations profession to undergo transitions. Shinbach declared: "The lines between the disciplines of marketing, public relations and advertising have blurred. Carrying-on the concept of integrated communications, the three will continually amalgamate as technology develops."[78]

All those interviewed placed particular emphasis on the importance of online communications to expanding media relations programs. Solberg noted: "Online communications have extended the number of acquaintances and contacts. Prior to electronic services, such a broad reach would have been impossible."[79] It is not only reach that is improved, as Allen attested: "I get an average of 40 e-mail transmissions every day, from all over the world. Offering e-mail as a communications vehicle helps to eliminate the pressures of time-zone considerations."[80]

Organizations questioning whether pursuing online access is worthwhile should consider their information relationship with stakeholders. Allen added: "The electronic-related benefits of being able to act and respond quickly are awesome. There is a decided advantage in being able to advise the CEO on just what the important, up-to-the minute issues really are."[81] Electronic media can serve as a public relations vehicle to illustrate a company's intimate concern for its stakeholders--so long as the vehicle is used in an appropriate manner. Shinbach cautioned: "Using e-mail to engage in dialog allows organizations to display actual interest in two-way symmetric communication--as long as they use the medium with two-way symmetry in mind."[82]

When asked whether using e-mail could assist the public relations professional with crisis management, profound thoughts on the Intel Pentium case came to mind. Solberg admitted: "Had Intel monitored electronic news, there is a strong possibility that much of the crisis could have been averted."[83] Shinbach agreed: "The Pentium scenario was a poster-child case

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[78] Peter Shinbach, telephone interview, April 1996.
[79] Ron Solberg, telephone interview, April 1996.
[80] Donald Allen, telephone interview, April 1996.
[81] Allen, interview.
[82] Shinbach, interview.
[83] Solberg, interview.

demonstrating the possible benefits that e-mail brings to crisis management."[84]

Allen had even more incisive commentary that affirms the relations management benefits of the Internet to public relations:

> In November of 1995 Wonderware had a situation where the founder and CEO of our company, Dennis Morin, decided to step down for personal reasons—he engineered the company to its current level and simply felt it was time to move on . As Mr. Morin passed the reins of leadership to President and CEO Roy Slavin, we used wire distribution of two different news releases to fully explain the circumstances underlying the situation. We also posted those releases on the What's New section of our World Wide Web site. That did indeed help greatly in explaining Wonderware's view of what happened. The mere fact that they were available on the Web allowed us to calm stockholders as well as our distributor population around the world.[85]

New, expanded public relations possibilities to monitor situations and issues with scrutiny as never before have resulted in the fundamental importance of issues management to public relations. Solberg explained: "Electronic media are having a significant impact upon the evolvement of public relations. Increasingly, issues management is of core concern to public relations. Practitioners are being called upon to specialize in issues analysis. Electronic media can help them do that."[86] The reader should be cautioned, however: Several of those interviewed pointed out that electronic communications provide a very helpful array of tools with the *potential* for benefit. Shinbach alerted: "Electronic media have increased the capability for public relations to be proactive, but it is up to the individual organization to decide upon evincing a proactive mentality."[87]

Proactivity involves anticipating a customer's needs and wants. Increasingly, companies

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[84] Shinbach, interview.

[45] Allen, interview.

[86] Solberg, interview.

[87] Shinbach, interview.

are realizing that they need to understand their customer-base in terms of a global perspective. The Internet and its accompanying e-mail capabilities can be of great assistance to companies keeping a global lookout, as Lubetkin pointed out:

> Communicating via the Internet demonstrates a whole new way of reaching customers at their convenience. Putting information on the Web helps customers access technical information and support documentation whenever they want it. They aren't limited by the scope of office hours or the business day. We are also finding that, increasingly, customers prefer communicating via e-mail to using a phone and/or fax.[88]

Monitoring the state of customer relations is one essential aspect of public relations. Monitoring media relations is another. Here, too, the Internet is already proving itself of great value to public relations, even though the online capabilities in this area are still quite basic. Shinbach conceded: "We are now beginning to see the emergence of adequately sophisticated online tools that allow public relations to receive customized information. The Internet is a new medium. More sophisticated tools are on the way, though at this time, many are in the early production or late testing stages."[89]

Even so, public relations can derive quite a benefit from those media relations tools that already exist. Solberg acknowledged:

> Traditional database systems like Nexis and Dialog are extremely effective for media relations information. You can get textual information of news programs within the hour. There has been concern with the ease-of-use factor of some databases, but people are working on that and it is becoming easier. Technical difficulties aside, the important thing is that the advent of tools like electronic clipping can increase productivity of public relations by eliminating the need for conducting manual searches. It won't be long before each of us has our own

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[88] Steven Lubetkin, telephone interview, April 1996.
[89] Shinbach, interview.

personalized publication.[90]

The Internet is also gaining prominence as a medium for public relations to communicate with journalists. Lubetkin divulged: "Many journalists already prefer e-mail to paper. In fact, many read e-mail before they read paper."[91] In many cases, public relations professionals are finding useful the ability to circumnavigate journalistic interpretations and communicate one-on-one with readers. As Allen expressed: "Prior to the Internet, news releases were sent out and the media were relied upon to interpret the information--with little or no room for the reader to respond. Now there is dialog. Those concerned about whatever can communicate with us individually—and we can respond in kind. People appreciate that a great deal."[92]

Engaging in dialog not only breeds an air of willingness to communicate, it fosters an aura of certainty. As Shinbach revealed: "Used to engage in dialog, electronic media reinforce the impression that opinions are based in fact, and that those parties on the Internet are interested in open communication--so long as two-way symmetry is the intention."[93]

According to the responses gathered from those interviewed, public relations professionals are increasingly urged to regard two-way symmetric communication as the norm. Shinbach added: "With the increasing availability of online information, two-way symmetry will come to the fore as a matter of competitive equity or advantage."[94] Such an open environment will increasingly mandate the need for honesty and integrity among communicators. Allen alerted: "There is so much communication taking place over the Internet that exposure is just a natural side-effect. People are instantly able to corroborate what you are saying with what others are saying. Liars can be tagged quickly and easily exposed."[95]

With such a vast and open communications domain in use, what are the opportunities for public relations to conduct online surveys at this point? Here the lack of precedent creates the

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[90] Solberg, interview.
[91] Lubetkin, interview.
[92] Allen, interview.
[93] Shinbach, interview.
[94] Shinbach, interview.
[95] Allen, interview.

problems associated with the unknown. As Lubetkin explained: "The problem with online surveys is one of validity. The group online is not a true random sample in any way, primarily because they are all people who chose to be there. So you can't extrapolate the information to reflect the general population. You may be able to extrapolate the results to describe characteristics of the online population, but that is unclear."[96] In spite of this drawback, public relations professionals can use aspects of surveying techniques to refine their Web sites. Allen rationalized: "The ability of users to click on items on Web pages allows public relations to get some idea of how long, on average, people browse a particular page and where they search from there. Studying what routes people take through a Web page--most popular versus the most ignored--can help public relations to refine their organization's Internet site."[97]

There is little doubt that the Internet is changing the nature of mediated communication. Solberg attested: "Any way public relations can achieve increased feedback is helpful. The traditional media are migrating to the Internet, and within the foreseeable future it could become a one-stop shop for information."[98] People are growing increasingly feverish in their quest for information as technology enters an era of feedback upon demand, as Lubetkin specified:

> Today's professionals are moving online en-masse. Very soon all journalism will be distributed in real time, and so companies are going to have much less of a window of time to react. Companies need to have mechanisms in place that will allow them to respond with authority. Corporate public relations officials need to monitor Internet activity because people simply will not wait for a response.[99]

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[96] Lubetkin, interview.

[97] Allen, interview.

[98] Solberg, interview.

[99] Lubetkin, interview.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary:

The purpose of this thesis has been to assess the increasing need for the emergence of two-way symmetric communication as a result of the technological development known as the Internet.

The author documented the Intel Pentium crisis to confirm both the Internet's popularity with the public as well as its ability to communicate the public's sentiments on a given issue of concern.

The author confirmed the Internet's importance both to the Intel case and to emerging developments in public relations via a series of telephone interviews with selected public relations professionals.

From the information gathered via the telephone interviews, the case study as well as other supporting evidence, the author was able to draw the conclusions presented in this chapter.

Conclusions:

The research gathered in this study supports the conclusion that the advent of the Internet has mandated the practice of two-way symmetric communication. Society has become obsessed with the concept of feedback upon demand--and online communications provide the tools necessary to the task.

Research gathered during the course of this thesis also affirmed that online communications can--if properly monitored--help contain or help avert a crisis before it escalates

out of control.[100]

The research revealed that, increasingly, corporate public relations professionals are integrating the role of online information analyst. The research conducted during the course of this thesis suggests that incorporating online technology into organizational planning efforts does elevate the public relations professional's value as counselor. In fact, there is support for the position that those who fail to master the online world will fall hopelessly out of touch with their publics. "As information brokers, public relations people must learn to gather information online, at the faster speeds offered by the new medium and demanded by their stakeholders."[101] In the era of feedback on demand, it is the consumer who has the right to demand--and the public relations professional's job is to keep ahead of it.

Keeping up with consumer demand necessitates that public relations professionals become adept at and specialize in conducting online searches. Research collected during this thesis indicates that doing so is a technical affair requiring expertise. While talk of technical computer mastery can induce fright, it can also be interpreted as a blessing in disguise.

All of the research presented in this thesis highlights one significant finding--that online communication technologies have firmly established themselves as mainstays in the world of corporate communications. Realizing this, today's public relations professionals would be wise to position themselves as online communication specialists. For too long, the profession of public relations has suffered because of the perception that practitioners are information bullies, having been cast as spin doctors and propagandists. Perhaps this was so because public relations professionals always espoused the value of information to publics who couldn't see the information for themselves. Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Newt Gingrich addressed this point at a recent techno-forum when he alluded to transmitting all House documents online, as is now done:

'If you really want to weaken the Washington lobbyists,' said the speaker, 'there is

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[100] Raymond L. Kotcher, "Surviving a Crisis in Cyberspace," *Public Relations Tactics* Mar. 1996: 12.

[101] Mark 14.

no single device that weakens them better than to simply disseminate the

information in real time so that the people who are paying them to lobby are

reading the same documents that they've got and there's no longer any great

advantage to being an insider . . ."[102]

But the advent of online communications means the days of secrecy are officially over.
Just about anyone with a computer and phone connection can have access to the global web of
information that is the Internet. Millions of people already have access, and millions more are on
the way. As information floods the human consciousness, the value of information will give way
to the value of interpretation:

It would be an oversimplification to say that the only way to view the public

relations world of the '90's and the next century is through computerized,

networked information delivered right to your desktop. While the delivery aspect is

true, the same information in the hands of two different people will not necessarily

be interpreted the same way. Online research and computer savvy will not replace

creative, strategic thought. How public relations practitioners analyze the

information they gain online is what is important. But the key to effective analysis

is to first become comfortable online with filtering techniques that bring only the

information or supporting documents needed, since online work can often

overwhelm a person with more information than 10 people could sift through.[103]

Recommendations:

This author sees analyzing and interpreting online information as the future of public

relations worldwide. Interpretation will reign supreme in a feedback upon demand world. This

author recommends that today's public relations professionals must become tomorrow's online

information analysts. Public relations professionals must become adept at sorting through

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[102] Ferguson A16.

[103] Mark 17.

available online information to take full advantage of the Internet's potential benefits.

The author also recommends that further studies be conducted that devote more energy toward assessing the benefits of Intranet management to public relations professionals. At the time this study was conducted, it was too premature to fully assess the value of Intranet developments to public relations departments. As companies do develop Intranet sites, it would be interesting to study the additional communications possibilities that might be generated.

An equally interesting area of study might be the emergence of more sophisticated Internet survey techniques. This area is a nascent topic that should interest the public relations profession for years to come.

Lastly, the author recommends that current and future generations of public relations professionals brace themselves for the grand information roller coaster ride they will encounter in the emerging era of feedback upon demand.

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