

An Analysis of the Website Strategies of Top Fee-Generating
U.S.-Based Public Relations Agencies

John G. Wirtz
Assistant Professor
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Phone: 217.333.1602
Email: jwirtz@illinois.edu

and

Prisca Ngondo
Assistant Professor
Chico State University
Email: pngondo@csuchico.edu

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Abstract

The current paper presents a content analysis of a group of 102 websites of major U.S.-based public relations agencies and a critique of how principles of dialogic communication have been applied to these websites. Our analysis revealed that the agency websites were very strong in the areas of usefulness of information and ease of interface, as might be expected. There was much wider variation in the areas of conservation of visitors and generation of return visitors. For example, only one website featured an explicit invitation to return, and none of the websites had a FAQ or Q&A page. Similarly, closing the dialogic loop was mixed, with many agencies allowing for comments to be left by visitors but with few comments or dialog. We discuss our findings in light of dialogic communication and where we suggest researchers might focus their efforts in the future. In particular, we suggest that an agency-client relationship may represent an example where dialogic communication is appropriate but where that communication style is not enacted via the agency's website. We also highlight examples in which certain agencies use their websites to create dialog with clients and potential clients.

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The use of organizational websites as a tool for facilitating two-way communication between organizations and their publics has been studied and advocated widely by public relations researchers (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998; Ki & Hon, 2006; Park & Reber, 2008). For example, Kent and Taylor (1998) argue that the nature of the Internet and websites offers a unique opportunity to public relations practitioners to create dialogue with their publics. Park and Reber (2008) and Ki and Hon (2006) make similar arguments, and both sets of authors recommend that online strategies should be an important part of the practitioner's tactical arsenal and that practitioners should create a comprehensive set of "best practices" by combining traditional public relations strategies with online strategies.

One popular method of studying ways that organizations use their websites to engage their publics is Kent and Taylor's dialogic theory of public relations (1998; 2002). The theory articulates principles of communication between organizations and their publics that are based in relational communication theory, which itself argues that honest and open discourse is central to good relationships. Kent and Taylor (1998; 2002) also proposed a dialogic communication framework by which researchers can measure the degree to which organizations use websites to facilitate dialogue with their publics. The framework has been applied to a range of organizational type, including nonprofit and activist organizations (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Reber & Kim, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001), *Fortune 500* companies (Esrock & Leichty, 1999, 2000; Park & Reber, 2008),

colleges and universities (Kang & Norton, 2006; McAllister-Spooner, 2008; and congressional offices (Taylor & Kent, 2004).

Interestingly, the degree to which public relations agencies *themselves* use their websites to engage in dialogic communication has yet to be explored. We argue that this is a worthwhile endeavor to pursue for several reasons. First, analyzing agency websites should provide one indication of the popularity of dialogic communication website strategies among agencies, while at the same time suggesting the degree to which at least one set of academic recommendations has penetrated the field of public relations. Second, we believe studying how agencies interact with clients and potential clients in a public forum is useful, as the agency-client relationship may require a different set of website communication strategies than what is suggested by previous dialogic communication research. In fact, this latter point also provides an opportunity for us to critique dialogic communication as it has been applied to website strategies and to suggest future directions for research. For example, are there conditions in which dialogic communication should take different forms (i.e., agency-client relationships)? If so, what are the implications for dialogic communication both in theory and in practice as it is applied to PR agency websites?

Therefore, the current paper presents a content analysis of a group of 102 websites of major U.S.-based public relations agencies and a critique of how principles of dialogic communication have been applied to these websites. We analyzed the websites of the top 50 agencies in terms of revenue according to the O'Dwyer's ranking of top billing firms, as well as 52 smaller agencies (i.e., 100-151) appearing on the same list. As noted, we used Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogic theory of public relations as a basis for our analysis, and we focused on the five

principles of dialogic communication as they are applied to websites (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002).

Given that agencies that with higher billing are also generally larger, we also suggested that those websites may have different features, so we tested whether systematic differences emerged in a comparison of the two groups of agencies. Finally, we discuss our findings in light of the current status of dialogic theory and where we suggest researchers and practitioners focus their efforts in the future. In particular, we suggest that an agency-client relationship may represent an example where dialogic communication is appropriate but where that communication style is not enacted via a website.

Literature Review

Dialogic theory of public relations

Kent and Taylor (1998) state that the Internet presents an opportunity for organizations to develop true discourse between organizations and their publics and that the terms “dialogue” and “dialogic” are becoming more prevalent in describing ethical and practical approaches to communication in academia and industry as public relations theory and research move toward a two-way relational communication model (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

The Kent and Taylor concept of dialogue is rooted in philosophy, rhetoric, psychology, and relational communication theory. At the heart of dialogic theory is what the authors refer to as “dialogic communication,” which is defined as a particular type of relational interaction occurring in a context where a relationship already exists. The authors note that as early as 1974, Johannesen suggested that

dialogue is intimately connected with concepts such as honesty, concern for the audience, genuineness, open-mindedness, empathy, lack of pretense, nonmanipulative intent, and encouragement of free expression.

Pearson (1989) applied these ideas to public relations, arguing that Plato was perhaps the first person to connect the idea of dialogue to certain desirable and ethically preferable styles of communication. Pearson also suggested three procedures useful for facilitating dialogue: that no topic should be excluded *a priori* from discussion, that no type of communication be considered *a priori* as inappropriate or irrational, and that during discourse, communicators have the option of changing levels of reflexivity.

Kent and Taylor (2002) synthesized these ideas, and described dialogue as an orientation that includes several overarching tenets of dialogism. These tenets are the first step toward understanding the concepts of the dialogic theory: *mutuality*, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; *propinquity*, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; *empathy*, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; *risk*, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, *commitment*, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to the public.

In terms of building interpersonal relationships, Kent and Taylor (2002), explain that all organizational members who communicate with publics must be comfortable engaging in dialogue, and the necessary skills needed to achieve dialogic communication include: listening, empathy, being able to contextualize issues within local, national and international frameworks, being able to identify common ground between parties, thinking about long-term rather than short-term objectives, seeking

outgroups or individuals with opposing viewpoints, and soliciting a variety of internal and external opinions on policy issues. They also state that while dialogue “cannot guarantee ethical public relations outcomes, a dialogic communication orientation does increase the likelihood that publics and organizations will better understand each other and have ground rules for communication” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 33).

For mediated dialogic relationships, Kent and Taylor (2002) suggest practical steps that organizations can take to reinforce their commitment to dialogue. Examples include placing e-mail, web addresses, toll-free telephone numbers, and organizational addresses prominently in advertisements, on organizational literature and on all correspondence that appears in public forums. Simple steps such as these then encourage members of publics to engage others in discussions about organizational issues.

And, of course, the authors discuss how websites can be used to create dialogue with an organization’s publics. To serve as guidelines for the successful integration of dialogic communication in public relations practice, Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) offer the five principles to facilitate dialogic relationships with publics through the Internet (see Table 1).

Kent and Taylor’s dialogic theory and framework for measuring dialogic communication in websites has been applied to a variety of organization type. For example, Taylor et al. (2001) studied how activist organizations use the Internet to build relationships, and they found that while most activist organizations met the technical and design aspects required for dialogic relationship building on the Web, they were not yet fully engaging their publics in two-way communication. Additionally, they found that activist organizations were better prepared to address

the needs of member publics rather than media needs. These findings imply that public relations practitioners already have the tools needed for dialogic communication at the websites but for some reason do not.

Table 1

Five principles of dialogic communication applied to websites

Principles	Description
One: The Dialogic Loop	Organizations should create websites that allow the public to ask questions of organizations and for organizations to respond.
Two: The Usefulness of Information	Organizations should provide content that is useful for the user—not just the organization needs.
Three: The Generation of Return Visits	Organizations create websites that inspire users to make repeat visits
Four: The Intuitiveness/Ease of Interface	Organizations should create websites that are easy to navigate and understand.
Five: The Rule of Conservation of Visitors	Organizations should create websites that keep visitors interested and surfing the site without going somewhere else. This principle has evolved into a measure of how timely the information is on a website (Kent & Taylor, 2004)

Table created from (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 326-330).

More recently, Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) studied the dialogic potential of blogs in relationship building and found that blogs incorporated dialogic communication principles to a greater degree than traditional websites, potentially making them better suited for online relationship building. Seltzer and Mitrook

asserted that blogs can be effective at establishing and maintaining organization public relationships especially for public relations practitioners who are versed in two-way symmetrical communication skills and who are knowledgeable of the organization and its publics. They state that these practitioners should be capable of practicing the type of public relations that effective blogging demands, therefore allowing the blog to reach its full dialogic potential in online relationship building.

Finally, in a ten-year review of dialogic Internet principles, McAllister-Spooner (2009) found that in spite of recommendations of scholars to incorporate two-way dialogic channels, websites are very poorly used dialogic tools, and that most organizational websites are effectively utilized only for introductory level of relationship-building functions. Additional findings suggest that while the websites are easy to use and offer useful information, they do not do the dialogic functions very well. McAllister-Spooner concludes that regardless of type, organizations do not seem to be fully utilizing the interactive potential of the Internet to build and maintain organization–public relationships.

Social media and dialogic communication

Even though it is unclear what its full effect may be in the long-term, the use of social media has increased exponentially over the last several years and become recognized as an essential tool by public relations practitioners (Taylor & Kent, 2010). As an example, the authors note that the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) hosted eight Webinars in February and March 2009 that addressed social media and that the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) offers podcasts and lessons on how to integrate social media technology into the communications practice.

Blogs are generally also included in the social media spectrum, and the use of blogs in public relations serves two main functions (Hallett, 2005). First, it allows the practitioners to “analyze the market and ascertain the opinions of their audiences—to gauge public opinion on a business, product or brand” (Hallett, p. 269). Second, blogs allow consumers to participate in the communication loop by “giving opinions both personal and organizational, be it by posting comments on other blogs or creating one’s own” (Hallett, p. 269). This implies that blogs are a natural fit within the dialogic communication framework.

As social media continues to emerge as an area of research (Trammell, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Stewart, 2008; Wright & Hinson, 2008; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Taylor & Kent, 2010), it should be an important consideration when it comes to the dialogic loop as it may help build relationships and possibly “facilitate more balanced organization-public relationships” (Kent et al., 2003).

Public relations practitioners and dialogic communication

One final element to consider is how important PR practitioners view web-based tools. There is a significant amount of research indicating that they recognize their importance. For example, in a recent study Porter, Sweetser and Chung (2009) found that PR practitioners were using blogs as much as the general population. As Sallot, Porter and Acosta-Alzuru (2004) noted, “Practitioners see the web as essential to compete in today’s dynamic business environment, since clients and management expect practitioners to handle any web-related issues” (p. 272). In addition to having a company blog, 70% of the 216 practitioners surveyed by Porter et al. also maintained a personal blog. Another survey of 283 practitioners showed that 24% of

them used social networking, about 40% had blogs and 19% used photo-sharing platforms such as Flickr (Eyrich, Padman, Sweetser, 2008).

Sallot et al. (2004) also interviewed PR practitioners about their Web use and their perceptions about the role Web-based tools should be used in the field. Some of the results indicate that PR practitioners use the Web “as a way to ‘laser-target’ publics...and improve relationships with management and clients” (Sallot et al., p.276). Additionally, practitioners viewed the Web as a way of not only enhancing their image, but also as another channel to distribute information (Hill & White, 2000). Although the practitioners acknowledged that the Web was “a way to strengthen relationships that already existed” (Hill & White, p. 42) they did not see the Web as being capable of ever replacing the value of face-to-face communication.

It is clear that PR practitioners recognize the Web as a tool to rely information to and from the public. It is also clear that public relations researchers have advocated using the Web in general and websites in particular as a tool to facilitate dialogic communication. What is less clear is whether the PR practitioners put those recommendations into practice in their own organizational websites.

Research questions

We pursued three research questions in our analysis. The first question was guided by the dialogic communication website framework (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002). We also were interested in the degree to which public relations agencies featured social media tools, and so coding for social media tools was added to our analysis. Finally, we explored whether there were differences between the websites of the larger agencies and the other agencies.

RQ1: *Do public relations agency websites demonstrate principles of dialogic communication?*

RQ2: *Do public relations agencies use social media to create dialogue with their clients and potential clients?*

RQ3: *Are there systematic differences between large and smaller public relations agencies?*

Method

This study reports the results of a content analysis of 102 websites of U.S.-based public relations agencies. The analysis was conducted over a one-week period in August 2012.

Sampling plan

O'Dwyer's Public Relations News is a company that reports news about the public relations field, and the company has published a widely used agency directory since 1970. We used O'Dwyer's list of the top-grossing public relations agencies with major U.S. operations as the basis for identifying the websites used in the study ("Public relations firm rankings," August 2012).

Two sets of agencies were selected based on their rank on that list—the top 50 (i.e., agencies ranked 1-50; $n = 50$) and the bottom third (i.e., agencies ranked 100-151; $n = 52$). When a link was provided to the main agency website on the O'Dwyer's list, we used that link to access the agency. If no link was provided, the agency website was identified using an Internet search with the Google search engine. Each of the agencies on the list had a website, so this resulted in 102 websites that were coded.

Coding procedures

Two graduate students were trained in how to perform content analysis on websites. A codebook was developed using three previous website and dialogic communication studies (Kent et al., 2003; Taylor & White, 2004; [AUTHORS]). The coders analyzed a sample of 4 websites, the results were discussed, and the coding list was finalized.

The main coding categories were 1) usefulness of information, 2) ease of interface, 3) conservation of visitors, 4) generation of return visits, and 5) dialogic loop (see Appendix for coding sheet). For conservation of visitors, important information was operationalized as information about the organization, such as an event hosted by the agency. Quick links was operationalized as an alphabetized list of the most frequently requested pages that was placed on the front page.

For social media, we focused on popular social media tools and whether or not they were referenced on the front page. For example, Facebook page was operationalized as a direct reference to an agency's fan page on Facebook or a link that took a visitor to the agency's Facebook page. We also coded for the presence of a blog (or blogs), as well as who authored the blog (e.g., none, executive, employee). Finally, we included whether the blogs allowed for comments in the social media, because allowing for comments could be considered part of the dialogic loop.

Inter-coder reliability

Inter-coder reliability was established using cross-tabulation to derive a *Kappa* value. Percent agreement was also calculated. websites were coded independently, with 10% of the websites being coded by both coders to establish reliability. Each coder then coded the remaining 46% of the sites the other did not

code. The resulting *Kappa* value was a substantial $\kappa = .75$ (Landis & Koch, 1977) and a percent agreement of 85%. Riffe, Lacy and Fico (2005) noted that a minimum level of 80% agreement is required.

Results

The first research question was, “Do public relations agency websites demonstrate principles of dialogic communication?” To answer this question, we aggregated the data for the top-billing and lower-ranked agencies. We then present descriptive statistics on the five categories of dialogic communication as applied to websites.

Ease of interface

Ease of interface concerns website features that facilitate site navigation. Almost all of the websites had major links to the rest of the site (98%), and almost all of the sites displayed the agency logo on the front page (92%). Conversely, only 14.7% included a site map and only 19.6% had a search engine. The latter two items are common features of websites. (See Table 2.)

Usefulness to clients and potential clients

Usefulness of information relates to whether or not a website has features that meet the needs of its visitors. For clients and potential clients, we would expect the agency websites to have items such as contact information, agency specialties, and how to request information.

This was probably the area that was strongest and most consistent across the websites. For example, 99% of the agency websites contained contact information,

80.4% contained a list of agency leaders (e.g., president, vice presidents, etc.), 93.1% had a list of expertise, and 85.3% provided a client list. Interestingly, only 11.8% of the websites had a specific mechanism for requesting information and only 27.5% featured client testimonials. Finally, only 6.9% of the websites had a special password-protected area for clients.

Table 2

Occurrence of dialogic features in public relations agency websites

Category	Total	Top 50	Bottom 50
Ease of interface			
Site map	14.7	24.0	5.8
Major links to rest of site	98.0	98.0	98.1
Search engine box	19.6	36.0	3.8
Logo of organization on front page	92.2	88.0	96.2
Usefulness to clients potential clients			
Agency contact information	99.0	100.0	98.1
Password-protected area for clients	6.9	10.0	3.8
List of agency leadership	80.4	74.0	86.5
Client list	85.3	82.0	88.5
Area of agency expertise	93.1	96.0	90.4
Client testimonials	27.5	28.0	26.9
Case studies	57.8	68.0	48.1
Publicity about clients/projects	89.2	88.0	90.4
Opportunity to request information	11.8	16.0	7.7
Conservation of visitors			
Important information on first page	70.6	64.0	76.9
Post time and date of last update	2.9	0.0	5.8
Quick links to rest of site	61.8	70.0	53.8

Note. Table includes percent for each category. Top 50 = top 50 public relations agencies by total billing in 2011; Bottom 50 = agencies ranked 100-151 by total billing in 2011.

Conservation of visitors and generation of return visits

For conservation of visitors, we coded whether important information was on the home page and whether information about recent updates was available.

Important information included items such as upcoming events, and 70.6% of the websites included important information on the front page. For quick links, 61.8% of the sites had a bar for quick links off the front page. However, only 2.9% of the websites listed the time and date of last update. (See Table 3.)

For generation of return visits, we coded features of websites that would give visitors a reason to return to the website. Again, somewhat surprisingly agency websites did not include features that are commonly associated with generation of return visits. For example, none of the websites (0%) had a FAQs or Q&A page and only one website (1%) had an explicit invitation to return, although 5.9% did include a “Bookmark Now” feature. About 21% of the sites had some type of downloadable information, such as case studies or white papers.

Dialogic Loop

The dialogic loop consists of providing the opportunity for publics to engage organizations by expressing their opinions but also organizations can “close the dialogic loop” by responding to the publics. The dialogic loop is often operationalized as instances where website visitors can leave comments and where the organization can also respond.

Here, 34.3% of the websites provided opportunity for some type of user response. Not surprisingly, only one website provided the opportunity for visitors to vote on an issue and only two websites had public surveys that visitors could vote on. While generally not included in the dialogic loop, we did note that 32.4% of the

websites included the option of signing up for some type of email news or e-newsletter.

Table 3

Occurrence of dialogic features in public relations agency websites

Category	<i>Total</i>	<i>Top 50</i>	<i>Bottom 50</i>
Return visit encouragement			
Explicitly invites user to return		2.0	0.0
FAQ/Q&As	0.0	0.0	0.0
Request to “Bookmark now”	5.9	10.0	1.9
Downloadable information	21.6	22.0	21.2
Dialogic loop			
Opportunity for user response	34.3	50.0	19.2
Opportunity to vote on issues	1.0	2.0	0.0
Survey to voice opinion	2.0	4.0	0.0
Email newsletter/e-newsletter	32.4	34.0	30.8
Social media			
website hosts blog	63.7	74.0	53.8
Facebook page	61.8	66.0	57.7
Twitter handle	66.7	72.0	61.5
Other social media tool/s	55.9	64.0	48.1

Note. Table includes percent for each category. Top 50 = top 50 public relations agencies by total billing in 2011; Bottom 50 = agencies ranked 100-151 by total billing in 2011.

Social media

The second research question asked whether public relations agencies use social media to create dialogue with their clients and potential clients. Because Kent and Taylor’s dialogic communication framework was developed prior to the development and popularization of many social network sites, we included those as a

separate category. We coded for the presence of blogs, as well as common social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter. We also coded for whether blogs allowed for comments.

About two-thirds of the websites (63.7%) had a blog. The two most common types of blogs were what we term “generic,” with no named author or a rotating author (about a third of the blogs) and slightly more than a third of the blogs featured one employer. The other popular category was blogs by executives (18.4%). Almost all of the blogs allowed comments (89.2%).

There were similar percentages for other popular social networking tools: 61.8% had a Facebook page, 66.7% had an agency Twitter handle, and 55.9% had references to some type of other social media tool, such as LinkedIn, Youtube, Digg, and Reddit.

Comparing Top-50 agencies to lower-ranked agencies

The third research question asked whether there would be significant differences between large and smaller public relations agencies. We used Chi-square to compare the set of 50 top-billing public relations agencies to the 52 other agencies. In general, most of the comparisons showed that differences between the larger and smaller agencies were not significant. The areas where the differences were significant likely reflected access to greater staff resources than strategic decisions by the larger agencies.

For example, the top-billing agencies were more likely to provide a site map, $X^2(1, N = 102) = 6.75, p = .009$, and more likely to provide a search engine, $X^2(1, N = 102) = 16.72, p = .0001$. Similarly, the larger agencies were also more likely to provide case studies, $X^2(1, N = 102) = 4.15, p = .04$ and to provide a “Bookmark

Now” statement, $X^2(1, N = 102) = 3.00, p = .08$, although both of the latter two differences should be interpreted cautiously given the relatively low counts for both size of agency. The larger agencies were also more likely to provide opportunities for user response, $X^2(1, N = 102) = 10.71, p = .001$. Finally, the websites for the agencies were more likely to have some sort of blog, $X^2(1, N = 102) = 4.48, p = .03$.

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to apply the five principles of Kent and Taylor’s (1998, 2002) dialogic theory to a content analysis of two groups of public relations agency websites. The first group was the top 50 PR agencies in terms of fees for 2010, according to O’Dwyer’s Public Relations News. The second group comprised the bottom third of the top billing agencies (i.e., 100-151). In addition to the five principles of dialogic communication, we coded for the presence of blogs and other social media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter. Finally, we conducted an exploratory analysis to determine whether there were systematic differences between the top 50 agencies and the other agencies in terms of what was included in the websites.

Evidence of dialogic communication

The first research question asked whether we would find examples of dialogic communication in public relations agency websites. In some ways the results of our analysis were striking, although perhaps not altogether surprising given what other studies have found (e.g., McAllister-Spooner, 2009). As a group, the PR agency websites demonstrated some evidence of dialogic principles, although there was considerable variance both within and between the five principles.

For example, while most of the websites included major links to the rest of the website and a clearly identifiable logo (associated with ease of interface), few provided a site map and relatively few provided a search engine box. Similarly, the agency websites were very consistent in providing certain types of useful information to what are certainly two of their most important publics—current and potential clients. Items such as agency contact information, lists of agency leaders, and areas of agency expertise were readily available, as were examples of publicity about clients or projects. The latter example is to be expected. However, it was somewhat surprising how few websites included opportunities to request information or special password-protected areas for clients. While providing a special area for clients may represent a significant investment in an agency's website, providing opportunities to request information seem like a very simple change to make.

The same trend continued with both the conservation of visitors and return visit encouragement principles. For conservation of visitors, important information on the front page and quick links were available on many of the sites, but very few posted the last time and date of update—a common way to indicate that a site is active. There were also very few examples of the common items associated with encouraging return visits. For example, only two sites explicitly invited users to return. Not one website included FAQs, and only seven sites total requested visitors to bookmark the site. Again, these suggest simple changes that agencies could make to increase the dialogic capacity of their websites.

Closing the dialogic loop—providing visitors an opportunity to ask questions or give opinions and the organization responding—was strangely absent in the majority of the websites. Again, common ways of measuring the dialogic loop, such as an

opportunity to vote on issues or to use a survey to voice an opinion were only found on three websites. There were more opportunities for user response, but that was still only evident in about a third of the websites.

So, the question becomes why weren't there more examples of dialogic communication on the agency websites? One possibility is that PR practitioners are unaware of Kent and Taylor's dialogic theory and their suggestions for website features that encourage dialogue. And, of course, this is possible given the often-wide chasm between researchers and practitioners. Another possibility is that perhaps the websites reflect a "do as we say, not as we do" mentality. That is, while public relations practitioners likely recommend to their clients to use their websites to create dialogue and build stronger relationships with their clients' publics, it is possible that agencies do not see the need to use their own websites in this way. It is also plausible that agencies are more interested in using websites to push out information than engaging their clients in dialogue. And this is a common finding among websites (e.g., Kent et al., 2003).

But we offer a third possibility—perhaps practitioners feel as if their websites are not the proper venue for dialogue. Perhaps there is something unique about the agency-client relationship such that agencies use their websites as a virtual "front door" where potential customers can come and browse without being bothered. If this is the case, then we would expect to see the principles of dialogic communication in evidence in other types of communication but not the websites. Because agencies exist to sell their services, it may also be that the agencies are reticent to provide too much information that could be used by competitors. Even so, there are a number of

minor changes that agencies could make that would increase the dialogic communication of their websites.

Agency use of social media

The second research question asked whether we would find examples of social media on the public relations websites. Again, given the recent explosion of social media, the results of this analysis were somewhat surprising. Only about two-thirds of the websites used featured blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and others social media tools such as LinkedIn, Youtube or Reddit.

Many of the agencies that did use them, though, took advantage of the natural dialogic characteristics of social media. For example, many of the blogs posts featured responses from commenters who claimed to be current or former clients. Similarly, the Facebook pages often included comments from visitors and fans, as well as responses from someone at the agency.

We believe that social media offers a great opportunity for agencies to engage in dialogue with clients and potential clients. We also assert that increasingly this is what clients and potential clients expect. For example, Twitter could be used by agencies not only to talk about what services they offer, but also to engage in online discussions about topics of interest to the clients.

Comparison of top billing agencies

The final research question asked whether there would be significant differences between the larger and smaller agencies. While we did not offer this as a hypothesis, we expected that if differences emerged, they would be likely to emerge in the more technical elements of the websites. And we found this to be the case. For example, the larger agencies were more like to provide features such as site maps and

search engines. They were also more likely to provide case studies and to host a blog. All of these findings are likely to reflect that agencies have more staff available to write case studies.

It is worth noting that given the relative lack of differences across so many coded variables that there does seem to be an agreement across larger and smaller agencies about what is important to include. Ironically, many of those items could be interpreted as one-way communication. For example, clients lists, agency expertise, and publicity about past successes provide information about the agency that is useful, but not really dialogic in nature.

Implications for theory

In the ten-year review of Internet dialogic principles, McAllister-Spooner (2009) suggested future research refine the dialogic principles. Additionally, McAllister noted how websites were not reaching their full dialogic potential because they are being underutilized. This study further refines these principles by coding for social media, client log-in and a list of leadership/management.

If the dialogic loop concerns itself with giving users an opportunity for feedback, a platform to vote on issues and voice opinions, and offering regular information (Kent et al., 2003), then the dialogic loop should be updated to include social media. Outlets such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter allow companies to provide regular information to users directly instead of relying on traditional media (Wright & Hinson, 2008). Social media also allow users to comment and participate in surveys and polls, as Stewart (2008) advised, “If your PR client sells a product or service, tell them to give his or her customers the option of following them on Twitter.

This is a wonderful way to keep in touch with customers and get their instant feedback” (p. 17).

Kent and Taylor (2002) noted that, “dialogic participants must be accessible” (p. 26), “participants in dialogue should be viewed as persons and not as objects” (p. 25), and “dialogue is honest and forthright. It involves revealing one’s position” (p.29). By coding to see whether the leadership identified itself on the websites, we can see whether practitioners are incorporating elements of dialogic features. Giving clients an opportunity to access the non-public side of the company may increase that accessibility. By observing these occurrences researchers can accurately judge the theory’s assumptions.

McAllister-Spooner (2009) also suggested that dialogic theory should be advanced by analyzing web users input and feedback. This study offers evidence that larger agencies are more likely to provide opportunities for user response, both on the website and blogs. Now that we know that these platforms exist and being utilized, the next step should be to analyze the nature of messages to and from the public. This can further strengthen the assumptions of dialogic theory by illuminating the themes in the messages on blogs, Facebook pages and tweets.

We also believe that deeper consideration needs to be given to potential boundary conditions for dialogic communication, at least as it applied to websites. As suggested earlier, it is possible that there is something unique about the agency-client relationship such that websites are not the proper venue for dialogue. Because of the nature of proprietary information and recommendations, it is possible that the dialogic communication framework is not applicable—at least that only parts of it are applicable to agency websites. This is an area that should be pursued in future

research. Are there one-size-fits-all principles of dialogic communication when applied to websites or are certain classes of websites different?

Implications for practitioners

Kent et al.'s (2003) study suggested that "if organizations want to use their websites to build relations with publics, certain design features are necessary" (p.75). As useful as the dialogic features can be, practitioners need to make sure that they are using the right mix of features to achieve their goals. For organizations that depend on the public to achieve their mission, employing dialogic features in the website design is important (Kent et al.).

McAllister (2009) noted that in order for practitioners to fulfill the "dialogic promise" (p. 321), they must concentrate on the website as one of the building blocks for relationship building. This study provides a guideline based on the dialogic features put forth by Kent and Taylor. As a major conduit for communication, websites are poised to facilitate relationship building through dialogue because the Internet is the next best thing to the interpersonal ideal (Kent & Taylor, 2002),

The web can be used to communicate directly with publics by offering real time discussions, feedback loops, places to post-comments, sources for organizational information, and postings of organizational member biographies and contact information. Through the commitment of organizational resources and training, the Web can function dialogically rather than monologically (p.31).

This data suggests that the top billing websites have the capacity to complete the dialogic loop, however a guideline that includes features more specific to their goal and capabilities is needed.

We also note that some of the agency websites have been surprisingly slow to embrace social media and feature it on their websites. Prior to beginning the study, we fully expected that 100% of the large and smaller agencies would have Facebook pages and Twitter handles, as well as featuring other social media. Again, perhaps this is a case of the “cobbler’s children having no shoes,” where agencies are so busy getting their clients up and running on social media that they haven’t had time themselves to develop a stronger social media presence.

Another observation was the relative lack of feedback in the agency-hosted blogs. Most of the blog posts did not contain any comments, and the few that did have comments were rarely acknowledged by the blog’s author. This finding suggests that having an agency blog may represent a task that no one really wants to do or has time for. Here, it is likely better to have a very active blog that follows principles related to blogging rather than having a blog that no one reads.

Limitations and areas of future study

There are several limitations that should be noted in the current study. First, because we used total billing as the main criteria for inclusion in the study, we must be cautious about drawing inferences. While total revenue may represent one type of size, it is possible that other important segments of public relations agencies were omitted from the study. Perhaps agencies that focus on social media or online presence would have websites that are more dialogic in nature.

Second, we adapted the coding for “usefulness for client and potential client” from past studies. It may have been better to think conceptually about what a client or potential client may find useful, although certainly items such as agency expertise and agency leadership should be useful to both groups. Finally, we only looked at

official agency Facebook pages and Twitter pages. It is likely that many people working at agencies have a social media presence that cannot be separated from their role in the agency. Thus, it is possible that we underestimate how much dialogue is actually occurring.

While the results of the study were interesting, there are also several areas of future research suggested by the study. The first, of course, is our suggestion of a rethinking of the dialogic communication framework. At the very least, we suggest that it be updated to include social media, but it is possible that we should rethink the framework itself in light of the different types of uses for websites. We assert that this is a topic for research, though, rather than simply offering a new framework. Second, we suggest further analyses with a more representative sample of agencies. As well, we suggest looking at different types of agency specialization. Finally, it would be interesting to study whether other agencies from other strategic communication fields (e.g., advertising, marketing) demonstrate dialogic communication with their websites.

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Appendix

Ease of interface

- 1) Site map (y/n)
- 2) Major links to rest of site (y/n)
- 3) Search engine box (y/n)
- 4) Logo of organization on front page (y/n)

Usefulness to clients and potential clients

- 1) Agency contact information (y/n)
- 2) Special area for clients (password-protected) (y/n)
- 3) List of employees (y/n)
- 4) Client list (y/n)
- 5) Areas of expertise listed (y/n)
- 6) Client testimonials (y/n)
- 7) Case studies (y/n)
- 8) Publicity about current clients/projects (e.g., recent newspaper or broadcast media coverage) (y/n)
- 9) Ability to request information (y/n)

Conservation of visitors

- 1) Important information on first page (y/n)
- 2) Posting of last updated time and date (y/n)
- 3) Quick links to other parts of website for popular information (y/n)

Return visit encouragement

- 1) Explicit invitation to return (y/n)
- 2) FAQ's or Q&A's (y/n)

3) Bookmark now (y/n)

4) Downloadable information (PDF files, etc.) (y/n)

Dialogic loop

1) Opportunity for user-response (y/n)

2) Opportunity to vote on issues (y/n)

3) Survey to voice opinion on issues (y/n)

4) Offers regular information (e.g., e-mail, e-newsletter) (y/n)

Social media

1) Blog (y/n)

2) Type of blog: company (no author) = 1, executive (specified) = 2, employee = 3

3) Blog allows comments (y/n)

4) Reference to Facebook page (y/n)

5) Reference to Twitter handle (y/n)

6) Other references (e.g, LinkedIn, MySpace, etc) (y/n)