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# **ELECTRONIC WINDOW DRESSING: IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT ON THE INTERNET**

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Businesses have begun to embrace the Internet to reap economic advantages. Considerable attention has been paid to instrumental uses of the Internet, but anecdotal evidence indicates that customers form impressions of organizations based on interaction with their World Wide Web (Cook and Sellers 1995), a topic that has received little research attention. If Web sites are influential in impression formation, they represent a new and peculiarly powerful tool in the quest for competitive advantage; organizations that recognize the power of the Web in impression management can use it to improve their image among powerful stakeholders.

Internet users who are browsing the Web may be considered to be walking down an electronic Main Street (the Web) and looking into the windows of various firms (Web sites) along the way. Web sites provide frames of symbolic representations designed to inform and lure the browser in to take a closer look. A dramaturgical perspective (Goffman 1959) would suggest that an electronic store front is created using icons, text, graphics, and structure. The situated identities perspective (Alexander and Knight 1971) highlights the importance of industry norms in determining pressuring companies to establish a Web presence and in influencing Web page design. The symbolic interaction approach (Blumer 1969) suggests that pages will vary depending on audience expectations.

This multi-phase project addresses the following research questions:

1. Do potential customers form impressions of organizations based on their Web pages, or do they only retrieve the data provided and suspend judgement?
2. Do impressions created by Web sites differ across firms and industries?
3. What characteristics of Web pages contribute to the impressions created?

In the first phase of the project, participants readily confirmed the creation of both positive and negative impressions based on characteristics of Web sites. A follow-up study reported Web-based impressions that were consistent among respondents, but differed among firms and between industries on several dimensions, so the Web is not just acting as a new medium for the transfer of information. Web designers of the Web sites evaluated in the second phase confirmed that they did not consciously intend to create the various impressions, but readily admitted that certain characteristics of their sites may lead to impression formation. They also indicated that their designs were primarily influenced by norms they abstracted by visiting sites of other companies in the same industry. A fourth study is underway to determine the relationship of Web site characteristics with the creation of specific impressions.

Future research directions and the intriguing implications of these results for Web page design will be discussed.

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