

PUBLIC RELATIONS ON THE WEB

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ABSTRACT

The new communication tools are rapidly changing and there is a general acceptance that the role of communication as a contributor to strategy within an organisation, is increasingly important. Recently, new tools and approaches to traditional tools have become available to the public relations practitioners, too. Among these new media the World Wide Web has been one of the most powerful for an organisation to communicate with its target audience. We have examined the difference of world wide web from traditional media, the purposes of having web sites and their contents in this study. We have also tried to find answers of how web sites could be used for public relations purposes and crisis management.

Keywords: Public relations, the World Wide Web, web site.

WEB'DE HALKLA İLİŞKİLER

ÖZET

Yeni iletişim araçları hızla değişmekte ve bir kuruluşta, kuruluş stratejisine katkı sağlayan bir unsur olarak iletişimin rolünün giderek arttığı konusunda genel bir fikir birliği bulunmaktadır. Son yıllarda geleneksel araçlara yönelik yeni yaklaşımlar ve araçlar, halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcıları için kullanılabilir hale gelmiştir. Bu yeni iletişim araçları içerisinde World Wide Web, bir kuruluşun hedef kitlesiyle iletişim kurmasında en güçlü araçlardan birisi olmuştur. Bu çalışmada internet ve World Wide Web'in geleneksel iletişim araçlarından farkının ne olduğu, web sitelerinin kuruluş amaçları, içeriklerinin nasıl olduğu, halkla ilişkiler amaçları için web sitelerinden nasıl faydalanılabileceği ve kriz durumlarında web sitelerinden nasıl yararlanılabileceği gibi konular ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Halkla ilişkiler, world wide web, web sitesi,

INTRODUCTION

Public relations has been historically incorporated with varied media that include traditional news releases, bulletin boards, annual reports, films and slides, flip charts, public relations advertising, special events, sponsorship, internet and other efforts, and interpersonal tools in an effort to support positive relationships between organisations and their publics. Public relations practitioners understanding that members of different public attend to various channels differently, have been receptive to experimentation and change in the choice of medium for message dissemination.

New tools and approaches to traditional tools have become available to the public relations practitioners in recent years. Trade and academic researches have examined the acceptance and diffusion of these new communication models such as video news releases, advertorials and the World Wide Web. Organisations should follow up these innovations to reach target audience as far as technology improves and communication tools and methods change. The importance of communication tools and media has increased still more in the process of world's getting global.

Now, people are being confronted with more information and more choices than they can possibly handle in the time available. Some of these information might be positive, some of them might be negative for the organisations. For this reason spreading information by new technology should be observed and necessary precautions should be taken.

In this study, the questions as how world wide web could be used by organisation to communicate with its target audience, what are the functions of having a web site and which components should exist on a web site have been evaluated. Our goal is to demonstrate how internet and the World Wide Web could be used for public relations purpose.

Before we look at public relations on the Web, we think that it is useful for us to define public relations and the World Wide Web.

DEFINING PUBLIC RELATIONS

Until now, many definitions of public relations have been developed. Most of them are long, the others are short. There is the function of communication that is two-ways in many definitions of

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public relations. Communication is a behaviour of individuals, groups and organisations. People communicate when they exchange messages each other. Public relations professionals doesn't only communicate themselves too. They communicate a great deal of messages into their internal and external audiences.

The Institute of Public Relations defines public relations as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics (Wilcox Ault and Agee 1986:5). When the Institute of Public Relations defined public relations, it pointed out mutual understanding as an effect in this definition.

Another definition is approved at the World Assembly of Public Relations in Mexico City in 1978. In this definition public relations practice has been defined as the art and social science of analysing trends predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which serve both the organisation's and public's interest (Seitel 1992:8). In 1976, Rex Harlow collected 472 definitions of written public relations since the early 1900s and produced a long definition. To summarise his public relations definition is 'the management of communication between an organisation and its public' (Grunig and Hunt 1984:7). Some educators have their own definitions. For example Cutlip, Center and Broom defines public relations as the management of the relationship between an organisation and key publics (Bruning and Ledingham 2000:86). According to Steven R. Thomsen the principal function of public relations has been the building of relationships and the management of communication between organisations and individuals (Cooley 1999:41).

The main function of public relations is to enable communication between organisation and its target audience as we see within all these definitions. We see the task of enabling communication is the primary one among the goals of having web site.

THE WORLD WIDE WEB

On the global network of computers is the World Wide Web able to exist. A definition of the World Wide Web is the universe of network-accessible information, an embodiment of

human knowledge (http://www.aol.about.com/internet/aol/library/glossary/bldef_worldwideweb.htm). The web is a system of Internet servers that supports a collection of documents that are written and formatted using the same type of programming language, which is called Hypertext Markup Language, or HTML. The web is based on a set of rules for exchanging text, images, sound, video and other multimedia files (Kırçova 1999:19-20). When you enter a web site address in your browser, web sites are able to be retrieved and viewed. Because you are sending a Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) command to the web server directing it to find and transmit the requested Web page (http://www.netforbeginners.about.com/library/glossary/bldef_www.htm#).

Web base is highly dynamic. Web can be developed by using Java and Activex. While in the United States of America %34 of the top 500 companies had web pages in 1996, this ratio has been %80 in 1997 (Kırçova 1999:20,54). Today many organisations have the millions of web pages on the internet. The reason of existence of so many web sites is the desire of organisations to reach their target audience by different purposes.

INTERNET AND TRADITIONAL INFORMATION CHANNELS

Via the internet the growing commercialisation of the World Wide Web has led to the increased availability of corporate information. Now it is easy to get information about the companies, products and services for individuals. Any individual can find about what's happening at a company with the touch of a key (Nakra 2000:37). It has got easy to reach and receive information such as touching a key.

It is possible to see the specifications of different media below. Among these media, Some functions of the World Wide Web as an interactive media as having the possibility of especially one to one communication by e-mail and feedback opportunity (comments about facilities by e-mail and their response from the organisation) and advantage of control can not be denied by public relations experts.

The internet has radically altered the nature of traditional communication too. This has important consequences for the way of organisations to share and distribute information with their

CHARACTERS OF DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION CHANNELS					
Characters of Communication Channels	Interpersonal Communication : Telephone	Interactive Communication : World Wide Web and E-Mail	Interactive Communication : CD-ROM	Mass Media: Daily Newspaper	Mass Media: Television
The Flow of Information	One person with another	One person with many others, One person with another	From one person to mass	From one person to mass	From one person to mass
Media Feedback Symmetry	High	High	Low	Low	Low
Degree of Selectiveness	High	High	High - Low Depend on prog.	High	Low
Interactive Selection	High	High	High	Medium	Low
Interpersonal Interaction	Yes	Yes and No	No	No	No
Interaction between person and search engine	No	No	Yes	No	No
(Usage) Control Opportunity	Very Good	Good	Fairly	Low	Low

(Hoewner 2000).

publics. In the past, information flows were mostly linear and hierarchical and easy for organisations to influence or control-for example, via public relations and mass media advertising. Now, the internet changes this. The open, interconnected nature of the internet is replacing this linear information 'supply chain' with a network-based, peer-to-peer communication model that lacks clear locus point.

Except the traditional mass media the World Wide Web can be considered the first public relations medium. Because the World Wide Web allows managed communication to flow directly between organisations and its publics without the gatekeeper function of other mass media (White and Raman 1999:406). As known, gatekeeper is a person who decides whether messages can be communicated or not. Gatekeepers filter a lot of information that comes from different sources and change their content. Gatekeepers can be

owner of the media, reporters, editors, producers and etc. In the World Wide Web content is not filtered by journalists and editors. Visitors can easily read all of information in the web sites. Consequently the messages which organisations would like to send to their target audience could take place on their web sites as they wish. Of course obeying legal regulations.

Today internet is increasingly booming. As a result of the internet, every organisation is new a 24-hour business with their publics. The design and content of web sites which are available for 24 hours for target audience should be appropriate to their purposes. So they should be prepared and managed professionally.

We can see that the internet and web are different from traditional mass media. Because, the web is the first controlled mass medium and provide two-way communication. The matter that

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should be considered here is to prepare web site enabling interactive communication. Consequently if there is not interactive communication possibility in web sites we can not talk about interactivity of web. We can define this type of web as enabling one way communication media.

Before the advent of the World Wide Web, advertising was the only mean to send a controlled message to a mass audience through a mass medium (White and Raman 1999:406). Consequently the content of other messages were being controlled, changed or they might not take place in mass media which let them reach mass people. And now by means of internet and web desired information is being send to target audience on electronic media easily.

PURPOSE OF WEB SITES

If an organisation's web site has contact address or e-mail address, via an web site, building relationships can serve to improve corporate identity and image and gather information about public. Different fields of business use the Web for not only advertising and marketing activities but also to obtain feedback and improve public relations. Web sites are used to:

- keep stakeholders up-to-date,
- provide and facilitate information to the media,
- gather information about publics,
- improve corporate image,
- strengthen corporate identity,
- provide employee communication,
- make a status symbol for an organisation,
- online sales,
- reach an international market,
- reach anybody/or surfing the net,
- and to host of other public relations functions.

Naturally above mentioned purposes of having web sites of organisations are varied depending on organisations. While there are products and information about how is shopping done exists in a shopping web site, the purposes of giving information to press or communicating with the employee do not exist. So each organisation should determine his web site's purposes peculiar to himself and organise his web site according to these purposes. For example most Fortune 500 companies use Web sites for external communication focusing on promoting the company image and enhancing public relations rather than

for direct sales or other revenue generating activities (Hill and White 2000:31-32). But another research revealed that web sites are used to provide information, advertising and marketing facilities and for customer communication. (White and Raman 1999:410).

Generally we can divide the purposes of web sites into two groups as the one with marketing and advertising purposes and another for giving service and information. We can say that marketing and advertising based sites are one sided and service and information based sites are two sided if they are arranged as interactively. Here we will just mention that the purpose of web sites varies depending on organisations more than evaluating them in details because of our subject.

Melissa A. Johnson, who wrote an article Journal of Public Relations Research in 1997, stressed that public relations practitioners use the Web to facilitate media relations, for employee communication and government and investor relations as well as for customer and consumer relations (White and Raman 1999:406). It is also important to provide information for an organisation's internal public. Because of employees are their best ambassadors or their loudest critics depending on how fast they get relevant information and the context in which it is received. Especially if an organisation is huge and has a great deal of employee, the matter of informing employees about facilities and decisions concerning web sites planning should not be forgotten. However, in small organisations it is not needed to have a page on web site to inform employees since there is informal and face to face communication.

According to a Yankelovich Partners Inc. Study in 1998, %91 of executives responding listed internet information services as a primary news source. And many journalists first visit organisation's web site before calling the media relations departments for asking information (Howard 2000:9). For this reason there should be background information and the names of authorized persons to ask for further information, their telephone numbers and e-mail addresses in the content of the World Wide Web.

When we have a look at the usage of a web site with public relations purpose we realize that organisations use it mostly for communicating

with external and internal audience. Beside this, we know that some of the web sites intend online selling. So it is possible to say that organisations arrange their web sites according the priority of their targets to reach.

NUMBERS OF INTERNET USERS

Today internet and the World Wide Web have been spreading out all over the world fastly. So that it is possible to adapt famous communication expert Marshall's words "television convert the world to a global village" to the internet and the World Wide Web. Millions of people all over the world have been marketing and exchanging information. Internet and Web technologies have spread as nothing else the world has seen before. Computer Industry Almanac reports expected("World-wide Internet Population", <http://www.commerce.net/research/stats/wstats.html#europe>):

- 259 million online user world-wide by year-end 1999
- By 2000 the number is expected to reach 349 million
- 490 million internet users by year-end 2002
- Over 765 million by year-end 2005.

While total of the internet users were 25 million in 1993 (Black 1995:5), Marken states that number is expected to grow more than 300 million by the year 2001 (1998-99:28). Howard notes that conservative forecasts estimate as many as 550 million users are now surfing the Net. That's close to %10 of the world's population (2000:9). These numbers show us how fastly the visitors of the world wide web have increased and will increase in next years too.

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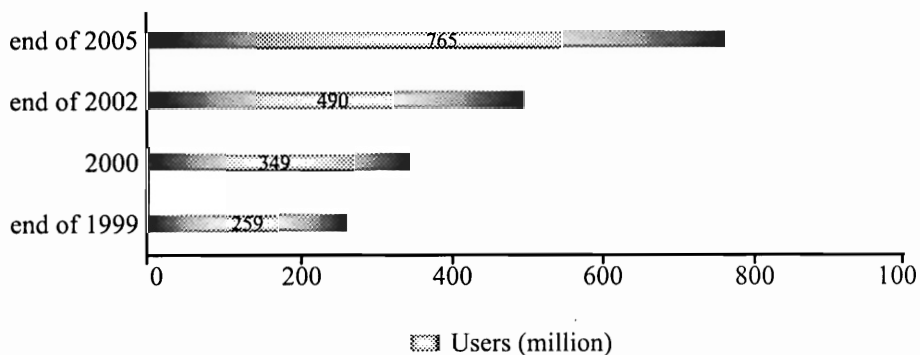
If however people used mass media to receive

news and information previously, they nowadays tend to the pages of the World Wide Web which supply information and service additionally to mass media. Almost everybody who has a computer and internet connection uses various web sites. The Web is one of the first places that many individuals go for up-to-minute information and is reported as the one of the first places that news media representatives turn in cases of a crisis. Ross and Middleberg in their 1997 survey of 2,500 managing and business editors of newspapers and magazines suggest that when reporting a breaking story after hours, journalists try for the source first, but indicate they turn to company Web site second for information (Kent 1998-99:31). Beside journalists other people visit web sites to get information about different kinds of subjects. If either intended visitors or randomly visitors leave the site pleased by learning information, services of the organisation, they have positive attitude about organisation.

Internet is accepted by many people as the fastest and easiest way of reaching information and different fields of business are able to communicate with groups through electronic mail and have real time online interactivity with customers.(Ihator 1998:31). This is like face-to-face interview. Both of two sides may gain useful information by this online interactivity.

Howard, in his article states that PR Week writer Jonah Bloom believes that the internet and public relations were made for each other, and adds "They are both about making a connection about establishing one-on-one relationships" (2000:10).

We obviously see that the goal of either public relations or internet is to communicate with target audience. If so it is necessary to have a web site which enables this communication and inter-



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active communication. For this reason planning, designing, updating and managing web sites well is important. In spite of the obvious importance attached to organisational web sites, we can see that many web sites are poorly administrated and loose as many sales and organisational advocates as they gain. This is not favourable. Thus, the web site must be managed effectively too.

The World Wide Web is a unique medium not only in terms of electronic, digital delivery, but it emerges quickly and changes constantly. The media hype about the Web has created a gold rush mentality. Many public relations practitioners who would usually not create messages without a researched-based target are rushing to get online and may not be asking the basic questions they would consider when using traditional media: What do we wish to accomplish? Whom do we need to reach? But in a typical public relations planning process, formative research is conducted to define the problem clearly and to define publics. Objectives are specified a desired outcome, target audiences are identified and expected level of attainment is stated by public relations practitioners. This step is followed by the formulation of a message strategy and message testing before any communication is implemented. Evaluative research is conducted after the communication campaign is executed (White and Raman 1999:406-407). In the process of planning a web site, nearly same phases should be followed. As a matter of fact to organise a web site is not so different from organising a public relations campaign. A web site should be planned according to organisation's needs. Kent describes the planning stage of a web site as following:

"When the term 'planning' is used about Web, it refers to planning what the site should look like and who will maintain it. This perspective doesn't take into account the needs of the audience with whom the organisation wishes to communicate. So, organisations must take into account their target audiences in Web sites. In Web organisations must provide contact information for media representatives, customers, or interested publics to write with specific questions must be answered" (1998-99:32).

While Kent describing the planning stage of a web site, he has mentioned the basic factors which builds up a web site. We face with these

factors like to build up a web site referring to the target audience' needs and the goals of organisation, to appoint someone who will be in charge with the web site and to prepare a suitable position to get and reply questions from target audience come.

One of the factors that we stop by and repeat is the need to have an interactive web site. In other case web site will not be different from one way publicity. In present if organisations have to be effective and response to their target audience's wishes and expectations to direct their own activities than, they have to learn and response target audience's wishes and desires on the internet too. Because of this every organisation must have an e-mail address where to individuals can send their questions. While responding questions from interested publics the person who answers questions has to be trained as a communication specialist or a technology specialist who is primarily responsible for maintaining the organisation's web site. The question of an individual is needed to be replied satisfactorily.

Sometimes there is not an expert in the organisation. Than another place should be designed for frequent questions by e-mail on the site. If the question of visitors is unavailable here, a device should be used to reply automatically and a message should be send mentioning that his question has been received and would be answered as soon as possible. So visitor feels that his question is taken seriously and himself is important.

After the Web site has been established to test responsiveness of an organisation's Web site in a determined trial process, it is necessary to try to access the site from a modem-based connection and try to get information on a variety of topic areas: General information, breaking news, customer service, technology support, current affairs, financial situation, site map, language, contact address or e-mail address etc. "It may be necessary to write several messages over the course of a few weeks to judge the effectiveness of the web site accurately" (Kent 1998-99:32).

If an organisation has an effective web site, public relations representatives should visit their web site from time to time. They must control the information whether accurate, up-to-date and there is an avenue for somebody to respond about the organisation's policies and practices, its products or inquiry to interact with a knowledge-

able individual. This control stage will enable you to evaluate the efficiency of the site and to take immediate precautions designating the attacks towards to site.

Today a lot of organisations recognise the potential value of the internet and the World Wide Web. They try to find the most effective ways to use them.

It is possible to determine if an organisation has an effective site or not looking at if the visitors visit again, the spending time in the site and the interactive communication. We can say that the site is successful and meets the needs as much as these numbers are high.

RUMOURS, FLOW OF INFORMATION AND CRISIS SITUATIONS

We would like to continue with the ongoing monitoring of internet coverage. Marken states that:

"Online forums, mailing lists, chat rooms and discussion groups gather on the internet every day. When these virtual groups gather, people exchange negative and positive information, rumours, misinformation and disinformation about companies, products and individuals...In the pre-internet days a satisfied customer or a person could tell one or two prospects but a dissatisfied customer could tell a few person. With the internet and Web those same satisfied persons can tell to the millions of people" (1998:31).

If an organisation doesn't monitor internet traffic and web activity it can face with serious troubles because of the slanted, malicious and downright libellous information since information, disinformation or intently forwarded information could reach to millions of people via internet by e-mail or on-line forums. For this reason observations should be done carefully on the internet and when/if negative, wrong information about organisation starts to spread, immediate precautions should be placed on the web site and correct information should be tried to spread out.

In addition to observations of web sites, it should be taken account of following considerations too. Marken explain them in the following way:

"It's important that the company find forums, list

servers, discussion groups and other locations where the company can listen to an interact with customers, potential customers and company detractors. When they work in these cyberspaces, company representatives need to identify themselves honestly and post information that is tailored to the cultural and information requirements of specific group" (1998:32).

It is also important to create on-line update centers in crisis situation. Web sites are used to provide information to both external and internal publics. The e-mail function is seen as an offering communication way. It has been seen that in a crisis situation some information had been send to Kerr-McGee Corporation's employee by e-mail on April 19, 1995. In this case the chaos by the Oklahoma City bombing in April 19, 1995 had certainly not lost on the approximately 900 Kerr-McGee Corporation employees located in downtown Oklahoma City. The company's management had faced with the immediate problem of communicating with employees under the most difficult circumstances. The employees had no way to learn if they were expected to come back to work next day or next week. When would they get their cars out of the company parking lots? How could employees get their paychecks if they couldn't get into the building? They also need to know of any of their coworkers were seriously injured or killed. These and many other communication problems get the full attention of company's management team. The traditional employee media of bulletin board notices, e-mail and employee publications were relied upon more than usual following the return to work after the bombing. Several bulletins and e-mail were used in weeks and months following the tragedy (Dozier 1998:13-18).

It is also necessary to create multi-lingual sites if the crisis involves countries speaking languages other than English, if an organisation face with a disaster then it acquire two or three additional corporate domain names and it is required to develop an online disaster plan an organisation can quickly implement. Such efforts have helped Odwalla that is a drink company when the company had its e.coli contamination ordeal in 1996(Marken 1998:32). Odwalla launched a World Wide Web page to answer questions about the crisis and added press releases issued by company and questions and answers for concerned its publics. Because the web site was an appropriate tool for the quick dissemination of

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important information.

Meanwhile some crisis can start up on the internet. For example in 1994 Intel Pentium processor of versions problems started on the internet and these problems spread up to media and the general public via e-mail and news groups (Hearit 1999). Intel's crisis is look like Exxon Valdez case. Both of them are the example of failure crisis cases.

As seen internet and the World Wide Web could be used for both informing involvers in crisis situations and to contribute to create crisis. This function of internet should always be kept in mind by public relations representatives and internet should be used to take pre cautions against to possible crisis. Everytime alternative web sites should be kept ready considering the possibility of collapsing of the web site by an attack in a crisis.

SOME OTHER SUBJECTS TO TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION ON THE WEB SITE

Meanwhile we suppose that it would be useful to talk about some more functions related to the world wide web. We have discussed in our study that which factors are necessary in a web site earlier. If web site contains information of value to visitors, they will be more likely to return to it and web sites lead to more positive interactions between publics and organisations. They serve as a public relations extentions of a corporation by effectively fielding to time sensitive problems. Therefore, the web sites and contents should be designed effectively.

Kent puts forward followings about matters should be taken consideration on a web site:

"Visitors avoid sites that are too slow to be of general utility or are difficult to navigate. In keeping with the intuitiveness or ease of use, a great deal of a web site's content should be textual rather than graphical. Because text loads faster than graphics, and well-typeset pages can actually be more effective attention getters than a graphical interface that takes 30 seconds or more to load. Tables of contents (or site map) can be useful if they are well organised an hierarchical. The focus of web sites should be on the organisation, product, or information located there, and not the "whirling, flaming logo" the organisation creates. While the web is a communication envi-

ronment designed to be rich in content, graphics and sounds are not the most useful tools for providing publics with information" (1998-99:33).

Infact it is obvious that who visits a web site by chance, on purpose or by curiosity they will be interested in its content more that its design. To place too much charts or graphics on the web site which downloading them takes too much time will make the visitors bored or leave the site. Sometimes web pages that are viewed too late can not be viewed due to the time over. So web sites should be fast and consist few graphic elements.

At the same time the content of web sites should not consist of written material from corporate brochure, advertising, manuals or annual reports and visitors should not think that the owner of web site or controller turned it into a boring corporate brochure.

The web is only about twelve years old and still evolves. Advances in internet technology have been developing so rapidly that the time element has been greatly compressed. It is difficult to study on an innovation that changes faster than it can be adopted.

CONCLUSION

Though the web has unprecedented capabilities (a continuous presence, reach to a mass audience without gatekeeping restraints) and has acquired a mystical and ethereal characterisation, it is another communication medium. As with any other medium, there is need to objectives and planning for the communication transmitted via web sites. To plan and build effective web sites, the audience perspective should be considered. They must be easy to use, they must provide information that is useful to a variety of publics and they must effectively interact with organisational individuals and divisions. But if an organisation's target audience is not on the internet the web may not be a good place to invest organisation's resources. Therefore target audience should be considered effectively.

Via electronic communication the public relations have ideal means of not only reaching the public but also entering into a dialogue with the public. The world wide web could serve as the greatest tool the public relations profession has ever had (Cooley 1999:42). The public relations

professional of tomorrow must understand the value of a corporate web site and be able to utilize it with the public.

On the other side it should not be forgotten that public relations works best when internet is a part of an integrated communication plan. So, organisation should not forget print, radio, television and the other communication tools too.

Technology has removed many of barriers. Once the individuals shared a problem with each other but via internet it is much more likely that they will be able to organise actions. It would be to boycott a product or to damage a company's reputation. Companies should regularly have a presence in cyberspace themselves. Of course, this presence should be a friendly web site for commerce or publics, too.

Finally, public relations practitioners for an organisation should visit their web site from time to time and must control whether the information is accurate, up-to-date; there is an avenue for somebody to respond to the organisation's policies and practices or not. And organisations should use their staff or hire firms to monitor all appearances of a company's name, reputation, products or services on line. Because information is changing rapidly all over the world.

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