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Internet as a crisis management tool: the preparedness of company websites

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Running head: INTERNET AS A CRISIS MANAGEMENT TOOL

**Internet as a Crisis Management Tool:
The Preparedness of Company Websites**

**A Thesis Presented to The Faculty of the Department of Communication
Rochester Institute of Technology**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the
Master of Science Degree in
Communication & Media Technologies**

**By
Verda Duygun**

June 10, 2005

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Abstract

The Internet has become a crucial information resource. People can find what they seek in a matter of seconds. This new medium has provided opportunities as well as challenges for public relations practitioners. Its speed has also produced an increased risk of faster dissemination of rumors, hoaxes, and false information so important to counter in a crisis situation. In this study, I examined the preparedness of the top Fortune 50 companies to manage crises by evaluating the degree of interactivity of their Websites. The results indicate that few of the Fortune 50 companies are very interactive or well prepared to manage a crisis online.

Internet as a Crisis Management Tool: The Preparedness of Company Websites

Personally, I chose this subject because I intend to pursue a career in the Public Relations (PR) industry, and I see the use of the Internet as a key to managing crises. The growth of this new medium requires that PR practitioners learn to employ this new medium to reach their publics both now and in the future. According to a report released by The Council of Public Relations Firms, demand for specialized services such as online crisis management and Internet site design helped increase global revenues for public relations companies up 34% to \$4.6 billion in 2000 (Frook, 2001).

Previous studies have regarded email as a lean medium due to its inability to transmit cues besides words (Daft & Lengel, 1984). Both the message sender and the receiver in the communication process were dependent on the meaning of the words alone. In order to better convey the true meaning of what is being said, we need to find ways to increase the credibility. This study contributes to the Internet-subject based studies from this aspect. While managing a crisis online, a PR practitioner should know what means would be most credible in disseminating the information to the public in a very short period of time. In order to reduce response time during a crisis, companies should have pre-crisis plans for both traditional and online media. This study focuses on the practices for online media. I have created an evaluation form drawing out from the practices that were tried out during real crises and successful in sending out the right message at the right time to the right public. Also I have benefited from a previous study of Dr. Paul Ferber, Dr. Franz Foltz and Dr. Rudy Pugliese (April 2003) in completing the evaluation form. This evaluation form actually leads Public Relations practitioners to

determine what is missing on their companies' Websites that might result in lost credibility in time of a crisis. For example, a missing letter from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a company might cause publics to devalue the CEO's credibility.

This study will also contribute to the field of crisis management on the Internet with regard to precrisis planning on the Website of a company. Unfortunately, there are not many studies concerning managing a crisis online. There are many published articles concerning the precrisis planning of a Website explaining the steps to be taken in the event of a crisis management on the Internet. However, in these articles only the steps of building the crisis team, designing crisis micro sites, educating key partners and employees, writing scenarios, and becoming aware of a potential crisis are addressed. It is assumed that publics will seek information in times of crisis and will increasingly access new media to find it. My study will address the pre-crisis readiness of the top 50 of the Fortune 500 companies by evaluating their Websites for the following features: archived news releases, biographies of the board members, downloadable files, graphics, contact information, and other features to increase traffic and encourage public interaction.

Review of Literature

Among the various definitions of "crisis" in the literature, the most appropriate one for today is that it is a period of "upheaval and collective stress, disturbing everyday patterns and threatening core values and structures of a social system, in unexpected, often unconceivable ways" (Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001, p. 6). Organizations are not immune to crises, especially in this era of information technology. They started to face a new source of pressure directly from computer users who were provided with a

means to vent their concerns throughout the world via the Internet in the mid 90's (Lerbinger, 1997). However, most companies still do not plan ahead for a possible crisis. According to a research done by the Institute for Crisis Management in Louisville, KY, from 1990 through 1999, about 86% of the crises studied had been visible to the management of the companies before they snowballed (Vaughn, 2001). Organizations have to take the Internet seriously regarding this situation. For example, Intel realized all too well the power of the Internet when its disgruntled customers used the Internet to report about its Pentium chip. A mathematician, early in November 1994, spread the word on the Internet that the Pentium chip had a flaw that could lead to errors in some mathematical calculations. Intel had been aware of this situation but had not announced anything about the flaw. A week later, customers began logging on the Internet to complain about the chip. After a great deal of negative publicity resulting from these Internet exchanges, Intel finally promised to replace the defective chip with an updated version (Lerbinger, 1997).

Kotcher (1996) claims that the computer age has made people more likely to react and respond to issues, especially those that upset them. Moreover as the number of Internet users increases, more people start to express their concerns and start rumors. For example, 39-year-old Clara Miller received an email message under the subject, "Starbucks vs. Israel" saying that Starbucks was closing all its stores in Israel. This email message triggered the misperceptions that Starbucks was joining an Arab boycott of American businesses in Israel and that the company had decided to abandon its business

in Israel because of the fear of terrorist attacks. The email also called for action such as emailing or calling the company to complain about its attitudes held in Israel towards the Arab boycott and also forwarding the email to the others. As soon as Starbucks became aware of the upcoming crisis, they established a good crisis plan. They mounted a campaign in which the company decided to disseminate the correct information to the related parties. Furthermore, customer relations representatives fielded phone calls and emails from concerned customers and provided them the information about the company deciding to leave Israel. Starbucks was fortunate to be able to counteract the email that could have resulted in much worse consequences. Later, officials at Starbucks said that the company had not seen a decline in sales since the email message began being disseminated (Day, 2003).

It has now become obvious that increased use of the Internet has resulted in a greater potential threat to organizations. "An organization's sensitivity to media coverage indicates that one of its deep concerns is to protect its reputation" (Lerbinger, 1997, pg. 4). In 1997, Samsung experienced a similar case to Starbucks. Millions of Internet users had started receiving unsolicited and promotional email from Samsung Electronics. In response to this, many users objected and sent angry responses to Samsung. However, this time, apparently from Samsung's law firm, an email was sent to the users accusing them of illegal acts and connection to various acts of Internet terrorism. After this, users sent 10,000 angry emails a day in average to Samsung. Samsung estimated that millions of dollars were lost because of this hoax. Apparently, the whole incident was begun by a disgruntled customer (Zetlin, 1998).

Unfortunately, many companies overlook the Internet as a crisis communications tool, according to a recent report by Burson-Marsteller (Fast, Full Online, 2003). The report found that a majority of companies rely on press releases, which can make companies' responses to crises difficult for interested stakeholders to find (Fast, Full Online, 2003, pg. 13). However, the Internet is a useful medium to get the information out to journalists, stakeholders, opinion leaders, and publics (Snellen, 2003). A RainierNet study (2002) found that 72% of the journalists considered the Internet as the most important source of information while only 3% of the journalists consider other media as the most important (In Snellen, 2003).

Another study surveyed a random sample of 525 Internet opinion makers from a panel of 100,000 US households. It found that in regards to the sources of Internet-based information, company Websites (85%) are used more widely than online magazines (65%) and opinion sites (55%) (In Snellen, 2003). Accordingly, publics will turn to a corporate Website when they hear some news about the company in order to find the information and see what the company is doing about the crisis. If there is no news in regards to the crisis issue, they might think the company is not acknowledging the situation or even trying to covering up the aspects of the crisis (Holtz, 2002). Richard Learner, CEO of RLM Public Relations, a New York-based company whose business is from 5% to 15% is crisis management, says that "Companies in crisis have no choice today: They must use the Internet because it's quick and gets the news out" (James, 2000, p. 15). This aspect of the Internet is very important because time is so precious during a crisis.

Organizations have to provide rapid response to the crisis situation in order to conserve time. For example, during the 9/11 crisis, millions of people, including the people trapped in the World Trade Center buildings, were able to communicate with friends and families through email and instant messages that provided instant communication demonstrated the speed of the Internet. (Palser, 2001). If the company does not get to the source of the crisis promptly, information online can spread out like wildfire. (Middleberg, 2001). Also the information on the corporate Website can easily be updated and accessed while it may be difficult to update information on hard copy such as media releases, stakeholder updates, or online announcements. These sites can include lists of emails of comprehensive media and stakeholders in case the company would like to contact them. In addition to these, the Web has an ability to facilitate the coordination of the crisis communication effort across a geographically wide area (Safety Management, 2000). It offers a pipeline for the companies through which they are able to disseminate the information to boost corporate image and awareness especially during a time of crisis (Kieler & Middleberg, 1997).

Relying on these advantages that the Internet offers companies, some have grasped the importance of the Internet as a crisis communications tool and have survived by using it during a crisis. For example, an energy crisis in California resulted in rolling power blackouts. At that time, there was a political crisis surrounding deregulation of the California electricity industry. So the company had to deal with more than one crisis. The company decided to provide greater functionality and interactivity to improve customer service on its Website. They could sign up as a new user, close their accounts, and even

pay their bills online. The results were positive. Both CNN Headline News and CBS NewsWatch.com featured the site covering it positively (Loat, 2001).

Internal v. External Crises

There are additional examples of the crises managed on a corporate Website. In the mid-90's, when Westinghouse Electric Corporation was in negotiations to sell off some of its business units, employees became worried about their jobs and began speculating about their units' futures in Internet chat rooms. The corporate communications team created a protected, internal Intranet called "Speak Up," which provided employees a communications medium to post their questions anonymously and have them answered by company executives (James, 2000).

All of these examples serve to raise the question: When do crises mostly occur? There are a number of possible answers to this question, but I would like to focus on one of them. Crises are characterized by a high degree of uncertainty (Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001). A crisis involves communication with four publics: within the organization, among the actors involved, with the media, and with the concerned external public. Also communicating with these target publics does not simply mean being able to send the message, it also means being able to receive messages from them. "Voids are often created, which inevitably hinder understanding and foster conflict and rumors" (Lagadec, 1991, p. 15). In order to decrease uncertainty which provokes conflicts and rumors, organizations must try to make sense of ill-defined, complicated problems about which they have little or unclear information and translate them into simpler,

workable solutions (Daft & Lengel, 1984). These solutions will find themselves in media choices by managers in the organizations.

Benefits of Pre-Crisis Planning

Managing a crisis through corporate Websites is an ideal way to get the information out quickly in addition to using other media outlets. Companies in crises can minimize the risk to their reputations by applying the best online practices into an overall crisis communication strategy and can reveal their intentions to be transparent (Gaines-Ross, Cakim, & Dietz, 2003). Building a crisis communication strategy online makes sense for many reasons such as having the ability to access and update the information on the Website and to disseminate the information rapidly. Moreover, influential publics who are opinion leaders are increasingly turning to company Websites to find for information confirming what they have already heard or read. According to a study done by Burson-Marsteller, one of the top-rated public relations companies, 90% of influential online users obtain the company news and information through company Websites (Gaines-Ross, Cakim, & Dietz, 2003). Moreover, online influentials spread their opinions to an average of 14 other people (Gaines-Ross, Cakim, & Dietz, 2003). According to research done by National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in 2001, 61.8% of the total number of Internet users log onto the Net for news (<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/dn/html/Chapter3.htm>). Consequently, corporate Websites need to be as transparent as possible when providing their side of the story online.

Crisis management online has become increasingly popular in the PR industry. Detailed crisis management strategies can reduce adverse effects on a company's reputation by setting the record straight and reducing any possible ambiguity around the story (Gaines-Ross, Cakim, & Dietz, 2003). Rumors create much ambiguity. The ones that are considered harmful or potentially harmful reach public relations practitioners and communications consultants almost once per week on average (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2001). This demonstrates the need for companies to address these rumors on their Websites. Procter & Gamble refutes rumors regarding its relationship with the church of Satan in the Trademark and Facts section of its corporate Website by linking to the Websites related to Christian myths and urban legends (http://www.pg.com/company/who_we_are/trademark_pgrumor.jhtml). In addition to this, it has a whole section providing information about current rumors and hoaxes. Another example is the clothing company, Tommy Hilfiger's Website. There is still a rumor section (<http://www.tommy.com/help/rumor/>) for its well-known crisis regarding Hilfiger's being racist under the company info section. Testimonials from Oprah Winfrey, the Anti-Defamation League, and customers are presented in order to address any persistent rumors. The Internet has opened up a new communication tool for the masses and while providing PR professionals a helpful new medium in the wake of negative press (Granat, 2002).

Lack of preparation could result in failure for the company when a crisis strikes. While the Internet has the power to disseminate the positive information to the masses almost instantaneously, it has the power to spread the negative ones just as quickly. In a

study conducted by Fleishman-Hillard Inc., it was found that only one of eight companies declared that important news had broken on the Internet before it had been officially announced (Investor Relations Business, 2001). According to a survey study done by Fleishman-Hillard Inc., while 48% of companies reported having a written crisis communication strategy, only one-fifth of that group reported that their policy addressed the possibility of an online crisis (Investor Relations Business, 2001).

According Burson-Marsteller's research, of 101-high-profile companies less than a third (29%) had a dedicated online crisis response section in 2002 and 2003. Instead, 66% of companies in crisis depended primarily on press releases as a crisis management tool buried deep within their Website's press relations section (Gaines-Ross, Cakim, & Dietz, 2003). In order to be prepared for a possible crisis, organizations should conduct precrisis planning involving the corporate Website. They should prepare a rapid response Website to go live when a crisis strikes that includes holding statements, company history, fact sheets, media contact forms, and FAQs (Safety Management, 2000). In addition to these, the site should include information about products, services and policies, media footage (video or pictures), and information in a variety of languages and formats (Snellen, 2003). Also, a corporate Website should be designed to be as transparent as possible before any unexpected crisis develops. This would anticipate public reaction by providing detailed information about the company. In 2000, Alaska Airlines placed a lengthy but simple letter from the company president on the front page

of its Website regarding a crash. It was carefully worded to avoid the responsibility of the incident and seemed to come from the heart (Long, 2000). A personal message from the CEO helps to reinforce the entire message to the public. It shows the company's concern and acceptance of responsibility (Peirce & Dugan, 2002). If dealing with human misery, the top executive person has to become involved in expressing concern for the victims. Otherwise, the company would lose the credibility it had built up in the past (Vaughn, 2001). To give another example, when the stock of Norwalk-based Oxford Health Plans plummeted in 1997, Jim Eggenberger, a PR consultant, included biographies of its new management team as well as their photos and comments from supporters to provide lots of information during the crisis. He believes this saved PR practitioners from receiving a lot of phone calls (Bureau Business Practice, 2000). Furthermore, during a crisis, apart from the information regarding the crisis, facts and figures, general background information about the organization, frequently asked questions, media footage (such as video or pictures) and information in various languages should exist on the corporate Website (Snellen, 2003). It is further suggested that a good frequently asked questions (FAQ) section is a perfect way to deal with the misperceptions about a company (Investor Relations Business, 2001).

Website Evaluation Criteria

Although content and transparency seem to overlap each other, they differ slightly. The content of the Website relates to all information on the site excluding that

concerning ownership of the site and policies relating to users such as privacy of the information gathered.

Another criterion to prepare a corporate Website for a crisis is the interactivity of the site. Blattberg and Deighton (1991) define interactivity as the ability for people and organizations to communicate directly with one another regardless of time or distance. Steuer (1992) explained interactivity as "the extent to which users can participate in modifying the format and content of a mediated environment in real time" (p. 84). In order to help the company's publics get involved with the company in crisis, public forums should be present on the Website to help people feel a sense of inclusion with the company. For example, Edison International, the parent company of Southern California Edison, invites investors and investment analysts to sign up for its email updates regarding the California energy crisis (Holtz, 2002). Napster took advantage of interactivity to involve users in support of its legal struggles. The site offered a quote voicing support for artists and other Napster fans to speak out in terms of support. (Holtz, 2002). This helped Napster family to see what their supporters think and act accordingly. So they have set up an applet that the public can log on and speak for themselves.

The fourth criterion for the preparedness of a company Website is the usability of the Website. This criterion assesses the publics' ability to find the information they are looking for on the site. For example, search engines should be present on the Website to be able to locate the information faster and easier.

The final criterion assesses the audience (better known as a public in PR). The audience consists of the stakeholders, media, and customers. The site designers should distinguish between these audiences and develop the site accordingly. For media, an online newsroom or a listing of press releases and downloadable pictures and graphics would help media professionals to cover the company more effectively. For stockholders and customers, information about financial reports and products should be presented respectively.

The present study assesses the preparedness of the Fortune 50 companies to address a possible crisis using the Internet. Approximately 15% of the Fortune 1000 companies have crisis communication plans ready (Middleberg, 2001). The more prepared they are for a crisis, the more effective and timely the communication will be. Any delay might cause a temporary breakdown of activities, or permanent damage to the company's reputation. After Alaska Airlines Flight 261 crashed around Santa Barbara region, California, the Airlines did a great job in providing fast information. In 56 minutes, a news release which included the Website address where they can reach updated information was released. In the second news release they had confirmed the plane crash and they provided a hotline number for passengers' relatives and friends. PR professionals will need to become more devout users of the Internet in order to transform the new medium into a crisis communications tool for enhancing their own efforts rather than viewing it as an obstacle that makes their jobs more difficult (Granat, 2002).

Method

I have chosen content analysis as the method and modified an evaluation instrument developed by Ferber, Foltz and Pugliese (2005) to determine the preparedness of an organization's Website for a crisis. There are many case studies published on the subject of crisis management online. Unfortunately, there are few other methods used in the study of crisis communications. I have drawn conclusions from case studies to determine what content and features should be part of the Website during a crisis to help disseminate information faster and maintain the confidence of the public during these "red-alarm" situations. Indeed, the conclusions helped me select criteria for evaluating a good crisis Website beforehand. A number of the features should be implemented on the existing Websites and would save time during a crisis time since would already exist. Another possibility is having the organization modify the existing features depending on what is needed during the time of crisis, such as a letter from the CEO. Conclusions drawn from the case studies allowed me judge how prepared a Website can be before a crisis strikes.

Following the contents and features of a well-prepared Website, I constructed an evaluation form to analyze the first Fortune 50 companies in 2004 (See Appendix A). They are based on five criteria: transparency, content, usability, interactivity, and audience.

The first evaluative criterion, the transparency of a corporate Website, concerns the degree to which the corporate Website provides information to the public about who controls the content on the site (Ferber, Foltz & Pugliese, 2003). Demchak, Friis and La

Porte (2000) have argued that these concepts form the main components of the organizational openness. An organizational openness is defined as the degree to which it gives complete information about company to its publics (Ferber, Foltz & Pugliese, 2003). Today, all of the internationally known companies have Websites. However, it is significant whether the content present is transparent. Under this section, company history, bios of members, contact numbers and email addresses of members, privacy statements, policy statements, annual reports and facts and figures are provided in order to identify who owns the site and to provide full, accurate and timely disclosure of information. While this helps reduce uncertainty in the minds of the public, it also serves to increase the organization's credibility by presenting accurate information about itself. It can counter misinformation about the organization that may be spreading. If an organization does not provide the information that interested parties are looking for on its Website, they might seek out other sources that might not be as reliable nor as truthful (Snellen, 2003). During a crisis, an audience member might log onto the Website of the company in crisis and would likely find out how long the company has existed. Generally speaking, long-established organizations have more chance of survival during a crisis since they have established more credibility than newly established ones. Consequently, publics might be more supportive of a company that has a long history.

Content, the second evaluative criterion, concerns the site's information. Users should be provided with the information they are looking for on the organization's Website. Dated press releases, whether archived or not, should be presented for the organization's publics (especially the press) to gather information about the company.

Content should also include the following: a letter from the CEO explaining the responsibilities s/he has to the public, links to the other Websites (especially the parent organization) that show the organization's relation to the other companies, frequently asked questions (FAQs) to help save the public time, and an 800 number for publics to be able to call free to ask questions.

The usability of a Website, the third evaluative criterion, is very important during a crisis for a company. If the user cannot access the information s/he is looking for, none of the features matter. The result is that the public might view the company as inept or uncaring. Under this section, the items include a non-English version of the site in order for foreign publics to understand the content, a site search engine, and a site map for a faster acquisition of information. These is especially crucial during a crisis since time becomes especially important for communication.

The fourth criterion is the interactivity of the Website. This evaluates the features serving to increase communication between the organization and the user (Ferber, Foltz & Pugliese, 2003). It is very important for an organization to see judge the reactions of the publics in response to a crisis. The interactive features held on the site will help the company interact with the publics to help them reduce the ambiguity they might have regarding the organization and the situational details. Under this criterion, the following items are included: a search engine to help the public search for an information and access it faster, an email sign-up box for the public to be kept updated on events, a public forum for individuals to voice their opinions regarding the current situation, and a 24/7

live chat applet for individuals to ask questions and receive feedback instantly. These items help the public interact with the organization and helps them feel like they are part of the organization.

The last criterion of the instrument is the audience, which is the ability to address various publics. Many multinationals have multiple publics, and any organization may need to address them all during a crisis. This criterion consists of the following features: financial reports (especially for stakeholders, financial analysts, and media people), online newsrooms (for media people as well as others), downloadable pictures and documents to help the journalists cover their assignments. This feature is especially crucial for the latter during a crisis. These features save the journalist time and can be help the coverage of the company since deadlines are crucial to reporters and time saved is time that can be spent on more and better coverage. It is important to provide as much relevant as possible to all stakeholders involved or people affected by the event (Snellen, 2003).

"Quality index scores" were used in order to evaluate the degree of the preparedness for a company Website (see Table 1). Each Website received a set of component scores determined by the five criteria: transparency, content, usability, interactivity, and audience. In 2002, there was a similar study that evaluated of the Websites of 50 state legislatures based on the same criteria although the features differed slightly (Ferber, Foltz & Pugliese, 2003).

The instrument is based on scores of “0” and “1.” The sum of the five criteria scores determines the Website's quality of preparedness for a possible crisis. The Website was evaluated according to the presence or absence of the components on the checklist. If the item on the checklist is present, the organization's Website gains “1” point. If it is not, the site receives “0” points. The total sum of these scores under each section provides the Website with an overall rating for that section. For instance, if there are two “0”s and three “1”s under the “content” section on the checklist, the overall rating for the “content” portion of the Website becomes “3.” After adding up all of the scores for each criterion, a total overall rating was assigned. These totals indicated the scores for each organization on the Fortune 50 list. IBM and Microsoft had the best prepared Website for a possible crisis.

Limitations

According to the overall ratings of company Websites, the average score showed that many companies are somewhat prepared. However, it would be unfair to say that they are not prepared for a crisis because they might have a “dark site” ready for a possible crisis that might replace the regular one.

Every organization used different designs for their corporate Websites that included different features. This took me a lot of time to find the right information because on some of the Websites, the information I was looking for was buried deep in the site under a different title. For example, on Wal-Mart Website, the news releases

section is under the title “Business Contacts.” On the IBM site, it is under the title “About IBM.” So I might have missed what I am looking for on some Websites.

This study was limited to the top 50 of the Fortune 500 companies. A more ambitious study might address all 500 of them to provide a more complete picture. Other studies might evaluate the Websites of nonprofit or non-governmental organizations since they are more dependent on public relations than advertising. Additional subjects of study might include government, small business, and educational Websites.

There was only one coder, the author, who evaluated the Websites. Some of the features were buried deep into the Websites far from the home page. Additional coders might make the data more reliable and correct for any oversights. This would allow for the reporting of inter-coder reliability.

The Website evaluation form is a check sheet that only determines whether a feature is present or absent. It does not address how well the feature is implemented. A qualitative assessment would provide an alternative means of evaluation but might also carry some issues regarding validity and reliability.

Results

I evaluated the Websites of Fortune first 50 companies. The purpose of this study was to determine how well prepared the Websites of the first 50 companies of the Fortune 500 are for a crisis. The evaluations were been divided into five sections, and under each section there are items lined up that are related to each section. The sections are composed of content, transparency, interactivity, usability and audience. According to these criteria Microsoft ranked as the 46th and IBM ranked as the 9th on the Fortune list,

have the best Websites having almost every item on the form (Table 1). The items that IBM did not have on its Website were a letter from CEO in the “content” section, a public forum, and a 24/7 live applet in the “interactivity” section. And the items that Microsoft did not have on its Website are contact numbers of members in the “transparency” section, email sign-up box, and a 24/7 live chat applet in the “interactivity” section. On the other hand, they had every other item that would definitely serve to answer questions a public might have about the company in a time of crisis. IBM has the email sign up box and a non-English version of the Website, and Microsoft has the items non-English version of the Website and a letter from CEO, which are not present on most Websites. Both of the corporate Websites have frequently asked questions (FAQ) section that would be a great help in answering the questions faster during a crisis. Unfortunately, FAQ section is not present on most of the corporate Websites. There is one final item on the list that differentiates the Websites of IBM and Microsoft than the rest of the companies on Fortune 50 companies. It is that both of the Websites have downloadable pictures and documents on their Websites. This feature would ease the task of the media people in disseminating the news promptly. For instance, after receiving the news about the company in crisis, they can immediately go to the company’s corporate Website and download a logo picture of the company in order to place it with the news on the newspapers. Media people would not have to wait for the company media contacts to return to them.

The worst prepared Website in terms of the crisis management was Berkshire Hathaway, ranked as the 14th on the Fortune list (Table 2). The Website had almost no

featured items. It had no pictures, contact numbers, email addresses, or 800 numbers.

There was no search engine nor a site map to quickly access what information exists. The Website was rated weak in all five criteria.

On average, the other Websites were well prepared. Most have organization history, bios of members, archived press releases, annual reports, facts and figures, site maps, search engines, and privacy and policy statements. These items are crucial because they help audiences to access important information and to find this information quickly-- a necessity in time of crisis.

Discussion

According to the results revealed above, companies should provide additional information on their Websites. For instance, a letter from CEO could increase the perceived sincerity of the company. They should also provide a public forum where people can openly discuss the issues relating to the company, so that the company can follow the discussion and provide missing information or perspectives. Most of the companies have a company email addresses of members but not direct email addresses of the members. They might at least provide a board member's address. Otherwise, no one knows where an email message is being sent and who is sending the reply. Companies should also add a link to an FAQ section from the home page to provide faster access of information to their publics. Even if they do not know what to put in FAQ section, they should at least provide an 800 number on the front page. They should all provide their phone numbers and physical addresses on the front pages of the corporate Websites. Throughout the study, I realized that it takes more than a couple of clicks to find out the

phone number of the organization. The best communication channels to reach the organization are email and phone numbers. Therefore, the company should provide this information on or near the home page of the Website.

Email sign-up boxes are not present on most of the Websites. This might be because they do not have news to deliver each week or every month. However, all of the companies have archived press releases. They even allow audiences to sign up for their press releases. So when there is a red-alarm situation, the company can submit the information immediately to the audiences. It is also a good practice to have audiences' email addresses just in case the company would need to contact them.

The lack of 24/7 live chat applets is understandable since it might be too labor intensive to have people passively sitting and waiting to respond. However, the following organizations provide this applet during the day: Citibank, JP Morgan Chase, UPS, and Wal-Mart. This allows them to pass the information along faster to the audiences who are looking for that specific information.

Most of the companies do not have downloadable pictures on their Websites. Having downloadable pictures available would help journalists do their jobs. At the same time, it might help provide favorable coverage by having the visual information about the company get disseminated faster to the media gatekeepers.

While evaluating the Websites, I came across a couple of Websites that feature downloadable Webcasts. For example, on the Website of Cardinal Health, Inc. under the title Investors, there are Webcasts and presentations from the annual conference that are great for investors and media people to follow up on what is being said. Webcasting

is a good tool to reach the audience since it simulates the high credibility of television news. It is far more intimate than reading the information off the Website. However, not many Websites provide that feature. I have not put this item on the evaluation checklist because most users do not have a broad enough bandwidth connection to the Internet to be able to watch the Webcast without pausing. Although this problem might currently be seen as a drawback, in the future, this feature could be of great help in reaching audiences instantaneously during a crisis.

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Appendix A

Corporate Website Evaluation Form

Company:

Website:

Evaluation Key:

N = Not Present P = Present

Evaluation Key Rating:

Not Present = 0 Present = 1

Content

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Press Releases		
- archived?		
Letter from CEO		
Links to other sister Websites if any		
FAQ		
800 number		

Overall Content Rating : _____

Transparency

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Company History		
Bios of members		
Contact Numbers of members		
Email addresses of members		
Privacy Statement		
Policy Statement		
Annual Reports		
Facts and figures		

Overall Transparency Rating : _____

Interactivity

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Search Engine		
Email sign-up box		
Public Forum		
24/7 live chat		

Overall Interactivity Rating : _____

Usability

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Non-English version		
Site search engine		
Site map		

Overall Usability Rating : _____

Audience

Feature	Status	Comments
Financial Reports		
Online Newsrooms		
Downloadable pictures		
Downloadable documents		
Downloadable pictures		

Overall Audience Rating : _____

Table 1**Quality Index and Company Website Rankings**

Company*	Content	Transparency	Interactivity	Usability	Audience	Total	Result
1. Wal-Mart	5	7	2	2	5	21 / 31	0.677
2. Exxon-Mobil	4	6	1	2	5	18 / 31	0.581
3. General Motors	3	5	2	3	4	17 / 31	0.548
4. Ford Motor Corp.	6	6	1	3	5	21 / 31	0.677
5. General Electric Co.	4	8	2	3	5	21 / 30	0.7
6. Chevron Texaco Corp.	4	6	1	2	5	18 / 31	0.581
7. Conoco Phillips	3	6	2	2	5	16 / 31	0.516
8. Citi Group Inc.	5	6	1	3	5	20 / 31	0.645
9. IBM	4	8	2	3	5	22 / 30	0.733
10. American Int. Group	3	5	1	2	5	16 / 30	0.533
11. Hewlett Packard	4	7	2	2	5	20 / 31	0.645
12. Verizon	5	6	2	3	5	21 / 30	0.7
13. Home Depot Inc	5	5	2	3	5	20 / 30	0.667
14. Berkshire Hathaway	4	2	0	0	3	09 / 31	0.29
15. Altria Group	4	6	1	2	5	18 / 31	0.581
16. McKesson Group	4	6	1	2	5	18 / 31	0.581
17. Cardinal Health Inc	4	6	1	2	3	16 / 31	0.516
18. State Farm Insurance	4	6	1	2	5	18 / 31	0.581
19. The Kroger Co.	6	5	0	1	3	15 / 31	0.484
20. Fannie Mae	4	6	2	2	3	17 / 30	0.567
21. The Boeing Co.	4	6	1	3	5	19 / 30	0.633
22. AmeriSource Bergen Corp.	3	6	1	2	3	15 / 30	0.5
23. Target Co.	4	5	1	1	3	14 / 30	0.467
24. Bank of America	5	4	2	3	3	17 / 31	0.548
25. Pfizer Inc.	4	7	1	2	3	17 / 30	0.567
26. JP Morgan Chase	4	6	1	2	3	16 / 31	0.516

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27. Time Warner	3	5	1	1	3	13 / 31	0.419
28. Procter & Gamble	3	6	1	3	5	18 / 30	0.6
29. Costco Wholesale Co.	4	4	1	0	3	12 / 30	0.4
30. Johnson & Johnson	6	6	1	2	3	18 / 31	0.581
31. Dell Inc.	5	7	1	2	5	20 / 30	0.667
32. Sears Roebuck & Co.	4	6	0	1	5	16 / 30	0.533
33. SBC Communications Inc.	5	3	2	2	5	17 / 31	0.548
34. Valero Energy Corp.	4	6	0	0	3	13 / 31	0.419
35. Marathon Oil Corp.	2	5	2	2	3	14 / 30	0.467
36. Metlife Inc.	3	5	2	2	5	17 / 30	0.567
37. Safeway Inc.	4	4	1	0	3	12 / 31	0.387
38. Albertson's Inc.	3	6	0	0	3	12 / 31	0.387
39. Morgan Stanley	2	6	1	2	3	14 / 30	0.467
40. AT & T	5	7	1	2	3	18 / 31	0.581
41. Medco Health Solutions	4	5	1	2	3	15 / 30	0.5
42. UPS	5	6	2	2	5	20 / 30	0.667
43. J.C Penney Co.	4	4	2	2	3	15 / 30	0.5
44. The Dow Chemical Co.	4	6	1	2	3	16 / 31	0.516
45. Walgreen Co.	4	6	1	2	5	17 / 30	0.567
46. Microsoft Co.	5	7	2	3	5	22 / 30	0.733
47. The All State Corp.	4	6	1	1	3	15 / 30	0.5
48. Lockheed Martin Corp.	3	5	1	1	5	15 / 30	0.5
49. Wells Fargo & Co.	5	7	1	2	3	18 / 30	0.6
50. Lowe's Cos. Inc.	4	6	1	3	5	19 / 30	0.633

Table 2**Company Website Rankings – Best to Worst**

1. IBM	0.733
2. Microsoft Co.	0.733
3. General Electric Co.	0.7
4. Verizon	0.7
5. Ford Motor Corp.	0.677
6. Wal-Mart	0.677
7. Dell Inc.	0.667
8. Home Depot Inc.	0.667
9. UPS	0.667
10. Citi Group Inc.	0.645
11. Hewlett Packard	0.645
12. The Boeing Co.	0.633
13. Lowe's Cos. Inc.	0.633
14. Procter & Gamble	0.6
15. Well's Fargo & Co.	0.6
16. Altria Group	0.581
17. AT&T	0.581
18. Chevron Texaco Corp.	0.581
19. Exxon-Mobil	0.581
20. Johnson & Johnson	0.581
21. McKesson Group	0.581
22. State Farm	0.581
23. Fannie Mae	0.567
24. Metlife Inc.	0.567
25. Pfizer Inc.	0.567
26. Walgreen	0.567
27. Bank of America	0.548
28. General Motors	0.548
29. SBC Communications Inc.	0.548
30. American Int. Group	0.533
31. Sears Roebuck & Co.	0.533
32. Cardinal Health Inc.	0.516
33. Conoco Phillips	0.516
34. The Dow Chemical Co.	0.516
35. JP Morgan Chase	0.516
36. The All State Corp.	0.5
37. AmeriSource Bergen Corp.	0.5
38. JC Penney	0.5
39. Lockheed Martin Corp.	0.5
40. Medco Health Solutions	0.5
41. The Kroger Co.	0.484

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42. Marathon Oil Corp.	0.467
43. Morgan Stanley	0.467
44. Target Co.	0.467
45. Time Warner	0.419
46. Valero Energy Corp.	0.419
47. Costco Wholesale Co.	0.4
48. Albertson's Inc.	0.387
49. Safeway Inc.	0.387
50. Berkshire Hathaway	0.29