Content analysis of corporate blogs as a relationship management tool

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how major corporations in the USA utilize corporate blogs for building and maintaining relationships with various publics.

Design/methodology/approach – Applying the relationship management framework, a longitudinal content analysis of corporate blogs is conducted in 2006 and 2008. The blogs are identified by a thorough search of blogs operated by corporations listed on Fortune 500 companies or Interbrand Top 100 global brands. A systematic coding scheme is developed based on the existing research on relationship maintenance strategies and corporate communication.

Findings – A growing number of major corporations in the USA have adopted blogs as a corporate communication tool and the popularity of topic-oriented blogs appears to have increased over time. While corporate blogs tend to apply various relationship maintenance strategies, the application of such strategies tends to be concentrated on a certain type of strategies.

Practical implications – Despite the increasing adoption of the corporate blogging practice, many corporations still do not seem to harness the unique potential of a blog to the fullest extent. To maximize the relationship management efforts, practitioners should consider expanding the scope and level of relationship management strategies. For researchers, this paper proposes a new approach for examining corporate blogs as a public relations tool by applying the relationship maintenance strategy framework.

Originality/value – This paper is the first attempt to provide a longitudinal overview of the state of corporate blogs and strategies. In addition to offering descriptive information about the corporate blogging practice, this paper proposes a new research framework for studying corporate blogs.

Keywords Corporate communications, Public relations, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Blogs are one of the newest forms of online communication which public relations (PR) practitioners have begun to explore as a tool for corporate communications (Hill, 2004; Kent, 2008; Porter et al., 2007; Smudde, 2005). Several business trade magazines have noticed the new emerging phenomenon. For example, in May, BusinessWeek (2005) published a special report about corporate blogs under the title “Blog will change your business,” showing a few successful corporate blog cases including blogs by GM and Stonyfield Farm.

As Marken (2005) argued, blogs have the potential to be an effective and efficient corporate communication tool because of the unique characteristics facilitating both one- and two-way communication, and both mass and interpersonal communication. Therefore, it is argued that blogs offer a unique channel for a corporation to directly communicate with its publics in an intimate way that resembles interpersonal communication, while reaching out to the mass audience (Kelleher and Miller, 2006).
Many researchers have suggested that relationship management strategies used between an organization and its publics are very similar to those between intimate persons (Grunig and Huang, 2000). Based on this notion, PR campaigns often adopt relationship management strategies used in interpersonal relationships, such as keeping in contact with each other, communicating openly, or showing commitments. Owing to the unique nature of blog communication – having characteristics of both interpersonal and mass communication – some view blogs as an ideal medium for PR campaigns (Marken, 2005; Smudde, 2005).

Following the growing interests in and adoption of corporate blogging in recent years, researchers have begun paying attention to this unique phenomenon (Lee and Trimi, 2008). A few existing studies have discussed potential risks and benefits of corporate blogs (Cox et al., 2008), examined different types of corporate blogs and blogging strategies (Lee et al., 2006), and analyzed content and design features (Lee et al., 2008). Although these recent studies offer valuable insights and useful guidance for future research, many questions remain unanswered regarding how corporate blogs have evolved as a corporate communication tool, and what specific strategies are used in corporate blogs.

To explore the emerging world of corporate blogs and to answer some of the unexplored questions including relationship maintenance strategies employed in corporate blogs, a longitudinal content analysis was conducted in 2006 and 2008. Using the longitudinal design, this study can compare the corporate blogging practices between 2006 and 2008, when corporate blogging was just emerging, and two years later. Specifically, this study analyzed features of corporate blogs applying the relationship management strategy framework found in the interpersonal relationship literature and PR research (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Ki and Hon, 2006; Stafford and Canary, 1991).

Characteristics of blogs and corporate blogs

Blogs have distinctive features which differentiate them from other forms of computer-mediated communication. These features include:

- easy-to-use content management system;
- archive-oriented structure;
- latest-information-first order;
- links to other blogs; and
- ease of responding to previous blog postings (Herring et al., 2004; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005).

Because of the flexible and interconnected nature of blogs, people can use blogs for various purposes, including keeping a personal diary, interacting with other bloggers, building a virtual community, and disseminating messages to the mass audience (Bortree, 2005; Herring et al., 2005; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Lawson-Borders and Kirk, 2005). The boundaries between intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and mass communication seem to blur in the blogosphere.

Blogs began as personal diaries containing the blog author’s personal reflections as an individualistic and intimate form of self-expression (Bortree, 2005; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). Personal diaries are still the most dominant type of blogs and blog
authors often form their online identity and post their inner thoughts and feelings. However, as the scope and size of the blogosphere expands, different forms of blogs have emerged, functioning as a medium connecting users with other users, and organizations with their publics. The interconnectedness of the blogosphere facilitates direct conversations among a large number of people (Herring et al., 2005).

Although the majority of blogs contain personal thoughts or feelings of the bloggers that are not intended for mass dissemination, messages posted in blogs are generally open to anyone with an internet connection unless restricted with special programming (Gurak et al., 2004). More and more bloggers are recognizing this mass communication potential of blogs and use blogs to publish their opinions on public issues and to disseminate them to the mass audience (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005).

A corporate blog is a unique form of blogs that has been explored by communication practitioners just recently. Smudde (2005, p. 35) described corporate blogs as “a hybrid of the personal blog. These blogs are fairly new and feature the insights, assessments, commentary, and other discourse devoted to a single company.” Sifry (2004) defined corporate bloggers as:

[... ] people who blog in an official or semi-official capacity at a company, or are so affiliated with the company where they work that even though they are not officially spokespeople for the company, they are clearly affiliated.

Based on these descriptions, a corporate blog can be defined as a blog that is:

- endorsed explicitly or implicitly by a company; and
- posted by a person (or a group of people) who are affiliated with the company.

Research on corporate blogs

With the growing interest in corporate blogging, research literature is emerging but at a slow rate. Two studies examined communication practitioners’ views and adoption of blogging (Hill, 2004; Porter et al., 2007). Based on a survey with PR practitioners, Porter et al. (2007) reported that practitioners maintained blogs for routine information dissemination, interactive communication, and issue identification. In another study which conducted in-depth interviews with 15 corporate bloggers, Hill (2004) argued that a blog could be a viable and effective communication tool for small businesses and could serve a wide range of purposes, from viral marketing to search engine optimization. This study found most interviewees considered a blog to play an important role, especially in relationship building.

A few studies have examined blogging strategies by analyzing content of existing corporate blogs. Lee et al. (2006) conducted a content analysis of different types of organizational blogs – including employee, group, executive, promotion, and newsletter blogs – of 18 US companies, focusing on companies’ control mechanism strategies. They found most of the companies analyzed used a top-down blogging strategy, which means a high level of control rather than allowing bloggers’ autonomy. Two years later, another study analyzed content and design features of corporate blogs maintained by 23 Fortune 500 companies (Lee et al., 2008). The results revealed that promotional blogs used content and design features differently from executive and group blogs. Another recent study by Cox et al. (2008) offered extensive discussion of potential risks and benefits of corporate blogs, presented brief case studies, and recommended corporate blog policy guidelines. They cautioned blogs
could pose substantial threats and raise important ethical issues, such as uncontrolled employee blogs damaging corporation reputation and blogs generated by independent outside bloggers.

**Corporate blogs as a relationship management tool**

Some researchers have explored how corporate blogs can be used for a PR campaign. In particular, they have been interested in determining how blogs can be used as a tool for relationship building and maintenance between an organization and its publics. For example, Kelleher and Miller (2006) suggested that blogs could provide a company with a chance to communicate with its customers in a humanized voice and to show the company’s characters to the public. Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) argued that corporate blogs could improve the relationship between a corporation and its publics during a crisis, by conveying conversational human voices. The dialogue-style nature of blogging seems to fit in well with Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) ideal PR model of two-way symmetrical communication, which suggests a cooperative, give-and-take form of communication between an organization and its publics based on mutual respect and compromise (Kelleher and Miller, 2006; Smudde, 2005).

Despite the optimistic views and potential benefits of corporate blogs suggested by some of the existing literature, the majority of corporations still do not seem to embrace blogs for their corporate communication and many challenges have been noted (Cox et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2006; Lee and Trimi, 2008). One of the emerging issues regarding corporate blogs is whether and to what extent a corporation can control the content of blogs while pursuing open dialogues with publics (Lee et al., 2006). As all internet users can and do freely express their opinions in the blogosphere, it is extremely difficult for a corporation to control messages posted on different types of organizational blogs such as internal blogs by employees, newsletter blogs, and external blogs by outside parties (Cox et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2006). From the corporations’ perspective, the attempted two-way and open communication between an organization and its publics using blogs always involves risks. Another critical issue regarding corporate blogs is the credibility of blog content. Since every internet user can post their thoughts in the blogosphere without any constraints and gate-keeping processes, blogs often contain incorrect information and unverifiable opinions about a corporation (Cox et al., 2008).

Regardless of the varying views of corporate blogging as a tool for relationship building and maintenance, the debate on potential benefits and risks of corporate blogs as a relationship management tool calls for further empirical research. Especially, to understand how corporate blogs can be used as a relationship management tool, we first need to examine how corporations actually use blogs by identifying features of corporate blogs corresponding to established relationship maintenance strategies and analyzing whether and how such features are used.

**Application of the relationship management framework to corporate communication**

It is often argued that the fundamental goal of PR is building and maintaining relationships with key publics (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Ledingham and Bruning, 1998). Thus, it is no surprise that a great deal of PR studies have focused on the relationship management aspect (Broom et al., 2000; Bruning and Ledingham, 2000; Coombs, 2001;
Grunig and Huang, 2000; Heath, 2001). A mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and its publics is considered one of the key characteristics of Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) two-way symmetrical model of ideal PR.

In the long tradition of research on relationship management strategies and effects, various interpersonal relationship theories have been proven to be useful for conceptualizing characteristics of a good relationship and suggesting effective relationship management strategies (Grunig and Huang, 2000; Heath, 2001; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Thomlison, 2000; Toth, 2000; Wood, 1995). Excellent review and critiques of literature applying interpersonal theoretical frameworks to PR are published in Ledingham and Bruning (2000).

Among the interpersonal relationship frameworks, Stafford and Canary’s (1991) five dimensions of relationship maintenance strategies have been widely used in the previous research (Grunig and Huang, 2000; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Kelleher and Miller, 2006; Ki and Hon, 2006; Taylor et al., 2001). Stafford and Canary (1991) explored behaviors exhibited by relational partners to maintain their relationship in a context of a romantic relationship and marriage. They asked respondents what they did to maintain a satisfactory relationship with their partners. A factor analysis of the responses generated five relationship maintenance strategies: positivity, openness, assurance, social networking, and sharing tasks.

Positivity refers to “anything the organization or public does to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved” (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 14) and it has been found to be an important predictor of trust, control mutuality, and liking in a relationship (Stafford and Canary, 1991). Openness refers to self-disclosure and free conversations between partners in a relationship (Stafford and Canary, 1991). Openness has been found to be one of the key characteristics of communication behaviors that build trust in both interpersonal and organization-public relationships (Broom et al., 2000). Applied to the PR context, openness strategies include disclosure regarding the nature of the organization and information of value to audiences such as company overview, activities, and annual report (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Kelleher and Miller, 2006). Also included to the openness dimension is the aspect of publics’ disclosure such as a company’s openness to two-way communication and efforts to encourage members of its publics to disclose their thoughts and feelings.

Assurance, as it is applied to the PR strategies, is defined as “attempts by parties in the relationship to assure the other parties that they and their concerns are legitimate” or “attempts by the parties in the relationship to demonstrate they are committed to maintaining the relationship” (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 15). Since a measurement of a corporate blog’s utilization of this strategy requires a qualitative analysis of messages posted by companies, which is beyond the scope of the present study, this dimension is not included in this study.

Social networking refers to an organization’s efforts to build networks or coalitions with the same groups that its publics care about or are affiliated with (Hon and Grunig, 1999). In the existing research, this relationship maintenance strategy has been operationalized by the number and quality of contacts within a network and with other networks (Grunig and Huang, 2000; Ki and Hon, 2006).

Finally, Sharing tasks is defined in the context of PR as:

[... ] organizations’ and publics’ sharing in solving joint or separate problems. Examples of such tasks are managing community issues, providing employment, making a profit, and
staying in business, which are in the interest of either the organization, the public, or both (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 15).

Kelleher and Miller (2006, p. 400), in the context of organizational blogging, defined this dimension as “performing one’s responsibilities.”

These strategies have been applied to various non-interpersonal communication contexts including corporate communications. Wright (2004) reported that positivity and openness strategies were most frequently used in the context of internet-based interpersonal relationships. Ki and Hon (2006) also found openness to be the most frequently used relationship maintenance strategy adopted in corporate web sites.

Research questions

Previous studies have suggested that blogs can serve as a viable communication tool for PR campaigns (Marken, 2005; Porter et al., 2007; Smudde, 2005). Especially, due to its unique characteristics facilitating both interpersonal and mass communication, a blog is considered to have great potential for contributing to relationship management (Kelleher and Miller, 2006; Marken, 2005; Smudde, 2005; Sweester and Metzgar, 2007). Although a few existing studies provide some useful findings, no previous study has examined corporate blogs as a relationship management tool and analyzed relationship management strategies employed by corporate blogs. To fill the gap in the literature and to provide much needed descriptive information about the current state of corporate blogging, this study addresses three specific research questions:

RQ1. How many of the major corporations in the USA utilize a corporate blog and what are the key characteristics of those blogs?

RQ2. To what extent do corporate blogs employ Stafford and Canary’s (1991) relationship maintenance strategies and what specific strategies are most frequently used?

RQ3. Are there significant differences among different industry types in the employment of various relationship maintenance strategies in corporate blogs?

Method

Two separate content analyses were conducted for corporate blogs operated by major corporations in the USA. The first content analysis was conducted in June 2006 and the second in December 2008. To identify corporate blogs for this study, an operational definition of a corporate blog was developed based on the existing literature: a corporate blog was defined as a blog which is explicitly endorsed by a company and maintained by a person (or a group of people) affiliated with the company (Sifry, 2004). Major corporations were operationally defined as corporations listed on Fortune 500 companies or Interbrand (2005) Top 100 global brands. The two lists are considered to provide a reasonably exhaustive list of major corporations in the USA.

Sampling

Based on the operational definition of a corporate blog, the researcher conducted a thorough and extensive search of the blogosphere to find corporate blogs for each of the companies listed on Fortune 500 companies or Interbrand Top 100 global brands. To ensure the sample included all corporate blogs, the sample was cross-checked
against a list obtained from “Fortune 500 business blogging wiki (www.socialtext.net/bizblogs/index.cgi)” which claimed to offer an exhaustive list of Fortune 500 companies’ corporate blogs. Blogs by media organizations and non-English blogs were excluded. After the elimination of these blogs, a total of 31 blogs was found in 2006 and 59 in 2008.

Measurements and coding
The coding scheme was developed based on the previous literature on relationship management, especially relationship maintenance strategies proposed by Stafford and Canary (1991). Four relationship maintenance strategies (positivity, openness, social networking, and sharing tasks) were operationalized to be applicable to the corporate blogging context.

For creating measures for the four relationship maintenance strategies, this study relied on Ki and Hon’s (2006) coding scheme for analyzing corporate web sites and inputs from interactive marketing communication experts. Following Ki and Hon’s (2006, p. 32) approach which defined positivity in corporate web sites as “any attempt to enable ease of web site use,” positivity was measured by presence of different user-friendly navigation tools and interactivity features. In addition, various multi-media features were counted as well, because such features can be considered to represent a corporation’s efforts to make user interaction more enjoyable and entertaining. User-friendly navigation tools include Really Simple Syndication (RSS), hyperlink within posts, search, archive, categories, calendar, and tag. Multi-media features include podcast, video, audio, and animation.

Openness, referring to features encouraging and facilitating open two-way communication between blog authors and visitors, was operationalized by presence of two-way communication features such as comment and trackback functions. Many PR practitioners have noted that two-way communication and open dialogues are the most unique characteristics of blogs (Marken, 2005; Smudde, 2005) and therefore, it is important to examine how corporations use comment and trackback functions enabling openness.

Social networking, defined as networking with common friends and affiliations, was measured by presence of blogroll and the number of links on the blogroll. A blogroll is a list of external links posted on a blog’s main page, typically in the sidebar (Penn State Learning Design Community Hub, 2007). Bloggers use this feature for building and maintaining their online social networks by linking their blogs to their friends’ or those with similar topic interests, or by listing their favorite and frequently visited web sites. In addition to the presence of the blogroll feature, which blogs and web sites were on the blogroll list was also taken into account.

Sharing tasks was measured by the frequency of postings in blogs. Most regular users visit blogs to read updated postings and to leave responses and therefore, the frequency of blog posting is likely to influence the users’ perception of how well the blog author is performing expected tasks, and can be a good indicator of the corporate bloggers’ taking responsibility in maintaining their relationships with blog visitors.

Based on the coding of the relationship maintenance strategies, four relationship maintenance strategy scores were created to represent the level of implementation of each type of strategy in corporate blogs. Each relationship maintenance strategy score was entered using a three-point scale where “0” indicated a low level of
implementation, “1” indicated a medium level, and “2” indicated a high level. Table I provides detailed information about how the level of strategy implementation was operationalized for each relationship maintenance strategy.

In addition, the type of blogs (multi-vocal, and univocal types), the positions and affiliations of blog authors within an organization, topics of blogs (industry/company, brand/product, personal issues, public issues, others) were measured.

Content of the first page in each corporate blog was analyzed by two trained independent coders. The sample blogs were saved into portable hard discs and the coders independently analyzed the saved blogs using a systematic coding scheme and a guideline. When there were disagreements between coders during the initial training and pilot-coding processes, the researcher discussed the coding scheme and operational definitions with the coders to reach consensus. The intercoder reliability was tested using Holsti’s formula. The average intercoder reliability was 0.89 in 2006 and 0.87 in 2008, and both were at the acceptable level (Neuendorf, 2002).

Results
RQ1: key characteristics of corporate blogs
The data analysis results reveal some interesting changes over the two-year time period. A total of 31 companies had corporate blogs in 2006 and the number increased to 59 in 2008. Among the corporate blogs found in 2008, 27 blogs were by the companies that had corporate blogs in 2006 and 32 blogs were by companies that did not have one in 2006. Four companies that operated blogs in 2006 no longer did in 2008. In other words, 87 percent of the companies that had corporate blogs in 2006 were still maintaining the blogs two years later. The number of companies with multiple corporate blogs also increased from nine (30 percent) in 2006 to 21 (36 percent) in 2008. The results suggest that the adoption and the level of utilizing blogs for corporate communication increased during the two years.

To determine key characteristics of corporate blogs, we analyzed industry types, author characteristics, and blog topics. In 2006, 17 out of 31 blogs (55 percent) were found to be operated by manufacturing companies, 12 blogs (39 percent) were for services, and two blogs (6 percent) were for retailers. The 2008 data show a slight change: 28 out of 59 blogs (47 percent) were for manufacturing companies, 27 blogs (46 percent) were for services, and four blogs (7 percent) were for retailers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>High (score = 2)</th>
<th>Medium (score = 1)</th>
<th>Low (score = 0)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>Providing more than three navigation features and multimedia features</td>
<td>Providing either more than three navigation features or multimedia features</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>Presence of both trackback and comment functions</td>
<td>Presence of only the comment function</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking</td>
<td>Presence of a blogroll and more than ten links on the blogroll</td>
<td>Presence of a blogroll</td>
<td>No blogroll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing tasks</td>
<td>New postings at least once a day or more frequently</td>
<td>New postings less than once a day but more than once a month</td>
<td>New postings once a month or less frequently</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Operationalization of relationship maintenance strategy scores
The results indicate that the industry categories of companies adopting corporate blogs appear to be gradually diversifying. While 65 percent (19 blogs) of the corporate blogs found in 2006 were by companies in the computer, communication, or electronics industry, 42 percent (25 blogs) of the corporate blogs in 2008 were in the same category. These results seem to suggest that more diverse types of companies in various industries have begun to use blogs for corporate communication. Descriptive statistics for characteristics of corporate blogs are presented in Table II.

In terms of the number of authors, a blog maintained by multiple authors (multi-vocal) was the most popular format in 2008, with 41 blogs (71 percent) taking this format. The percentage of multi-vocal blogs showed a substantial increase from 42 percent in 2006. The difference in the percentage of multi-vocal blogs between 2006 and 2008 was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 7.32; p = 0.01$). The results suggest that the nature of corporate blogs might have shifted from a form of personal journals that truly resembled personal blogs to a form of online publication maintained by a group of people.

Departmental affiliations and positions held by authors also showed some interesting diversity and slight changes over time. In both years, staff-level employees were most common among corporate bloggers (48 percent in both years), followed by...
managers, and executive officers. The most common departmental affiliation was the development department in both 2006 (15 or 48 percent) and 2008 (20 or 34 percent). The percentage of authors from communication or PR departments slightly increased from 10 percent (three blogs) in 2006 to 22 percent (13 blogs) in 2008.

We categorized corporate blogs into one of the following three categories: personal journal, community, and topic-oriented blogs. A personal journal blog is maintained by a person or persons affiliated with or sponsored by a company. Examples of this category include Randy’s Journal run by Randy Baseler, Vice President of Boeing, and General Mills blog run by a famous chef. The authors, mostly well-known figures or high-ranking executives, share their experiences, knowledge, and thoughts in the blog.

A community blog is operated mainly for facilitating discussions and knowledge sharing among internal and/or external stakeholders. Developers in computer/internet-related companies appear to prefer community blogs to share knowledge and new ideas with coworkers and others in the same industry. A topic-oriented blog tends to focus on a specific topic relevant to the company or a topic area where the company has expertise, in order to attract customers and build positive relationships with various stakeholders. Examples include Owens Corning blog, and McDonald blog. Owens Corning blog focused on demonstrating the company’s expertise on environmental issues and McDonald blog focused on the company’s social responsibility.

Among these three types of blogs, a topic-oriented blog was the most popular format. In 2006, 22 blogs (71 percent) were topic-oriented, six blogs (19 percent) were community blogs, and three blogs (10 percent) were personal journals. The dominance of topic-oriented blogs appeared more pronounced in 2008: 51 blogs (86 percent) were topic-oriented, five blogs (8 percent) were community blogs, and only three (5 percent) were personal journals. Although $\chi^2$-testing for the difference in the number of topic-oriented blogs between 2006 and 2008 showed only a marginally significant difference ($\chi^2 = 3.18; p = 0.09$), looking at the data of the 33 new blogs that did not exist in 2006, the trend of topic-oriented blogs in 2008 emerges more strongly, with 32 blogs falling into this category.

RQ2: employment of relationship maintenance strategies
The RQ2 asked to what extent corporate blogs utilize relationship maintenance strategies and what specific strategies are most commonly used. This question was addressed by analyzing various blog features and individual content elements. Table III summarizes the results.

Positivity. The analysis results from both years revealed that most corporate blogs provided a number of different user-friendly navigational features. The RSS syndication tool was the most popular feature in 2006, followed by monthly archives, hypertexts within posts, site search, categories, and calendar. Multi-media features were less popular than navigational features: seven blogs offered podcasts, four blogs used video clips, and only one provided animation. In 2008, the RSS syndication tool was still the most popular user-friendly navigational feature, followed by site search function, hypertexts within posts, category, monthly archives, and calendar. In addition, nine blogs in 2008 used the tag function which was absent in 2006.

Compared to the 2006 results, multi-media features became more popular in 2008: 25 blogs offered video links, six blogs used podcast, and three provided animation. When the differences between years were compared, some interesting findings
emerged: the calendar feature was used significantly less in 2008 ($\chi^2 = 9.55; p = 0.00$) whereas the use of video clips significantly increased ($\chi^2 = 8.08; p = 0.01$). These findings suggest that, while the positivity dimension has been the most commonly used relationship maintenance strategy, corporate blogs are now beginning to pay more attention to the enjoyment and entertainment aspect of positivity.

**Openness.** As the majority of corporate blogs did not provide bloggers’ personal contact information, leaving comments in the blog site was the only way for visitors to share their thoughts and feelings with a corporate blogger and to carry out two-way communication. In 2006, 25 blogs (81 percent) offered a comment function and ten blogs (32 percent) had a trackback function. Similarly, in 2008, 49 blogs (84 percent) had a comment function and 17 (29 percent) had a trackback function.

The results seem to suggest that the openness strategy is widely adopted by corporate bloggers. However, it should be noted that in most cases visitors’ comments appeared to be monitored and pre-screened by the blog operator: in 2006, 11 out of the 25 blogs with a comment function had a policy statement stating they screen or erase readers’ comments; and there were two blogs that did not allow visitors to view comments posted by other visitors. A similar pattern was found in 2008 as well: 22 out of the 49 blogs with a comment function (45 percent) provided a policy statement indicating that they would screen or erase visitors’ comments. In sum, the openness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006 ($n = 31$)</th>
<th>2008 ($n = 59$)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positivity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSS</td>
<td>26 84</td>
<td>48 85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly archive</td>
<td>23 74</td>
<td>35 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypertext within posts</td>
<td>22 70</td>
<td>37 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site search</td>
<td>22 70</td>
<td>44 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>20 65</td>
<td>36 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calendar</td>
<td>14 45</td>
<td>9 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcast</td>
<td>7 23</td>
<td>6 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video clip</td>
<td>4 13</td>
<td>25 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animation</td>
<td>1 3</td>
<td>3 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tag</td>
<td>0 0</td>
<td>9 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Openness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment</td>
<td>25 81</td>
<td>49 83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trackback</td>
<td>10 32</td>
<td>17 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social networking</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogroll</td>
<td>24 77</td>
<td>37 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sharing tasks</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of postings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than twice a day</td>
<td>4 13</td>
<td>5 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately once a day</td>
<td>4 13</td>
<td>16 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two to three times a week</td>
<td>7 23</td>
<td>12 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately once a week</td>
<td>6 19</td>
<td>7 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two to three times a month</td>
<td>5 16</td>
<td>7 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately once a month</td>
<td>2 6</td>
<td>9 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than one month</td>
<td>3 10</td>
<td>3 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table III.**
Relationship maintenance strategies and blog features

Notes: $^*$ $\chi^2$-test results significant at $p < 0.01$; $^+$multiple answers allowed
strategy appears to be adopted by many corporate blogs, but below the surface, even those blogs offering the open comment function do not seem to be really “open” to two-way communication.

**Social networking.** A total of 24 blogs (77 percent) had a blogroll function in 2006 and 37 blogs (63 percent) had the same feature in 2008. To better assess the usage of the social networking strategy, the destination of hyperlinks was also examined. The most common hyperlink destination from blogrolls in 2006 was the company’s official web site (14 out of the 24 blogs with a blogroll function or 58 percent), followed by other industry-related web sites (33 percent) and other employees’ blogs (19 percent). The same pattern was found in 2008: an official company web site was the most common hyperlink destination (25 out of the 36 blogs with a blogroll function or 69 percent), followed by other industry-related web sites (53 percent). The results suggest that, although the majority of corporate blogs seem to have features that facilitate social networking, most corporate blogs were connected rather internally to their own official web site.

**Sharing tasks.** In 2006, eight blogs (26 percent) were updated at least once a day or more often, 18 (58 percent) were updated more than once a month but less than once a day, five (16 percent) were updated once a month or less. The 2008 data seem to indicate an increase in frequency of blog posting by corporate bloggers: 21 blogs (36 percent) were updated at least once a day or more often. However, the difference was non-significant ($t^2 = 1.61; p = 0.45$).

**RQ3: differences in relationship maintenance strategies across industry types**

To examine differences among industry types in the extent to which various relationship maintenance strategies were employed, a summated relationship maintenance strategy score was computed by summation of the four individual relationship maintenance strategy scores created by the method presented in Table I. A series of independent *t*-tests was conducted separately with the 2006 and 2008 datasets to examine differences in relationship maintenance strategy scores between blogs for manufacturers and services/retailers. Table IV presents results from the 2006 data analyses and Table V shows results for 2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Manufacturers $(n = 17)$</th>
<th>Services/retailers $(n = 14)$</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>1.189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing tasks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>2.14*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>2.19*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p < 0.05 (2006 data)*

Table IV. Descriptive statistics and *t*-tests of relationship maintenance strategies
corporations in different industry categories tended to adopt relationship maintenance strategies to a different degree back in 2006, when the corporate blogging practice was just emerging; however; and

• the industry type difference seems to have been reduced two years later.

When comparisons were performed for four individual scores, only one pair showed a significant difference in 2006: the mean score for sharing tasks was significantly higher in blogs by service/retailers than that of manufacturers ($M_{\text{manufacturers}} = 0.88; M_{\text{services}} = 1.36; t = 2.13; p < 0.05$). No significant difference was found for the other three. When the 2008 data were analyzed, no significant difference was found for any of the four comparison pairs, which is in line with the findings from the summated score comparison.

Conclusions, implications, and future research
With the recent emergence of the blogging phenomenon, an increasing number of corporations are experimenting with corporate blogs. Owing to the unique characteristics suitable for both interpersonal and mass communication, corporate blogs are considered by some practitioners and scholars as a potentially effective and efficient tool for building and maintaining relationships between a corporation and its publics (Hill, 2004; Kelleher and Miller, 2006; Smudde, 2005). At the same time, the unique characteristics of blogs such as reduced – or a lack of – corporate control over the communication and messages have also generated much concerns and skepticism among others (Cox et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2006).

Despite the increasing interests in and adoption of corporate blogs, the research literature has been limited and many questions remain unexplored. To offer an updated overview of the current corporate blog landscape and help practitioners and scholars better understand the corporate blogging strategies, this study conducted a longitudinal content analysis of corporate blogs in 2006 and 2008. Especially, this study focused on whether and how corporate blogs are and can be used for corporate-public relationship management, and what specific relationship management strategies were adopted over the two-year time period. By analyzing and comparing the 2006 and 2008 data, we examined the adoption trend of corporate blogs by major corporations in the USA, key characteristics of corporate blogs, and the extent to which relationship maintenance strategies (Stafford and Canary, 1991) are used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Manufacturers $(n = 28)$</th>
<th>Services/retailers $(n = 31)$</th>
<th>$t$-value</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.71</td>
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<td>Openness</td>
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<td>1.19</td>
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<td>Social networking</td>
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<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharing tasks</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table V. Descriptive statistics and $t$-tests of relationship maintenance strategies

Note: 2008 data
The study’s findings reveal that a growing number of major corporations in the USA have adopted blogs as a corporate communication tool, although it is still a very small portion of major corporations. Also, this study found that most major corporations that adopted corporate blogging in 2006 were still maintaining the practice in 2008. Another important finding is that the use of corporate blogs is not just done by companies in the computer or technology industry; the type of industries involved in corporate blogging has diversified over the two years.

In terms of the blog type, although three different types of blogs – personal journal, community, and topic-oriented blogs – are still in use, the popularity of topic-oriented blogs appears to have increased over time. Topic-oriented corporate blogs are similar to the “promotional corporate blog” category proposed by Lee et al. (2006). Based on a content analysis of different types of organizational blogs, Lee et al. (2006) argued that most promotional corporate blogs tended to use a top-down blogging strategy with a high level of corporate control, because this type of blogs focuses on disseminating information and knowledge about one topic, and does not require two-way sharing of personal opinions and feelings. This study’s finding that the majority of corporate blogs are topic-oriented blogs suggests that corporations may prefer the higher level of control they can have in topic-oriented blogs compared to community or personal-journal type blogs.

In examining relationship maintenance strategies reflected in various features of corporate blogs, this study found that while corporate blogs appeared to apply various relationship maintenance strategies, the application of such strategies was concentrated on a certain type of strategies such as positivity. The majority of corporate blogs had user-friendly interactive features enabling easy navigation (positivity strategy). Two-way communication comment features (openness strategy) were also frequently found, but the comment feature was often not open enough to facilitate true two-way communication. In fact, the finding that many blogs using comment features had a policy hindering two-way communication between the corporation and visitors, and among visitors is somewhat concerning.

Some strategies were found to be scarcely used. Although many blogs featured blogrolls, most common destination of the blogroll links turned out to be the companies’ official web sites, which does not really count as facilitating social networking. However, there were a few corporate blogs that provided blogrolls linked to other destinations such as web sites of relevant organizations and news web sites, suggesting potential for the social networking function of corporate blogs.

The findings regarding the limited and just on-the-surface use of relationship management strategies suggest that, despite the increasing adoption of the corporate blogging practice, many corporations still do not seem to harness the unique potential of a blog to the fullest extent. In many cases, communication strategies and usage of various features in corporate blogs seem to be similar to traditional one-way communication and do not significantly differ from those of corporate web sites reported in Ki and Hon (2006). Although many corporations maintaining blogs claim that their blogs are for open dialogues with their customers and stakeholders, some scholars have raised fundamental questions regarding whether or not companies are really interested in mutual relationships with publics and whether open dialogues and two-way symmetrical communication between a company and members of its publics are actually possible (Christensen, 2002; Christensen and Cheney, 2000).
As Christensen (2002) argued, it may be that open dialogues and transparency claimed by corporations should be considered a corporation’s strategy rather than an actual relational condition.

Particularly interesting findings in this study were that application of relationship maintenance strategies to corporate blogs significantly differed between manufacturing and service/retailing industries in 2006, but the difference became non-significant in 2008. From these results, we can infer that in 2006 when corporate blogging was just beginning and a handful of companies in limited industry sectors were experimenting with this new tool, more differences existed in the type of strategies used by different industries; however, with broader adoption of corporate blogging and more professional management of blogs by the communication or PR department, corporate blogs may have become more standardized. This hypothesis needs to be empirically tested by future research.

As with any research, this study has methodological limitations. First, although our content analysis included all identifiable corporate blogs by major corporations listed on two of the most well-known corporation/brand lists, the sample size of this study was not large enough to allow more advanced statistical analyses. With an increasing number of corporations adopting the corporate blog practice, future studies should be able to have a much bigger sample size and more sophisticated analyses.

In terms of key measures, because this study is the first attempt to apply the relationship maintenance strategy framework to the blog context, the operationalization of the relationship maintenance dimensions is exploratory and the measurement validity needs to be further tested. Another measurement-related limitation is that because our content analysis focused on analyzing blog features found on the front page, some of the relationship maintenance strategy dimensions could not be properly measured (e.g. the assurance dimension). To further examine relationship maintenance strategies used in corporate blogs, we encourage future researchers to use different research methods such as a content analysis of blog postings, qualitative analysis of blog content, a survey or in-depth interviews with corporate bloggers.

Lastly, because of the mostly descriptive nature of this study and the limitations of the content analysis method, this study cannot offer empirically tested strategic recommendations for better corporate blogging. Another important question that cannot be addressed by this study is the link between relationship management strategies used in corporate blogs and relational outcome proposed by Grunig and Huang (2000). These questions call for an experimental study.

The methodological limitations do not diminish the significant contributions this study makes to the research literature. This study offers several important implications for PR practitioners and scholars. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to explore and to provide a longitudinal overview of the state of corporate blogs and strategies, applying the relationship management framework. Although at this point there are only a limited number of companies using corporate blogs, practitioners and scholars can use this study’s findings as a starting point for their research. As more and more corporations are incorporating blogs into their communication programs, future research should continue updating the picture of the corporate blogosphere.
For researchers, this study proposes a new approach for examining corporate blogs as a PR tool by applying the relationship maintenance strategy framework. Specifically, although limited, this study suggests new operationalization of the relationship maintenance strategies for the context of corporate blogs. This study’s operationalization is exploratory and needs further testing, but this study certainly demonstrates efficacy of Stafford and Canary’s (1991) relationship maintenance strategy framework for studying corporate blogs.

For communication practitioners considering or experimenting with corporate blogs, this study has an important message: to harness the unique potential of blogs and maximize the relationship management efforts, practitioners should consider expanding the scope and level of relationship management strategies. In theory, a corporate blog is different from a corporate web site and thought to be better at facilitating and enhancing the interpersonal feel and two-way symmetrical communication. However, this study’s findings demonstrate that current corporate blogs look and function more like a traditional web site than a blog. This study cannot conclusively determine whether these findings indicate a corporate failure or unwillingness to engage in true open, two-way communication, or simply present missed opportunities. Regardless, companies should be more proactive about using corporate blogs for building and maintaining relationships with members of their publics, and doing so should involve developing new features facilitating openness, social networking, and sharing tasks by both parties.

Some argue that the biggest strength of blogs from the corporate communication perspective is providing companies with the ability to connect and communicate with consumers in a more personal and informal way (Lee et al., 2008). As documented earlier, though there are a number of issues and challenges, if used properly and strategically, blogs can contribute to enhancing a corporation’s efforts to build and maintain relationships with its publics. It is our hope that this study stimulates more interests in corporate blogging and other researchers will build upon and extend this study’s findings.

References


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