

Examining how advocacy groups build relationships on the Internet

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- *In 2006, the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) became American law after brief Congressional discussions despite the public outcries from animal rights organizations. The AETA made it a federal terrorist crime to harm any animal enterprise financially, which could include legal forms of protests and boycotts. Members of the "Stop AETA" coalition failed to draw attention to the legislation. The relationship management theory of public relations provides a framework to determine how well the coalition members developed relationships with like-minded individuals and the media. Results from a content analysis of the coalition members' Web sites revealed that nonprofit organizations and citizen-advocacy groups attempted to develop relationships through a variety of strategies, including making the visit a positive experience, being open and transparent in their advocacy efforts, and providing access to coalition leaders. The results suggest that the coalition was unable to generate much news coverage for the issue because coalition members did not sufficiently reach out to cultivate relationships with journalists. Specific suggestions are provided for future advocacy groups to use the Internet to develop and cultivate relationships with key stakeholder groups.*

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Introduction

Supported by animal industry groups, corporations, and politicians representing them, the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) was introduced to the United States Senate in October of 2005 "to provide the Department of Justice the necessary authority to apprehend, prosecute, and convict individuals committing animal enterprise terror" (AETA, 2006). Advocates claimed that this amendment

was necessary because more sweeping legislation is needed to crack down on illegal actions by underground groups, which claimed credit for more than 1200 attacks that resulted in millions of dollars in damages and monetary loss between January 1990 and June 2004 (Schuster, 2005).

The legislation targeted illegal actions committed in the name of animal rights, such as breaking into laboratories, destroying equipment and threatening lab employees (Potter, 2006). Opponents of the bill, however, worried that legal, non-violent forms of civil disobedience, such as boycotting and protesting, could also be defined as acts of terrorism because they lead to economic harm to animal

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enterprises. Although the bill included an exemption for disruption or damage that results from lawful action, opponents argued this bill endangers activists' First Amendment rights to free speech (Potter, 2006).

More than 250 organizations formally opposed the legislation by joining the "Stop AETA" coalition, but it appears their opposition efforts had little effect as the legislation received little coverage in mainstream media outlets. The AETA bill passed overwhelmingly in both houses of Congress and was signed into law by President Bush on November 27, 2006.

A search of the LexisNexis database revealed that since its introduction, the legislation was discussed in only 59 news stories in American media, mostly in animal enterprise trade publications. Given the lack of media attention, the purpose of this study is to explore how the advocacy organizations that joined the "Stop AETA" coalition developed relationships with likeminded individuals through the design and outreach methods of their Web sites.

Literature review

Public relations and advocacy

Advocacy has been intertwined with public relations since the profession's beginnings (Sallot, 1993). Cutlip *et al.* (1985) argue that effective public relations must "ethically and effectively plead the cause of a client or organization in the forum of public debate" (pp. 450–451).

Advocacy is important to nonprofit organizations, which must gain support for their causes and programs from a variety of constituencies to be effective. Animal rights' advocates felt the AETA, by potentially defining legal forms of protest as terrorism, would impair their ability to draw media and public attention to perceived injustices to animals. To counter pro-AETA forces, it was important that animal rights advocates disseminate their views to the public and Congressional representation. However, limited media coverage suggests these organizations faced challenges in reaching out to others.

Advocacy organizations, which typically have less financial resources than government and corporate entities, often find it challenging to disseminate their messages. The costs of designing, printing, and distributing information can be resource intensive. The Internet could potentially level the playing field for advocacy organizations, because starting and maintaining a Web site is relatively inexpensive. Taylor *et al.* (2001) argued these organizations should strive to "use the Internet to its fullest potential—dialogically—to create relationships with publics" (p. 267). Developing relationships with likeminded individuals is one of the strongest factors in becoming a successful advocate for an issue (Grunig and Grunig, 1991; Ellison, 1998; Hudson, 2002; Ni, 2006).

A stream of recent public relations research has focused on the impact of relationship management (Ledingham and Bruning, 1998; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Bruning and Ledingham, 2000; Phillips, 2006). This research argues the value of public relations lies in the profession's ability to develop relationships with stakeholders that help the organization achieve its goals. For example, Waters (2008) demonstrated that nonprofits that dedicate time and resources to relationship-building efforts are more likely to see donors contribute to future fundraising campaigns. Research on policy change and the political process has demonstrated advocacy groups need relationships with likeminded individuals to advance their issues (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Sabatier (2007) encourages advocates to develop relationships with others because coalition-building often brings greater public attention to an issue, which helps motivate political change. Public attention can also be brought about by an advocacy group's ability to develop relationships with the media (Reber and Berger, 2005; Reber and Kim, 2006).

Public relations and relationship management

Although the provision of information on a Web site may suggest that organization

attempts to reach outside groups, public relations theory provides a more solid understanding of how organizations develop relationships with journalists. Ehling (1992) advocated for the shift from focusing on strategic communication to relationship management to advance the profession.

After reviewing interpersonal literature, Huang (1997) discussed several relationship maintenance strategies, which Hon and Grunig (1999) further explicated for future testing in organization–public relationship settings. These strategies include access, assurances, networking, openness, positivity, and sharing of tasks.

Access

Organizations need to provide access to key decision makers and public relations practitioners when stakeholders have questions. The organization's leaders also need to be available to meet with these publics when important decisions are being made that impact them. Hon and Grunig (1999) noted access can be achieved simply by reading and responding to e-mail messages or engaging in telephone conversations. The most important aspect of access involves the willingness of both sides to engaged in dialogue about complaints or questions.

Assurances

Providing assurances to another party can enhance a relationship (Canary and Stafford, 1992). Looking at the relationship between organizations and stakeholders, assurances occur when “each party in the relationship attempts to assure the other that it and its concerns are legitimate and to demonstrate that is committed to maintaining the relationship” (Grunig *et al.*, 2002). An organization can demonstrate it values its stakeholders by incorporating this strategy into its communication plan.

Networking

For public relations, organizations need to build networks with other organizations that

are beneficial for their stakeholders. Thus, the relationship maintenance strategy is established through the number and quality of contacts with other groups.

Openness

Openness has been defined as “direct discussions about the nature of the relationship and setting aside for talks about the relationship” (Canary and Stafford, 1994, p. 12). For public relations, openness involves disclosure of thoughts and feelings among parties, but more importantly it involves the disclosure of behavior. Given stakeholders' demands that organizations be more accountable and transparent after scandals in the nonprofit and for-profit sectors, full disclosure can help to increase levels of trust in the relationship.

Positivity

Positivity has been conceptualized as “attempts to make interactions pleasant” (Canary and Stafford, 1994, p. 15). In applying this strategy to public relations, Hon and Grunig (1999) defined it as “anything the organization or publics do to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved” (p. 14). In other words, this concept reflects public relations' symmetrical model which encourages that both sides of the organization–public relationship strive to be unconditionally constructive.

Sharing of tasks

Sharing of tasks means that, when decisions must be made that impact both parties, responsibilities are equally shared. Hon and Grunig (1999) applied this strategy to the organization–public relationship and defined it as “organizations' and publics' sharing in solving joint or separate problems” (p. 5). Examples of sharing of tasks might include providing employment to a community, reducing pollution, or in the case of this study

informing the public about the consequences of the pending legislation.

Incorporating the above strategies into public relations programming can enhance relationships with various publics. For example, public relations theory suggests that advocacy organizations that engage in these strategies should cultivate better relationships with stakeholders, including journalists and other advocates. Better relationships with journalists could result in increased media attention on the AETA legislation. Better relationships with other advocates could spawn demonstrations and protests designed to create an interest in the legislation. The lack of media and public attention given to the AETA caused the research team to question how well the organizations incorporated these strategies into their Web sites. To investigate this issue, the first research question was proposed:

RQ1: How well did the members of the "Stop AETA" coalition enact these relationship maintenance strategies on their Web sites?

Membership of the "Stop AETA" coalition consisted of both legally incorporated nonprofit organizations and concerned community groups. Examples of the nonprofits include the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and the Animal Rights Coalition. Examples of the concerned community groups include Best Friends Animal Society, Maryland Animal Advocates, and Bay Area Vegetarians. Even though nonprofit organizations are generally viewed as having limited resources when compared to the government and for-profit sectors, research has shown that they do have more resources than citizen groups (Gittell and Vidal, 1998). Therefore, the researchers wondered if nonprofits were more active in attempting to develop relationships with individuals who were opposed to the AETA legislation because of their additional resources:

RQ2: Did legally incorporated nonprofit organizations and concerned community groups incorporate the relationship maintenance strategies into their Web sites differently?

Methodology

To evaluate the relationship strategies, a content analysis of Web sites of "Stop AETA" coalition members was conducted. A stratified random sample was conducted using organization type as strata (legally incorporated nonprofit organizations and community groups). A total of 122 organizations from the 253 "Stop AETA" coalition members were included in the sample. From the 253-member coalition, a random sample of 122 organizations, which included 89 nonprofit organizations and 33 community groups, was drawn to represent the coalition membership accurately.

During the coding process, the researchers sought to evaluate how well relationship maintenance strategies were incorporated into the organizations' Web sites. Ki and Hon (2006) provided a coding schema for five of the strategies. The coding for the sixth strategy, assurances, is original to this study and was created based on the literature review. Items representing the six indices are presented in **Table 1**.

Access was evaluated by creating an index that examined the availability of contact information. Specific information was collected on the provision of addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses. Assurances were operationally defined as strategies that let stakeholders know that their concerns were important. These included attempts by the organization to let Web site visitors submit their concerns, informing Web site visitors that the organization did not sell or spam e-mail addresses (if they offered the ability to sign up for updates), and the provision of a feedback form.

Networking was indicated by evidence of contact with outside organizations, such as the

Table 1. Frequencies of organizations by classification level for the six relationship maintenance strategies

| Relationship maintenance strategy | Classification level | N |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|----|
| Access | | |
| Provision of telephone numbers | High | 22 |
| | Medium | 6 |
| | Low | 94 |
| Provision of mailing addresses | High | 13 |
| | Medium | 28 |
| | Low | 81 |
| Provision of e-mail addresses | High | 22 |
| | Medium | 9 |
| | Low | 91 |
| Assurances | | |
| Problems or concerns statement | High | 11 |
| | Medium | 63 |
| | Low | 47 |
| E-mail privacy statement | High | 14 |
| | Medium | 68 |
| | Low | 39 |
| Feedback form | High | 11 |
| | Medium | 65 |
| | Low | 45 |
| Networking | | |
| Stop AETA coalition | High | 31 |
| | Medium | 16 |
| | Low | 75 |
| Government agencies | High | 55 |
| | Medium | 27 |
| | Low | 40 |
| Community groups | High | 50 |
| | Medium | 19 |
| | Low | 53 |
| Openness | | |
| Organization overview | High | 35 |
| | Medium | 26 |
| | Low | 61 |
| News updates | High | 28 |
| | Medium | 25 |
| | Low | 69 |
| Annual reports | High | 8 |
| | Medium | 21 |
| | Low | 93 |
| Programs and/or services | High | 24 |
| | Medium | 9 |
| | Low | 89 |
| Positivity | | |
| Ease of navigation | High | 45 |
| | Medium | 39 |
| | Low | 38 |
| Search capability | High | 9 |
| | Medium | 26 |
| | Low | 87 |

(Continues)

Table 1. (Continued)

| Relationship maintenance strategy | Classification level | N |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|----|
| Sitemap | High | 18 |
| | Medium | 11 |
| | Low | 93 |
| Sharing of tasks Volunteering | High | 48 |
| | Medium | 19 |
| | Low | 55 |
| Community activities | High | 23 |
| | Medium | 39 |
| | Low | 60 |
| Education activities | High | 16 |
| | Medium | 25 |
| | Low | 81 |

“Stop AETA” coalition, other nonprofits or community groups, or the government. Contact with these groups was measured by the presence of logos, links to the organizations’ Web sites, and how prominently these networks were highlighted.

Organizational annual reports, organizational overview, and news about the impact of the AETA on the organization were considered indicators of openness. These items were included in the analysis because they frequently discuss the impact of legislation on programs and services, the challenges organizations face, and news updates specifically about the legislation.

Positivity was operationally defined as attempts to ease use of Web site use. Indicators include ease of navigation, inclusion of a sitemap, and availability of a search engine. The standard for measuring ease of navigation is clear labeling and functioning hyperlinks. Researchers determined that sites with these navigational tools are more user-friendly and foster positivity between the organizations and their target publics.

Sharing of tasks, which evaluated the sharing of responsibilities when decisions need to be made, consisted of items pertaining to education about the legislation, community activities focused on the AETA, and information on volunteering efforts for programs addressing the AETA. These items were considered examples of this strategy because they allowed

individuals to become involved in advancing the "Stop AETA" message.

For the relationship maintenance strategies, a scale was created that ranged from 0 to 3, with 0 meaning nonexistent, 1 = low quality, 2 = middle quality, and 3 = high quality. For example, high quality access was indicated by a site that included contact information for the organization's top staff and executives while low quality was indicated by a site that only provided generic contact information without referencing specific people.

Two independent coders coded 15% of the sample for evidence of the online relationship maintenance strategies. The intercoder reliability for these relationship strategies ranged from 85.8 to 93.4% using the Scott's π formula.

Results

The first research question explored how well the "Stop AETA" coalition members incorporated six relationship development strategies into their Web sites. Indices were created to measure the six strategies. Table one shows the indices and the items used to measure each strategy. Cronbach's α results found that the indices for access ($\alpha = 0.92$), assurances ($\alpha = 0.78$), networking ($\alpha = 0.84$), openness ($\alpha = 0.89$), positivity ($\alpha = 0.81$), and sharing of tasks ($\alpha = 0.79$) were all reliable, according to Carmines and Zeller (1979).

With the indices demonstrating reliability, frequencies were conducted on each of the individual strategies that comprised the indices. In most cases, few organizations met the criteria for fully incorporating the strategies into their Web sites to qualify for the top category. For example, 68% of the organizations simply provided generic e-mail addresses, such as a general e-mail address (webmaster@nonprofit.org), and 71% provided only a basic phone number for the organization, rather than providing specific contact information for individuals or departments. Organizations were more likely to provide more direct mailing addresses, but

61% still provided only a basic organizational address.

Organizations attempted to incorporate the assurance strategy into their Web sites; however, most of them only partially met the criteria for this relationship cultivation strategy. Most organizations (47%) had a statement on their home page that encouraged visitors to let the organization know if they had concerns; however, they did not provide an assurance that their problem would be read and addressed. Additionally, organizations recognized the privacy concerns visitors have about Web sites; however, in their e-mail privacy statements, most organizations only acknowledged one aspect of privacy. Organizations generally informed those that signed up for e-mail updates that their personal e-mail addresses would either not be sold/used for non-organizational purposes or not be spammed by the organization. Only 11% addressed both of these concerns. Nearly 50% of organizations had a feedback form with a limited amount of room for visitors to express their concerns; however, only 8% of the organizations said the concerns were important and would be addressed.

When examining how the "Stop AETA" coalition members discussed networking with other groups, it was interesting that 23% did not highlight their affiliation with the "Stop AETA" coalition. Instead, they were more likely to promote their connections to government agencies (41%) or community groups (38%) through partnership descriptions, links to the agencies' Web sites, and agency logos.

In terms of openness on the Web sites, the organizations provided little information about the organization and their programs or services. Surprisingly, organizations provided very little information about the organization's history and background (46%). Organizations were even more unlikely to provide descriptions of their programs or services (67%), news releases (52%), or annual reports (70%) about their efforts.

Organizations most often attempted to make a visitor's interaction with the Web site pleasant by making the site easy to navigate

by providing clearly labeled menus and having limited non-working links (34%). They rarely provided a search function (65%), and those that did rarely offered tips or suggestions for finding materials (7%). Most organizations did not have a sitemap to help navigate the Web site (70%).

The final relationship maintenance strategy being examined involves how well organizations work with their stakeholders, or how well they share tasks to accomplish similar goals. This strategy focused on providing opportunities for Web site visitors to get involved in volunteer activities, working in community outreach efforts, and educating others about the AETA legislation. Organizations were most likely to provide detailed information about volunteering (36%). However, organizations most often discussed volunteering opportunities without providing specific contact information on who to contact to become involved or provided a calendar of upcoming events for volunteer activities (41%), community outreach (45%), and AETA education (61%).

Given the coalition membership consisted of nonprofit organizations and citizen groups, the second research question explored whether these two distinct groups enacted the relationship strategies differently. For all six strategies, analysis revealed that nonprofit organizations incorporated the strategies into their Websites more than the citizen groups. **Table 2** highlights the differences between the

two groups based on results from an independent *t*-test. The biggest differences between the two groups came from the strategies of access ($t = 6.85$, $df = 120$, $p = 0.000$), openness ($t = 3.89$, $df = 120$, $p = 0.001$), and positivity ($t = 4.53$, $df = 120$, $p = 0.000$). These results indicate that nonprofit organizations were more likely to describe their work and community involvement and to provide Web site visitors with information on how to contact people affiliated with the organization than the citizen groups.

The two groups scored highest on the three remaining strategies. Nonprofits were more likely to promote their connections to different community and government groups ($t = 2.54$, $df = 120$, $p = 0.015$). Similarly, nonprofits were more likely to attempt to assure visitors to the Web site that their concerns were serious and would be attended to by someone at the organization than their citizen group counterparts ($t = 3.27$, $df = 120$, $p = 0.002$). Finally, even though both organizations provided visitors with information on how to become involved with programs to help advance the organizations' missions, nonprofits provided more information than the citizen advocacy groups ($t = 3.02$, $df = 120$, $p = 0.004$).

Discussion

Given the little resistance that the AETA faced when the bill was debated before Congress in 2005 and before it was signed into law in 2006,

Table 2. Relationship maintenance strategies employed by AETA activist groups' web sites

| | Both nonprofit organizations and citizen advocacy groups | | Nonprofit organizations ($n = 89$) | | Citizen advocacy groups ($n = 33$) | | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> |
|------------------|--|--------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|----------|-----------|
| | Mean | Standard deviation | Mean | Standard deviation | Mean | Standard deviation | | |
| Access | 1.43 | 0.51 | 1.55 | 0.53 | 1.10 | 0.22 | 6.85 | 120*** |
| Assurances | 1.74 | 0.46 | 1.81 | 0.43 | 1.52 | 0.44 | 3.27 | 120** |
| Networking | 1.91 | 0.65 | 2.01 | 0.59 | 1.65 | 0.75 | 2.54 | 120* |
| Openness | 1.56 | 0.52 | 1.66 | 0.53 | 1.28 | 0.38 | 3.78 | 120*** |
| Positivity | 1.60 | 0.44 | 1.71 | 0.42 | 1.30 | 0.35 | 4.53 | 120*** |
| Sharing of tasks | 1.70 | 0.67 | 1.81 | 0.66 | 1.41 | 0.63 | 3.02 | 120** |

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

this study sought to determine how effectively members of the "Stop AETA" coalition used their Web sites to develop and strengthen relationships with visitors who might support their anti-AETA position.

By coding the Web sites of roughly half the members of the coalition, the researchers were able to determine that both nonprofit organizations and citizen advocacy groups attempted to develop relationships with their constituencies. However, when examining the sites in relation to the six relationship maintenance strategies, neither of the two types of groups was very successful. Nonprofit groups, however, were more successful at integrating relationship cultivation into their Web sites.

Scholars have argued the Internet has the potential to be a powerful equalizer for advocacy and activist groups. Because of the global reach of the Internet, advocates are more likely to overcome the resource challenges they face when confronting corporations (Coombs, 1998). Using the Internet as an information subsidy has been an effective way for public relations practitioners to disseminate information.

However, when like-minded advocacy groups join together, the new efforts have the potential to create a ground-swell movement when they follow similar Internet-based strategies to distribute their messages and develop relationships. These coalitions increase the likelihood of successfully opposing legislation. The "Stop AETA" coalition had a membership of more than 250 organizations, but the individual members failed to work together to devise and enact similar virtual strategies to combat the legislation.

As the Internet increasingly becomes a vital tactic for advocacy and activist coalitions, all advocate groups must learn to implement virtual strategies to build relationships with key groups that can advance their causes (Johnson, 1997; Kelleher, 2006). "How-to" guides and practitioner-oriented publications offer several tips for implementing a relationship-based approach into organizational Web sites (Lordan, 1999; Ledingham, 2000; Neal,

2001). These strategies are reflected in the interpersonal and public relations communication literature.

Public relations research has found that most organizational Web sites have done an effective job incorporating dialogic elements. Through measuring the access strategy, this study found that the "Stop AETA" coalition members rarely offered contact information so stakeholders could ask questions or have their concerns about the legislation addressed. Efforts to incorporate the dialogic function were not completely ignored, however, as several organizations did provide feedback forms and promised to follow up on concerns as part of their assurance strategy.

Taylor *et al.* (2001) found that activist groups are better prepared to develop relationships with their members than the media. This finding was also reflected in the current study. Even though members of the "Stop AETA" coalition did not incorporate a strong relationship strategy into their Web sites, they were evaluated most positively on the networking, assurances, and sharing of tasks strategies. The members worked most at demonstrating how they were working with others whether it be through networking with other nonprofit groups or government agencies or sharing the workload with volunteers. By highlighting these connections to groups and individuals, the organizations attempted to lay the foundation for future grassroots work. They failed, however, to develop relationships further.

The "Stop AETA" coalition focused on creating an expansive network that would help spread the word about the pending legislation. However, focusing on recruiting like-minded individuals and agencies was shortsighted. Nonprofit organizations and concerned citizen groups recognized the importance of relationships. They simply did not use all of the strategies that they had available to them. Instead of focusing on how to network most effectively with others and discussing ways to share the responsibilities of public education and outreach, the organizations need to balance these efforts with openness, access, and positivity strategies.

The findings of this study suggest several practical guidelines related to online relationship-development for advocacy groups:

1. Advanced reflections on all potential audiences who will be accessing the Web site will allow an organization to better anticipate the visitors' needs and design the Web site to meet their needs.
2. Advocacy groups must clearly identify organizational experts, who can address individuals' questions and concerns, and provide their contact information.
3. Whether through feedback forms or direct e-mail links, relationship growth can only occur if the organization listens to the comments and acts on them.
4. From the provision of financial information and goals to the availability of methods for individuals to become more involved, organizations can build trust and generate future Web site visits.
5. By describing specific actions they can take to become more involved in organizational issues, the likelihood of developing relationships with stakeholders is increased.

When these guidelines are incorporated into an organization's Web site, advocacy groups are more likely to develop strong relationships with their stakeholders. Research has shown that investing in relationship management leads to behavior that is favorable to organizations (Bruning, 2002; Ki and Hon, 2007). Members of the "Stop AETA" coalition failed to incorporate relationship development strategies into their Web sites, and they failed to move stakeholders to rally against the legislation despite their large numbers. Future coalitions can learn from their failure and maximize their impact on future political issues.

This study found mixed support for how well advocacy organizations implemented relationship development into their Web sites. It is difficult to say whether other advocacy coalitions struggle similarly because the study examined only one anti-AETA coalition, although it was the largest coalition of its

kind. Therefore, the results of the study are not generalizable beyond this one coalition. Additionally, although the scales were found to be reliable with the Cronbach's α test, the scales are relatively new and have yet to be tested in multiple settings. Further tests will help refine the scales and make them more applicable across advocacy settings. It would be useful to see how other advocacy groups develop relationships through their Web sites. A content analysis of other advocacy groups' Web sites in different contexts could also provide understanding of how these groups use the Internet. Scholars and public relations practitioners could then gain a better understanding of how online advocacy efforts can better serve the nonprofit and voluntary sector.

Biographical notes

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