RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE STRATEGIES IN WEB SITES OF COMPANIES LISTED ON BURSA MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Effective relationship maintenance strategies between organisations and its public are able to help organisations to achieve its goals. In this study, researchers examined public relation strategies used by Malaysian companies to build their relationship with stakeholders through company websites. Based on Hon & Grunig's relationship maintenance strategies, researchers analysed whether companies listed on Bursa Malaysia are utilising these strategies, and if so, how did they go about it? Quantitative content analysis was conducted to measure these strategies on 199 companies chosen using stratified sampling technique. The study found that *access* is the most commonly used strategy by companies listed on Bursa Malaysia, meanwhile a significant difference was observed among listed companies in terms of *openness*, *networking* and *assurance* strategies.

Keywords: *Public relations, relationship maintenance strategies, Organisation-Public Relationship*

STRATEGI PENGUKUHAN HUBUNGAN MENERUSI LAMAN WEB SYARIKAT-SYARIKAT YANG TERSENARAI DALAM BURSA MALAYSIA

Abstrak

Strategi pengukuhan hubungan antara organisasi dan publik berupaya untuk membantu organisasi mencapai objektif mereka. Dalam kajian ini, pengkaji melihat strategi perhubungan awam yang digunakan oleh organisasi di Malaysia untuk membina hubungan dengan pemegang taruh menerusi laman web mereka. Menggunakan kerangka strategi pengukuhan hubungan Hon & Grunig's, kajian ini menganalisis samada syarikat yang tersenarai di Bursa Malaysia menggunakan strategi yang disarankan dalam kerangka teori tersebut, dan bagaimana cara mereka menggunakan strategi tersebut. Analisis kandungan kuantitatif dijalankan untuk mengukur penggunaan strategi-strategi ini ke atas 199 syarikat menggunakan persampelan rawak berstrata. Kajian mendapati bahawa strategi yang paling digunapakai adalah strategi *akses*. Selain itu, perbezaan yang signifikan dapat diperhatikan antara syarikat-syarikat Bursa Malaysia dalam menggunakan strategi *keterbukaan, jaringan* dan *jaminan* di laman web mereka.

Kata kunci: *Perhubungan Awam, Strategi Pengukuhan Hubungan, Hubungan Organisasi-Publik*

INTRODUCTION

Public relation departments usually play an important role towards sustainability of an organisation. Hon and Grunig (1999) stated that public relation is indeed important as it drives organisations to be more efficient. One of the roles of public relations is to identify target publics involved and create communication programmes in order to develop and maintain long-term relationships between organisations and its public. This is key to help organisations achieve its goals.

An effective organisation is an organisation that is able to achieve its goals and provide benefits not only for the organisation itself, but also to the stakeholders. However, this is usually easier said than done. Efforts to develop good relationships with stakeholders is not an easy task. Therefore, effective relationship maintenance strategies are able help companies to develop positive relationships in order to achieve their goals.

One of the important tools for public relations is the Internet (Khalid Al-Shohaib et al., 2010). The Internet is a very useful medium for public relation practitioners to build good rapport with its stakeholders. With the advent of Internet, organisations have the opportunity to build a positive relationship with its stakeholders (Lei, 2011).

Ki and Hon (2006) saw the potential of the new media on companies, especially for building relationships with publics. They also observed that companies are not interactive enough with using the new media as communication tool. New media, particularly company's websites can serve as a communication tool to establish good relationship with stakeholders. This unfortunately is not being fully utilised by public relations practitioners.

Therefore, there is a gap to identify how organisations use websites as a PR tool and to identify what are the strategies used by companies in their efforts to build relationships with stakeholders through their websites. Many studies outside Malaysia have identified strategies used by companies to build relationships through websites such as Waters & Lord (2009); Williams & Brunner (2010) and Lei (2011). However, little is known about Malaysian companies and their relationship maintenance strategies through websites.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship Management and Organisation-Public Relationship

Ledingham (2003) stated that one of company's public relations roles is as a relationship manager. Relationship management can be considered successful when a public relations

department can create quality relationships between its organisation and the public. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) listed five dimensions in relationship management which are trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment. These dimensions can be seen as the key ingredients in a recipe of quality relationships. Ledingham and Bruning later on did a study to test the relationship that exists between dimensions of relationship management on public perceptions and behaviors. These scholars have found that relationships can influence public's loyalty towards organisations.

Other researchers also expanded the dimensions of relationship between organisations and their public such as Jo (2006), Ki and Hon (2007), Norhayati et al. (2011), and Chang et al. (2011). From these studies, it was found that positive relationships between organisations and its publics are crucial to ensure the effectiveness of these relationships. This means that the more positive public perception is on the relationship, the more positive public's behavior towards the organisation. Therefore, the question of how the organisation maintains a positive relationship to its public (in this case through website) is an issue of interest to many PR researchers.

Public Relations on the Internet

In the era of globalisation, public relations practitioners are also growing into a more global direction. Huang (2000) stated that the development of a global public relation has become a critical issue in today's world. Growing phenomenon of the new media allows public relations practitioners to adapt and start creating new public relations activities. New media is a medium that can provide a platform for public relations practitioners to create two-way communication. This is because it provides quick and easy access to existing transformation of activities in public relations (Wright, 2001). This means that public relations practitioners are already looking at ways to utilise the new media and eventually public relations scholars and practitioners need to focus more on public relations research and activities on the internet.

In studies conducted by Waters et al. (2009), Soo and Hyejoon (2010), Pettigrew and Reber (2011), and Sommerfeldt et al. (2012), we know that public relation issues in the Internet is an interesting topic that is regularly discussed by researchers. This is because the global world requires efforts of public relation practitioners to perform activities using new media. Therefore, it is important for communication researchers to continue conducting public relations research on the Internet. Studies were done on various companies looking at various new media content, as well as activities in public relations department that can help us to understand more about theory and the implementation of public relations strategies. Studies to understand the strengths and weaknesses of public relations on the Internet can stimulate public relations activities to become more effective.

Relationship Maintenance Strategies

Ki and Hon (2009) stated that a good relationship is reliant on organisations' commitment to build and keep a positive relationship with the public. In efforts to maintain the relationship between organisation and its audience, skills of public relations practitioner is needed (Hon & Grunig, 1999). These skills can be maximised by using existing public relations strategies, particularly relationship maintenance strategies developed by Hon and Grunig.

Hon and Grunig (1999) stated that public relations practitioners focus on how to measure outputs and outcomes from a variety of public relations activities or programmes. The outputs and outcomes of public relations are important but relationships measurement process itself is very crucial as well (Lindenmann in Hon & Grunig, 1999). This is because the measurement of outputs and outcomes can be done when a programme is completed and it can only describe whether the programme or activity was effective or not. The communication process however stresses on meaningful information, whether the programme or activity resulted long-term implications to the stakeholders or not. This means that measurement of communication processes to help companies realise the importance of relationship, aware of their target audiences are and how relationship maintenance strategies are used, are able to create long-term relationships that are effective and beneficial.

Those measurement processes are pointed out in the relationship maintenance strategies by Hon & Grunig, such as access, positivity, openness, sharing of tasks, networking, and assurance. Researchers have applied this model to various issues in the field of public relations. Studies (such as Ki & Hon, 2006; Hong, 2006; Waters and Lord, 2009; Williams and Brunner, 2010; Cho and Huh, 2010; Lei, 2011) found that the use of relationship maintenance strategies in companies' websites are diverse and varied. They saw that relationship maintenance strategies are very effective in building relationships and keeping a positive relationship between an organisation and its public. These strategies are important elements that are useful as a communication strategy in creating a quality communication. In this study, researchers try to identify the most commonly used strategy(ies) by companies listed on Bursa Malaysia through their web sites.

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative content analysis of selected companies' websites was conducted to see strategies used by companies listed on Bursa Malaysia. As of 28th of June 2012, the number of companies listed on the main market of Bursa Malaysia is 830. However, 5 companies were taken out from the equation as it was used in a pilot study. In choosing sample for this study, researchers first reduced the number according to 1:4 ratio according to types of companies (refer to Table 1).

From Table 1, four types of companies are not able to be selected in the final sampling (infrastructure project, hotel, closed-end funds and mining) as they only represent 1 unit each and therefore deemed problematic in terms of sampling representative as well as unable to be

analysed in Anova. This means that the total sample for this study is 199 websites selected using stratified sampling procedure.

In order to observe which strategies are utilised by the companies listed on Bursa Malaysia, researchers used a 5-level ordinal scale referred from a study by Lei (2011). Each strategy is given a value, by which 1 means no strategy utilised; 2 means low utilisation; 3 means moderate; 4 means moderate high and 5 means high. Two researchers coded the websites and the reliability of coders for this study according to Holsti's formula (1969) is 0.77, which is considered reliable.

Types of Companies	Population	Numbers of companies 1:4 ratio	Percentage (%)
Construction	42	10	23.8%
Consumer Products	133	33	24.8%
Finance	35	8	22.8%
Industrial Products	249	62	24.8%
Plantation	43	10	23.2%
Properties	89	22	24.7%
Technology	28	7	25%
Trading/Services	178	44	24.7%
REIT(Real Estate Investment Trust	15	3	20%
Infrastructure Project Companies	7	1*	14.2%
Hotel	4	1*	25%
Closed-end Funds	1	1*	100%
Mining	1	1*	100%
Total	**825**	**203 - 4 = total sample 199**	

Table 1: Number and Percentage of Companies according to types

*not included in the sampling because of ratio biasness

Operational Definition

There are six operational definitions in the framework of this study. The first is *access,* defined as efforts made   through companies' websites to provide suitable channels for stakeholders to get information from company representatives. It is measured by the existence of information on how to contact the company or its representatives. For example, the availability of phone number, address, and electronic mail address of the company is observed.

Positivity is defined as efforts made   by companies through its web sites that allow users to easily browse the company's web site. Indicator of *positivity* in this study were ease in navigation, using multi-language, availability of sitemap, search engines, pictures, videos, logos, and slogans. To measure the ease of navigation, researchers look for a clear link labels on each website. Researchers also look for multi-language content (facilitates users to choose which language they would prefer), a sitemap (any categorised outline of the company's website) and search engines (tools that facilitate users to search for more specific information), as well as pictures, videos, logos, and slogans that can create a positive user experience.

Openness is defined as efforts made   by companies on its web sites to provide more disclosure. It is measured by the existence of information that consists of the company's overview, press releases, annual reports, and stock quotes. The company overview contains information about the company as a whole. Press releases are forward-looking statements provided by the company to provide the latest information to shareholders. The annual reports are reports that contain all company activities for a year as a medium to provide information to stakeholders. Stock quotes are useful particularly for investors to be aware of the company's stock market. Not only that, *openness* is also measured with interactivity with the user, represented by the existence of social media outlets.

Another strategy is *sharing of tasks*. In this study, *sharing of tasks* is defined as corporate social responsibility initiatives undertaken by the company and communicated via the company's website. It is measured by existence of news about activities related to corporate social responsibilities such as community services, environment-friendly efforts and education. Environmental activities are efforts in the form of programmes, grants, projects, services or products that can help prevent pollution, improve plant and animal life, taking into account the problem of global warming or other topics related to environmental issues. Community-related activities are carried out efforts to improve well-being of community such as providing assistance in the event of a natural disaster, blood donation activities or other topics related to wellbeing of the community. While educational activities are carried out, efforts to improve education in community such as helping children who are less able to attend school, providing scholarships to students or other related activities to improve education.

Networking is defined as efforts made by companies on its web sites to build relationships with other parties. It is measured by the relationships with activists, for example environmental activists, associations or community groups. Not only that, relationships with other companies are also included in this strategy.

The last strategy, which is *assurance* is defined as efforts made by companies on its websites to reduce non-clarity of information. In this study, researchers will observe *Frequently Asked Question* (FAQ) page or *Ask a Question* page in companies' websites.

RESULTS

From the descriptive analysis in Table 2, we can observe the use of six relationship maintenance strategies among the companies sampled. *Access* is most commonly used by companies listed on Bursa Malaysia (M = 4.90). Those companies successfully used *access* which includes showing telephone numbers, company address, and e-mail addresses of employees in web sites.

The second highest relationship maintenance strategy observed in this study is *openness* (M = 3.39). Almost all websites featured a variety of information about their company such as company overview, press releases, annual reports, and stock quotes. In addition, those companies also used *openness* by creating interactivity through the usage of social media such as *Youtube*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*. Third highest strategy used is *positivity* (M = 3:31), albeit ranked as 'moderate' usage through sitemap, search engines, images, videos, logos, and slogans. Furthermore, these website feature a variety of languages and easy to navigate. Thus, both of these strategies are evaluated 'moderate' on its use.

Table 2: Level of Relationship Maintenance Strategies in companies' websites

Relationship Maintenance Strategies	Mean Value	Level	N	Percentage
Access	4.90	5	181	91
		4	17	8.5
		3	1	0.5
		2	0	0
		1	0	0
Positivity	3.31	5	6	3

		4	68	34.2
		3	105	52.8
		2	20	10.1
		1	0	0
Openness	3.39	5	9	4.5
		4	65	32.7
		3	119	59.8
		2	5	2.5
		1	1	0.5
Sharing of Task	1.98	5	23	11.6
		4	24	12.1
		3	14	7
		2	0	0
		1	138	69.3
Networking	2.85	5	92	46.2
		4	0	0
		3	0	0
		2	1	0.5
		1	106	53.3
Assurance	2.40	5	11	5.5
		4	0	0
		3	117	58.8
		2	0	0
		1	71	35.7

Networking (M = 2.85) was the fourth commonly used strategy among these companies. There are not many companies displaying links to other companies on their websites. Even lesser use *Frequently Asked Question* (FAQ) page and *Ask a Question* page (which represents *assurance*

strategy M = 2:40). *Sharing of task* (M = 1.98) was the least strategy used among the companies as there were very little publicity of activities related to environment, community, and education on their websites.

The researchers were also interested to look at any differences between types of company and strategies employed. The 199 companies were categorised according to types of business /services they provide. Table 3 provides the operational definition used to determine types of companies.

Table 3: Operational Definition for types of companies

Construction	Involve in structure and construction example highway and railway.
Consumer Products	Companies that supply products for consumer used.
Finance	Companies that provide services in earning and distributing funds in savings by banks, monetary institution, insurance and others.
Industrial Products	Companies that manufactures materials and products for industrial used.
Plantation	Companies involved in the proliferation, planting and / or replanting
Properties	Companies that invest whether directly or indirectly in property.
Technology	Companies that provide solution for any information communication problems
Trading/Services	Companies involved in the distribution of goods and services other than financial services, such as banking and insurance.
REIT(Real Estate Investment Trust	Companies involved in REIT

Relationship Maintenance Strategy		SS	df	MS	F	p
Access	Between Group	1.181	8	.148	1.557	.140
	Within Group	18.005	190	.095		
	Total	19.186	198			
Positivity	Between Group	5.260	8	.658	1.409	.195
	Within Group	88.649	190	.467		
	Total	93.910	198			
Openness	Between Group	16.141	8	2.018	5.913	.000**
	Within Group	64.834	190	.341		
	Total	89.975	198			
Task Sharing	Between Group	32.303	8	4.038	1.816	.076
	Within Group	422.451	190	2.223		
	Total	454.754	198			
Networking	Between Group	69.922	8	8.740	2.310	.022**
	Within Group	718.852	190	3.783		
	Total	788.774	198			
Assurance	Between Group	25.195	8	3.149	2.597	.010**
	Within Group	230.443	190	1.213		
	Total	255.638	198			
** significance value $p < .05$						

Variance analysis using ANOVA revealed 3 strategies with significant differences among the types of companies, i.e: *openness*, *networking* and *assurance*.

Table 4: Relationship maintenance strategies analysis according to types of companies.

Each of the three strategies mentioned had significant difference between different types of company. There were two distinct elements used by companies who scored high, which are the company background, as well as news column on the company's operation. Additionally, the company also included their annual report on their websites. This is important as the *openness* can be seen as an important factor for giving exposure to stakeholders about the company, as well as to develop stakeholders' trust.

Networking was also a distinct strategy that has significant difference among different types of companies and this strategy can be defined as steps to create new relationship among companies, the government, as well as community. This strategy mostly used by construction companies by including their past and current projects in the list of link. By including links of projects, company portfolio is seen even more interesting and convincing.

The third strategy that has significant difference among the types of companies is *assurance*. High on *assurance* strategy can be in form of steps taken by a company to convince the public that they will be responsible for any problems that may arise. Including Frequently Ask Question (FAQ) on their web sites is one of the distinct qualities of companies which scored high in assurance.

Researchers believed that all three items have the significant differences because each of the company listed have different goals and objectives. The results also supported earlier research by Ki and Hon (2006), which found that there is a significant difference between relationship maintenance strategies among different types of company. By identifying the strategies and the listed companies, this study has identified what are the strategies highly used, as well as strategies that need to be tap into by Public Relations according to types of companies.

DISCUSSION

Organisations' public relations departments need to be effective in carrying out activities and programs so that it can help organisations to achieve its goals. One way to materialise this is by using various public relations tool to help public relations practitioners to be more efficient. Internet can become a useful public relations tool, in which, if utilised properly, can help organisations build and maintain successful relationships with its stakeholders.

The study found that *access* is utilised extensively in websites. Sunway Real Estate Investment Trust with perfect *access* scores is a suitable example to illustrate the importance of

this strategy. As an investment company, the organisation takes care of its stakeholders, especially investors, by providing easy access for them to communicate with management. This will enable stakeholders and companies to engage in more effective interaction and create a mutually satisfying relationship with each other.

Second highest relationship maintenance strategy used by companies listed on Bursa Malaysia is *openness*. CIMB (a local bank) for example use *openness* excellently. Not only they publicise basic information about the company on its website, they also create various forms of social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* in an effort to reach out to stakeholders. This proves that CIMB saw this strategy as an important aspect in creating a good rapport with the public. They are also able to display transparency to create a sense of trust among stakeholders.

Positivity is the third highest strategy used. To be able to establish positive relationships with stakeholders, the listed companies on Bursa Malaysia presents sitemap, search engines, images, videos, logos, and slogans. Furthermore, the website facilitates easy navigation and multi-language content for users. For example, AirAsia Bhd (a local low-cost Airline company) properly displays *positivity* strategy of their website. By creating positive relationships with stakeholders through their website, AirAsia can improve the quality of their relationship with the public.

Networking, such as displaying joint efforts with other companies or activists, is found somewhat less utilised in websites. For example, Eurospan Holdings Limited, a company that manufactures home furniture, did not display information about networking with other companies or specific public activist. The company conducts business directly to its users (selling furniture online) therefore, although the web site looks interesting and informative, lacks any information about outside networks. Nevertheless, the website is easy to browse, creating a sense of comfort so the users can access more details of the goods sold. This proves that the company is more concerned with information related to its products rather than displaying networks with other companies on its website.

Companies listed on Bursa Malaysia are also relatively low in displaying the *Frequently Asked Question* (FAQ) page and *Ask a Question* page on its web site. For example, Petronas Gas Bhd do not have these features on their website. However, they do provide a lot of basic information such as company overview, press releases, and annual reports. Petronas Gas Bhd gives priority to basic information rather than *assurance*, particularly over processes which can be done through face to face communication. Overall, these strategies were utilised considerably lesser than other strategies.

Meanwhile, the lowest strategy utilised by companies listed on Bursa Malaysia is *sharing of task*. Companies such as KLCC Property Holdings Bhd, Malaysian Resources Corporation, Bonia Corporation Bhd, Unisem Bhd, and many more do not publicise any information about their role in issues of environment, community, or education activities. This result proves that Malaysian companies are still lacking to show their participation in engagement activities.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this research has highlighted some patterns observed on websites based on the relationship maintenance strategies developed by Hon and Grunig (1999). Among the high-usage strategy is *access, openness*, and *positivity*. This means that companies in Malaysia are beginning to recognise the potential of websites to establish effective communication with stakeholders. Companies also realised that websites can also help them to promote activities and programs to cultivate and maintain positive relationship with the public. However, Malaysian companies have yet to improve on other aspects such as *assurance* and *sharing of task* on their websites. The research also highlighted three strategies with significant difference (*openness, networking* and assurance) when compared according to types of companies.

Among implications of this study is that it provides some new insights on the potential of websites to maximize efforts of public relations practitioners to establish and build relationships with stakeholders. Furthermore, it gives a general overview of relationship maintenance strategies utilised by companies in Malaysia and what can be improved on. This could assist future public relations plans to nurture positive relationships between organisations and its public effectively. Finally, this study can serve as a guide to public relations practitioners to improve designs of their website to achieve better PR performance.

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