

# FUNCTIONS OF CORPORATE WEB PAGES IN MEDIA RELATIONS

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## 1. Introduction

Although media relations makes up the core of public relations profession and most PR campaigns cannot be waged successfully without media relations. (Desiere and Sha, 2006:96-98).

Media relations are important for every organization. On the other hand, there is a big misunderstanding in public relations about the media. When many scholars objectively look at the situation, they found that; (Center and Jackson, 2003: 206)

1. Media influence is cumulative and long term.
2. The main power of the media is to make us aware.
3. The media concentrate on reporting bad news.

Though the generalized relationship between journalists and practitioners may forever be characterized as adversarial, we must remember that the two professions are one basic tenet- the First Amendment- and in pursuit of protecting this license, we are united. (Center and Jackson, 2003: 208)

In this respect, we think that organizations must hold good relationships with the media. First of all, an organization must establish a formal media relationship policy. Second, an organization must establish a philosophy for dealing with the media. (Seitel, 1992: 376)

In realizing this, they have to look at themselves first. We mean by this is that as the new practice suggests that an organization's web pages are the first contact point with the public and the media professionals, we must be confident about the information we put on organization's web pages. Confidence requires the information be timely, accurate and relevant (Levine, 2004: 73).

The internet gives public relations practitioners a multifaceted form of worldwide communication, primarily involving message Exchange by e-mail, information delivery and persuasion through the Web, and extensive Access to audiences for strategic research opportunities. (Wilcox and Cameron, 2006: 332).

Organizations increasingly set up Web sites to serve informational needs of reporters, especially during a crisis or breaking news situation. (Wilcox and Cameron, 2006: 334).

Our concern in this paper is to assess the degree of importance given by organizations to their corporate web pages for disclosing their formal media relationship policy. To assess this, we chose Turkey's top 100 corporations in terms of net sales in 2005, both private and public. (Work for 2006 was still under way at the time preparation of this paper) (<http://www2.iso.org.tr/tr/web/BesyuzBuyuk/BesyuzBuyukFirma.aspx>, 21.04.2007)

## 2. Media Relations and Online Media

"Online media are tools for information distribution and retrieval, for entertainment, and for relationship building with individuals and audiences. Traditional print and electronic media-newspapers, phones, phonographs, movies, radios, TVs- perform the same function. The differences between online and traditional media lie in matters of degree. Whereas traditional media tend more toward mass, one-way distribution of information, online tends more to individualized two-way distribution. In that respect, online media are closer to direct marketing." (Horton, 2001:1)

The technical difference between traditional and online media is that online media can carry just about anything, and hence they are more flexible than any other medium except face-to-face communication. Online media can be classified into three groups; namely text, sound and still and moving pictures. These types of media can be perfectly combined into an information container. Virtually every communications technology has been influenced by or subsumed into online. Most importantly, they allow two-way conversation. According to Horton, this is a feature that newspapers, telephones, radios, and TV either cannot do or cannot achieve as economically as online.

According to the Nielsen Norman Group, PR professionals should conduct usability studies of their web sites, especially to understand the problems and concerns of ordinary users and journalists. He adds that journalists frequently go to company web sites as they start to work on a story. Reporters look to:

- Find a public relations contact.
- Check basic facts about a company.
- Discover a company's perspective on events.
- Check financial information.
- Download images to illustrate stories. (Wilcox and Cameron, 2006: 338).

Online media complement and supplement public relations. They do not replace the work of relating to internal and external audiences, nor do they replace media that we use today. They expand the power of persuasion and interaction with new media tools. This is a point that public relations practitioners need to remember. The principles of persuasion, credibility, and communication do not change, and one does not enter a world in which one must relearn everything. Many, if not all, of the crafts that PR practitioners learn in formal and on-the-job training still apply online, but the emphasis is different enough that one can feel like a stranger in a foreign land." (Horton, 2001: 1-2). The same holds true for the media professionals. If they can adopt themselves to the new media they can ease their daily work and online research to access the information needed (Schneider and Raue, 2002: 175).

A typical corporate web site will include the following types of information: (Horton, 2001: 156; Levine, 2004: 70-73)

- General company descriptions
- Product/services descriptions
- Company news and calendar of activities
- Investor data
- Employment opportunities
- Contact information
- Office and site directory
- Feedback
- Frequently asked questions and answers
- Tools: A search engine, a site map, downloads needed to use the site such as Adobe Acrobat Reader
- A statement on privacy

In terms of media relations, getting the appropriate audience of a message is very important. For this reason, to reach media professionals via e-mail requires having updated e-mail lists of those professionals. Therefore, e-mail list management is not a trivial subject. It is difficult to do and is just as critical as it is with direct mail. PR practitioners should outsource the drudgery of e-mail list maintenance but not the responsibility for getting names and addresses right. Lists are never completely accurate. They are more or less accurate. The practitioner sets the standard for accuracy based on the maintenance resources at hand and the list itself. Autorespond is a useful tool if used properly. Automatic e-mail responses allow public relations practitioners to send frequently repeated information by e-mail without costly human intervention. There are many uses for pr business these systems for example; autoresponders's one important feature is that they capture e-mail addresses. This can help your e-mail listing accurately. (Horton, 2001: 94)

Other autorespond systems utilities are worth to mention:

- E-mailing event invitations to large groups of media professionals. An autoresponder sends back confirmations and directions.
- frequently asked questions section for the media professionals.
- Directions for activating an account.

- Company information and observations about current events.
- Product information and spec sheets for journalists and others.

Autoresponders handle thousands of personalized messages a day, and they work with Web pages as well.”(Horton, 2001:98)

News distribution services have global reach today for a fraction of the cost of distribution wires they maintain. Secondly, they can deliver more media than with their wire services. Further, major online services are indexed in online databases and are searchable by stock symbols, keywords, and phrases (Horton, 2001:130).

All these advantages benefit PR practitioners who use online news service distribution. In addition, online news distribution services do more than send out press releases. They service and archive video, audio, photos, press releases, slide shows, trade show news and calendars, news by industry, expert sources, and more. They provide streaming video and audio news. They will handle a company’s investor relations site and create a site that looks like and is linked to an organization’s Web site but is managed by the newswire. News distribution sources, such as ‘ProfNet’, provide a flow of press queries to PR practitioners and experts to reporters.

An e-mail newsletter is away to build relationships with media professionals who have an interest in an issue or an organization and its products and services. They require careful reporting, editing and presentation. Newsletters are easy to create and online newsletters are even more easy since you don’t have to print and distribute just publish them electronically(Horton, 2001:100).

Precisely, public relations practitioners narrowly target key publics. Online channels facilitate this narrow targeting through the creation of messages based on the each customer’s individual

characteristics. Provided permission is granted, e-mail and customized web content can be tailored to the individual. (Wilcox and Cameron, 2006: 348).

Since enterprise news are a sort of news resources, it is important for an enterprise to archive the historical news classified according to subject and date of issue (Horton, 2001: 132).

The online pressroom makes organizational news available in a compact and easy-to-use place. Many organizations use pressrooms where journalists can download releases, photos, and other artwork such as logos. Some pressrooms require that reporters register so that the company knows who is using its information. Reporters do not like this either, but, they will do it if the content they are looking for is readily available. Pressrooms carry a broad range of organizational and product/services fact sheets and background material in text and pdf format. They are portals for join lists. Logical organization of materials is a necessity.

Some typical categories are: (Okay and Okay, 2003 :130-133 ; Horton, 2001:141-142)

- Releases
- Media coverage
- Customer profiles and case studies
- Corporate profiles
- Contact information for PR staff and key personnel
- Major job changes
- Industry news
- Calendar of corporate and industry events.
- Speakers’ presentations
- Recognition and awards
- White papers
- Product catalogs, specs, and R & D information
- Background and public information on legal issues and crises
- A photo library
- Investor relations
- Important statistics that define the company’s progress and industry trends
- A search engine to help reporters find information

<sup>1</sup> The research was conducted between 21st and 26th of April 2007. Many thanks to our student, Hatun Boztepe in helping us for gathering data of top 100 corporations’ web pages.

- A news alert service which is called RSS when news is added to the site.
- Firms for ordering video and/or stills.

### 3. Methodology of the Research and Findings

To assess the degree of importance given by organizations to their corporate web pages needs to define the criteria associated with the issue. We, first of all, defined these criteria as follows:

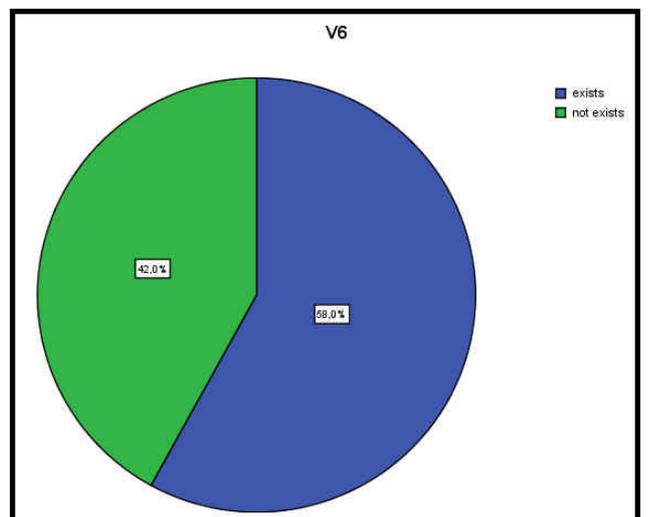
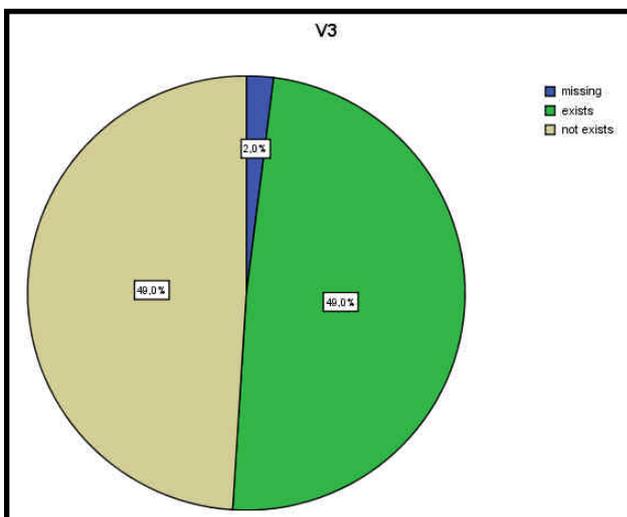
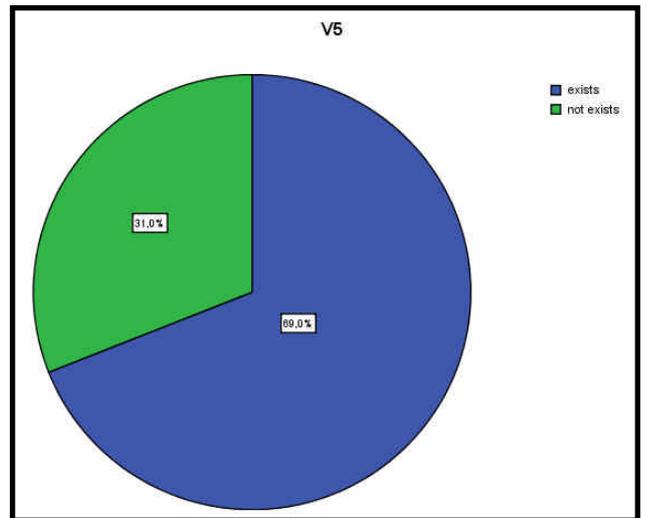
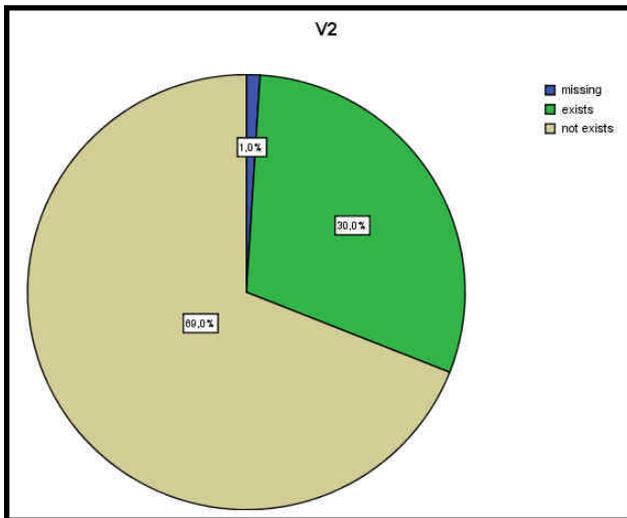
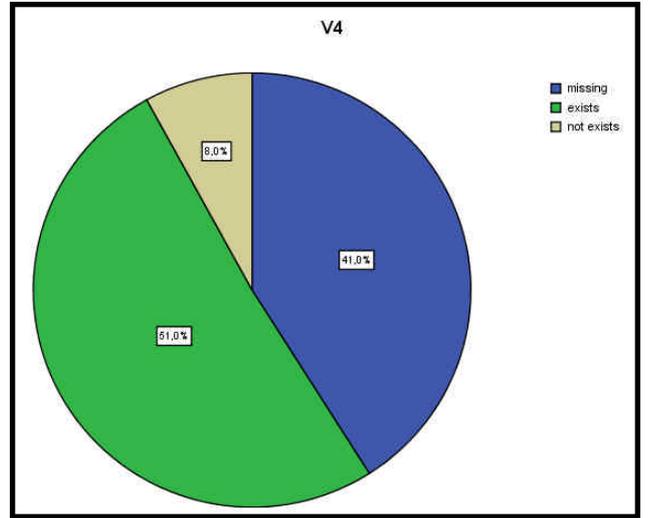
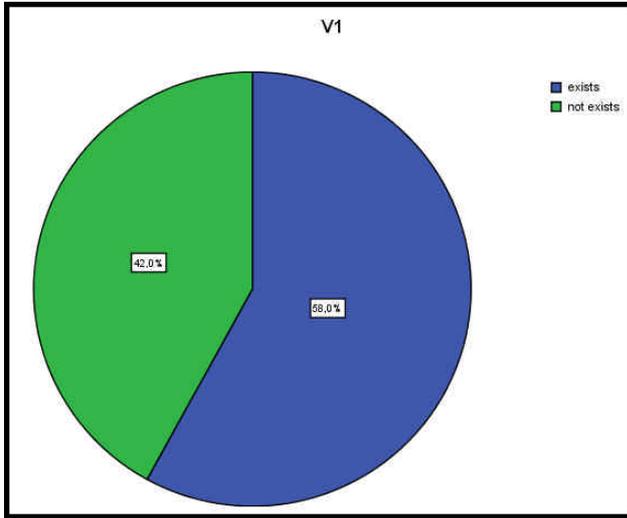
Does the following information exist on the web pages of organizations?<sup>1</sup>

1. News releases
2. Announcements about the activities done/to be done
3. Contact information of the person(s) responsible for the media relations in the organization that a media professional may need.
4. History of the organization.
5. Corporate investor relations information (especially for public offerings).
6. Biographies of administrators or founders of the corporation.
7. Organizational flowchart.
8. Sponsorship information.
9. Corporate publishing material.
10. Frequently Asked Questions about the corporation.
11. Necessary links of related corporations and/or sectors.
12. Visual material archive.
13. E-mail newsletters.
14. Statistical information about the corporation.
15. Search function especially designed for media professionals.

We searched web pages of top 100 of 500 corporations of 2005 in Turkey listed by Istanbul Chamber of Industry (ISO-Istanbul Sanayi Odası). The list is renewed every year. The concept behind the idea is to have a list of Turkey's biggest industrial corporations similar to Fortune 500 list. (www.cnn.com/fortune/, 21.04.2007)

Findings of the research can be summarized as follows:

1. 58% of top 100 corporations have web pages solely designed for providing information for media professionals. (See Fig.V1)
2. Only 30% of top 100 corporations have contact information especially provided for media professionals (apart from providing contact information for general purpose). (See Fig.V2)
3. 49% of top 100 corporations have News Releases available on their web pages provided for media professionals. (See Fig.V3)
4. 51% of top 100 corporations have web pages provided for media professionals reachable with two-click. (two-click rule: easy access to information) (See Fig.V4)
5. 69% of top 100 corporations have announcements about the activities done/to be done on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V5)
6. 58% of top 100 corporations have visual material archive on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V6)
7. 43% of top 100 corporations have corporate profit information (especially for public offerings) on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V7)
8. 90% of top 100 corporations have history of the organization on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V8)
9. Only 29% of top 100 corporations have corporate publishing material on their web pages for media professionals. (Online magazines, brochures, gazettes etc.) (See Fig.V9)
10. 36% of top 100 corporations have biographies of administrators or founders of the corporation on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V10)
11. 42% of top 100 corporations have sponsorship information available on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V11)
12. 48% of top 100 corporations have visual material archive available on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V12)
13. Only 16% of top 100 corporations can E-mail newsletters on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V13)
14. 54% of top 100 corporations have statistical information about the corporation available on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V14)
15. Only 26% of top 100 corporations have Frequently Asked Questions page about the



corporation available on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V15)

16. 82% of top 100 corporations have necessary links of related corporations and/or sectors about the corporation available on their web pages for media professionals. (See Fig.V16)

17. Only 9% of top 100 corporations have sign-in requirement to access to the pages available for media professionals. This is specially important for corporations to keep track of the media professionals who are interested in the corporation. (See Fig.V17)

18. Only 21% of top 100 corporations have search function on their web pages especially designed for media professionals. (See Fig.V18)

19. 31% of top 100 corporations have downloadable files on their web pages especially prepared for media professionals. (See Fig.V19)

### Conclusion

The interactivity of the Internet is very important to public relations. Building relationship through an interactive web site will ultimately serve to improve the corporate image and align corporate policy with public opinion. This two-way symmetrical communication reflects change on the part of the organization to accommodate the public. In this study, we especially selected the media relations which have a key role in delivering messages to the target audience.

We have found that in Turkey, although even the top 100 corporations have a sense of relevancy of corporate web pages' influence on media relations regarding the criteria defined in the academic arena, they are mostly lacking in realizing this need.

As a conclusion, we can state that in Turkey, new media technologies, especially Internet web pages are not fully utilized by PR practitioners, although obvious benefits exist. But rarely, some good examples can be observed. And finally, we should mention that PR practitioners in the sector should have been educated on the advantages of new media tools before they start to search for a job.

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