

Title: Internet as Mode of Resistance: Leveraging Internet Contagions

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Stream: Critical Marketing

Abstract

Traditional marketing has been using the Internet in attempts to create “buzz” or “viruses” to promote products. The point of viral/buzz marketing is to have a central message picked up and distributed by e-fluentials (online opinion leaders) and/or average consumers. The benefits to corporations are twofold: (1) the consumers do the marketing work for the organization and (2) the organization benefits from the credibility of “word-of-mouth.” Individuals and groups intent on promoting consumer resistance (resistors), especially when utilizing the more active resistance strategies of complaining and boycotting, can utilize the same basic online avenues to widen the range of people receiving their messages and ultimately to increase the power they wield when confronting organizations (Fournier, 1998). The Internet has the potential to empower consumer resistance by providing a variety of avenues for increasing the power organization’s perceive these groups to possess. We refer to the power associated with the spread of messages in cyberspace as an “Internet contagion.” This paper explores the dynamics of Internet contagions.

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Traditional marketing has been using the Internet in attempts to create “buzz” or “viruses” to promote products. The point of viral/buzz marketing is to have a central message picked up and distributed by e-fluentials (online opinion leaders) and/or average consumers. The benefits to corporations are twofold: (1) the consumers do the marketing work for the organization and (2) the organization benefits from the credibility of “word-of-mouth.” Individuals and groups intent on promoting consumer resistance, especially when utilizing the more active resistance strategies of complaining and boycotting, can utilize the same basic online avenues to widen the range of people receiving their messages and ultimately to increase the power they wield when confronting organizations (Fournier, 1998). The Internet has the potential to empower consumer and other stakeholder resistance by providing a variety of avenues for increasing the power organizations perceive these groups to possess. We refer to the power associated with the spread of messages in cyberspace as an “Internet contagion.”

This paper explores the dynamics of Internet contagions. The first section is a quick review of viral/buzz marketing on the Internet and other online resources available to resisters. The objectives and process of viral/buzz marketing are identified as a rationale for creating an Internet contagion. The second section provides a theoretical and conceptual base for how Internet contagions can serve to create power for consumer resisters.

From Buzz Marketing to Internet Contagion

The Internet has given rise to a marketing concept known as buzz or viral marketing. The basic idea is to create a message that is then spread by your consumers. Like a virus, the

message spread through the Internet infecting others. Buzz means that a message appears and spreads to other locations on the Internet. A buzz marketing effort involves a mix of orthodox Internet communication avenues: web sites, e-mail, weblogs or blogs, and discussion boards. Corporations have been trying to understand and exploit these communication avenues to spread their desired message. Ideally all the avenues would carry the message to various regions of cyberspace (Holt, 2004; Dye, 2000).

An example is when Lee Dungarees used a free video game to boost sales. Through a marketing firm, e-mail messages were sent to 1,000 young males with heavy Internet use. The messages contained a web site and brief message. The e-mail was forwarded to an average of six people. At the web site people played a video game but to play at higher levels required codes found on Lee's products. If customers wrote weblogs about the game or posted messages to discussion boards, the buzz was even stronger.

The danger is that buzz cannot be controlled. Once a message is injected into cyberspace, it can mutate in unpredictable ways. Buzz marketing is a variety of publicity and word-of-mouth (WOM). In publicity, an organization sends a message to a media outlet hoping that the message then becomes a story. However, publicity lacks control; the organization does not know if a story will be run or the nature of the story. WOM is viewed as a credible source when consumers want information. The Internet substitutes for and/or reinforces the telephone or face-to-face communication. Buzz is electronic WOM. While buzz can fail, two associates have formed for agencies specializing in buzz. Corporations take buzz seriously as a marketing tool that can produce results (Middleberg, 2001).

Resistors can use the same orthodox Internet communication avenues plus unorthodox avenues. The publicity parallel informs this point. Corporation can attempt to curry publicity

through orthodox tactics such as news releases, press conference, and pitch letters. Activists can go beyond the orthodox to include protests and boycotts. The danger is the tactics becomes the message or the group is further marginalized. The news media covers the event and not the reason for it. We see people chained to fences but have no idea why or are told the people are “extremists.” Unorthodox Internet communication avenues include attack web sites and complaint portals.

Corporations are expressing concern over resisters using either orthodox or unorthodox avenues. Firms offer specialty services in coping with attack and monitoring mentions of the corporation or product in weblogs (blogs) and discussion groups (Middleberg, 2001). The owners of complaint portals repackage and sell the information to the objects of scorn (the companies). People are making money from corporate fears of resisters using buzz. Why? A negative message spreading through cyberspace is a potential threat to an organizations reputation, how it is perceived by stakeholders. Reputation is recognized as an extremely valuable, intangible asset for an organization. A positive reputation has been linked to improved sales, stronger stock prices, and higher quality job application (Dowling, 2001). Negative media coverage and WOM are real threats to a reputation. An Internet contagion, unfavorable messages spreading on the Internet, is recognized as serious threat as well.

Failure of Buzz

Just as not all buzz works, resistor efforts to create an Internet contagion can fail. There are tens of thousands of blogs posted per day, for instance. How many are read by any one, generate comments from anyone, or create trackbacks from anyone? A trackback is a link to a specific blog. We do not have any statistics but our guess would be a very small percentage.

Less than 30% of the Americans who go online ever read a weblog (Raine, 2005). The same holds true for attack web sites, e-mails, and discussion posting.

A contagion is created in order to advance demands of the resisters. A contagion is created in opposition to some organization, product, and/or service. A contagion is a form of agitation. Agitation can evoke efforts at control; how management responds to the contagion. Efforts can be taken to suppress a contagion from spreading—prevent the buzz. Control strategies include: denial of means, counterpersuasion, adjustment, and capitulation.

The control strategies were used to explain protests in the 1960's and 1970's (Bowers, Ochs & Jensen, 1993). With some modifications, they apply to modern corporate responses. Denial of means, managers can use the legal in attempts to close an attack web site. Harassment, managers can threaten law suits if statements are not removed from public view. The threat of lawsuits is also a denial of means. Denial of demands, managers say the resisters are wrong. Counterpersuasion, managers can meet with resisters in hopes of convincing resisters that they are wrong about the organization. Adjustment, the management changes the organization in response to resistor concerns. Capitulation, managers give in to all resistor demands.

Resisters must be ready for control strategies. Denial of demands require refutation of the organization's position. Provide evidence to show your interpretation is correct. Counterpersuasion requires negotiation skills to hold your ground. Adjustment and capitulation suggest change but resisters must monitor the situation to determine if changes were really made and were not just a strategy designed to create quiescence.

Legal threats can be very effective if resisters lack the financial or legal resources to respond. However, legal action can be turned against an organization because it can generate

negative publicity. Resistors must prepare for a fight if the harassment or denial of means strategies are used.

The control strategies reflect the power of resistors. If the resistors are too weak, management simply ignores them. A control strategy is a form of engagement. Our argument is that an Internet contagion has the potential to create power and command the attention of management. So why do stakeholder resist and how exactly does the Internet create potential power for resistors? These are the focus of the next section.

Why Stakeholders Become Resistors

The growing emphasis on corporate social performance has opened up organizations to greater scrutiny by stakeholders. The public expects more from corporations because of their increasing prominence as socio-political forces as well as economic forces. Stakeholders are no longer limited to stockholders, employees, or community members. The growing importance of organizations as institutions has led stakeholders to feel they have legitimate interests in the operations of corporations. Believing that they have vested interests in corporations has led some stakeholders to more critically question organizational actions. Some stakeholders are motivated to become activists in order to highlight perceived misdeeds and influence operations.

Activist stakeholders (resistors) can have a variety of concerns about organizational operations stemming from their products (e.g., value, safety, health concerns), business operations (e.g., business strategies, including the use of sweatshop labor, outsourcing, discrimination, advertising), and environmental effects (e.g., impact on air and water quality). Various stakeholder groups develop expectations for how corporations should behave, and these expectations are often at odds with one another. Because the activist stakeholders have different, often contradictory, expectations grounded in disparate values and beliefs, classifying

stakeholders and the threats they may pose is problematic. In spite of the complexity of monitoring the range of stakeholder activities that may impact corporations, corporations should be motivated to monitor these because of their potential to threaten their reputation and operations. Additionally, corporations should be motivated to monitor stakeholders because of the information they can provide concerning the extent to which the corporation is meeting expectations. Stakeholders are a significant barometer of public sentiment concerning a wide range of issues pertaining to corporations.

In addition to challenging corporations on a variety of their organizational operations, activists also can present challenges reflecting more macro, societal concerns. In this way activist stakeholders also can vary in the breadth of their concerns. For example, some may focus on a more micro issues (or single issues) such as demanding the recall of an unsafe product or calling for an end to a specific organization's discrimination in hiring practices. Other activist stakeholders are concerned with broader, more macro issues such as anti-globalization or environmental concerns such as global warming or destruction of rain forests.

Regardless of the basis for their resistance, activist stakeholders are becoming increasingly aware of the power of the Internet in assisting their causes. While traditionally we may visualize activists engaging in public protests, we must also recognize the power of virtual activism to influence others and corporations. Several web-based avenues exist for resisters: web pages, blogs, e-mail lists, discussion groups, etc. The internet has emerged as an important tool for stakeholders who want to demand attention for their claims and influence corporate operations (e.g., van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004). Virtual activists can use the internet in numerous ways to affect sentiments, disseminate information, connect like-minded people, and mobilize actions. The internet-based activities of activists can even become a news

source for the traditional media and thereby garner increased attention and credibility. When web sites are cited in news reports by mainstream media organizations, the sites and the causes gain legitimacy and extend awareness of the issues. For example, in the U.S., the Flaming Ford website gained attention when CNN, NPR (National Public Radio), and major news networks cited the website in news reports. In spite of federal investigations, Ford had resisted the recall for several years. The website is credited for sparking attention and forcing Ford to recall the defective cars and trucks (Coombs, 1998). In this way the Internet can work in conjunction with traditional media to challenge the activities of corporations (Bennett, 2004).

How the Internet Can Build Power through Contagions

The Internet has increased the power potential of stakeholders who wish to become activists. Stakeholders' Internet actions can make it difficult for corporations to resist the claims of activist groups. The following outlines the potential threats that can be posed by Internet activists through their strategic use of the Internet to manage issues.

Coombs (2002) proposed the Issue Contagion perspective to explain and prescribe what issue managers should do in maximizing the potential of the Internet. "Issue contagions are issues that spread rapidly through the Internet" (Coombs, 2002, p. 216). When an issue gains momentum and spreads among people it becomes a contagion. Issue contagions can be the province of the issues managers, those who assume responsibility for helping an issue gain salience to corporations. The discussion that follows draws upon the arguments presented in Coombs's (2002) issue contagion perspective to highlight how the Internet can be used to effectively manage issues and to empower activists.

Issues are points of contention between organizations and stakeholders (Coombs, 2002). Organization-stakeholder relationships are complex as there are myriad relationships. The

relationship exists when the stakeholder or the organization recognizes an interdependency.

The recognition of the interdependency sets the stage for potential conflicts of interests. Interests can be values, beliefs, expectations, etc. that lead people or corporations to act. Interests are what motivates behavior. When resistors perceive conflicts of interest, they may be motivated to act in order to influence the corporation.

The primary corporate interest is survival. Organizational success is largely dependent on their reputations, a valued resource. Organizations also depend on others to not interfere with their operations. On a daily basis, an organization may expect delivery of raw materials, access to technology, etc. in order for it to operate. Disruptions to the routine standard operating procedures create problems.

Organizations are more or less dependent on stakeholders. They rely on stakeholders to not interfere with their business and to not contest their reputation. Challenges - or the potential for challenges – to either reputation or operations are problematic and may necessitate a response. Challenges can be traced back to conflicts of interest.

This dependency provides the backdrop for the development of stakeholder power. A stakeholder may perceive that an organization poses a threat to his/her interest(s) and decides to challenge the organization. A disgruntled stakeholder in isolation may not be perceived to pose much threat. However, if several stakeholders share their concerns and mobilize, they can gain power. “Issues emerge only when people share problems with others through communication” (Hallahan, 2001, p. 28). Stakeholders can create awareness of a problem (i.e., a conflict of interest) through their activities on the Internet. A stakeholder or stakeholder group can move issues onto a public agenda and become salient to the organization.

Prior to the Internet age, activist stakeholders had to rely on media advocacy for media coverage. They were highly dependent on the media for publicizing their concerns. This media publicity might allow them to attract other like-minded people. However, media advocacy is a form of uncontrolled publicity that cannot guarantee story placement or how the story will be depicted or framed in the media (Treadwell & Treadwell, 2000). Extreme actions (“publicity stunts”) often leave activists looking more foolish than wise and often overlook their message in favor of highlighting the extreme action (activists chaining themselves to trees, walking naked in public, etc.). The attention focused on the extreme actions meant that issues themselves often were downplayed and the potential for stakeholders to find one another was reduced.

In contrast to traditional media advocacy and publicity, the Internet empowers stakeholders to become more significant players in the issue management game. The Internet enables a greater degree of control and presents more options for activists to publicize a problem with the organization-stakeholder relationship. By enabling high

involvement individuals to communicate with others, the Internet has altered how issues emerge (Hearit, 1999; Holtz, 1999). The Internet can facilitate movement from an individual problem to a public issue and demand attention from a corporation. It can become a contagion when it spreads rapidly among stakeholders. Activists can use the internet to demonstrate that their concerns pose a real threat to corporations and increase the pressure on corporations to take their demands seriously.

The following discussion draws upon three areas of research to further explore how the Internet contagion perspective helps us understand how stakeholder activists - issue managers - can help an issue gain traction and thereby gain power. Insights from stakeholder theory, network analysis, and reputation management are reviewed briefly and synthesized with the issue management literature to inform this analysis.

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory offers an explanation of how stakeholders come to be viewed as powerful and thereby important to management. In their review of the stakeholder literature, Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) propose three dimensions for evaluating the salience of stakeholders: (1) power (the ability to get an actor to do something s/he would not do otherwise), (2) legitimacy (the actions are perceived as appropriate, desirable, or proper within the context of some belief system), and (3) urgency (the extent to which time frame is important; the call for immediate action due to the importance of the claim or the relationships to stakeholders). Stakeholder salience is a function of the ability to demonstrate these attributes. The more attributes the stakeholders are perceived to possess, the greater their salience to management. In other words, if management perceives resistors demonstrate these attributes, management will feel pressure to deal

with the stakeholders and their issues. This is further complicated by the fact that different the demands of different stakeholder groups are contradictory or mutually exclusive. The importance of various stakeholders can change depending on the situation (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 1996). The issues advocated by competing groups must be prioritized according to their threat level as determined by their ability to damage the organization and their probability of developing momentum. However, the resisters will be perceived to have greater salience when the attributes of power, legitimacy, and urgency are strong (Coombs, 2002).

Stakeholders can increase their salience by managing the three attributes through their Internet activities. The idea is that corporations will monitor the internet-based activities of resisters in order to assess their threat potential. Savvy stakeholders can engage in coalition-building and social construction of reality (management of interpretations) to enhance the perception that they can exercise power and force the organization to pay attention to their demands (Mitchell et al., 1997). For example, by using Internet communication the resisters can demonstrate they are a powerful group who has legitimate claims and can act quickly to disrupt operations. Resisters can organize an e-mailing campaign to corporate officials stating that they will boycott products if a health benefits policy covering same-sex partners is implemented. The orchestrated action signals the power of the group to organize and affect the corporation's financial status. The group's legitimacy claims (their reasons for implementing the boycott) may be grounded in references to Biblical teachings that they say represent their foundational values. The e-mail campaign is designed to create a sense of urgency and

persuade the corporation that their actions will be swift. If the management perceives the attributes in the way desired by the resisters, they will be motivated to address the issue.

In sum, indicators of stakeholder salience include power, legitimacy, and urgency. All three can be demonstrated via the internet in order to persuade the corporation that stakeholders' concerns should be considered. Power can be shown by claiming growing numbers of supporters as demonstrated through active participation in discussion groups and e-mailing lists. Web sites can offer automated complaint letters to be sent to corporations. This activity can signal both power and urgency. Urgency can be shown via reference to corporate plans (e.g., indicating a timetable for blocking corporate decision-making). The legitimacy of the resisters' concerns can be demonstrated by using the information storage and interactive features of the Internet. Through the posting of scientific reports, expert testimony, and other documents, as well as links to well-recognized organizations, evidence for the legitimacy of stakeholder demands can be established. The interactive features of the Internet also can be used to support the legitimacy of the claims. For example, discussion threads and trackbacks can signal that web site visitors share perceptions of the corporation's misdeeds. Discussions may signal that interpretations are shared and that emotions run high surrounding the issue.

Network Perspective

Rowley (1997) argues for the importance of using a network perspective to understand the power and potential influence of stakeholders. Network analysis offers a method for examining structural relationships as a system. It acknowledges the interconnections among various stakeholders and the organizations that comprise the environment. Because organizations have relationships with many different stakeholders,

Rowley contends it is naive to conceive of organization-stakeholder relationships in isolation. It is more accurate to consider the complex web of relationships with various stakeholders. That is not to say that all relationships are seen as equal relationships. Rather, relationships with some stakeholders gain prominence when those stakeholders can exercise power. Stakeholders who have greater power are difficult for an organization to ignore. Again, networks can help to account for power because power can arise from structural relationships (Rowley, 1997).

Network structure represents opportunities and constraints for actors within the network (Wasserman & Galaskiewicz, 1994). The corporation is an actor, as are the other stakeholders, and they operate within a larger environment consisting of similar corporations, suppliers, other relevant stakeholders, etc. (Rowley, 1997). For our purposes, the network boundaries are defined as those who share an interest in an issue (Knoke, 1994).

In network terms, power is a function of the issue manager's - stakeholder's - position within the larger network of stakeholders. Centrality is a critical variable because it enables communication and is an indicator of an actor's power. Centrality signals the issue manager's importance within the stakeholder network (Coombs, 2002; Rowley, 1997). The Internet offers a wide range of opportunities for resisters to develop relationships with others and to other organizations that may support the issue. The Internet can be used to develop resistor centrality.

Coombs (2002) applied the concept of centrality to the analysis of Internet contagions. Centrality is a function of a resistor's closeness and degree (Rowley, 1997). The closeness aspect of centrality refers to the ability of the issue manager to

independently access others across the network. A resistor who demonstrates the closeness dimension of centrality can spread information quickly and directly without intermediaries.

Degree centrality indicates the extent to which the issue manager is “well-connected.” The resistor has many relationships with other stakeholders. Degree refers to the number of ways a stakeholder can be linked to others in the network. Degree reflects the number of different avenues for reaching other stakeholders. In this way the resistor can access many different sources of information (Rowley, 1997). A stakeholder who demonstrates the degree dimension of centrality can use a variety of internet-based communication tools to facilitate access to others, including issue web sites, discussion groups, email alerts, weblogs, and posts to complaint portals (Coombs, 2002).

In sum, the issue manager’s centrality can create power through communication with other stakeholders. He or she can use different avenues of Internet communication to directly communicate with others. The power of the issue manager is important to the ability of an issue to become a contagion. The structure of the stakeholder network contributes to the power of the issue manager. Specifically, the issue manager’s centrality can create power through communication with other stakeholders. The closeness aspect of centrality means the issue manager can independently access others through the network. The degree aspect of centrality highlights the importance of using different avenues of Internet communication (Coombs, 2002).

Corporations that monitor the web activity of activist groups will be able to observe this centrality. Indicators of strong issue manager power through the centrality measure include website traffic, links to the website search engine results placement (it

should be close to the organization being challenged and within the top 10 placements), number of subscribers to e-mail alert systems, discussion group traffic, and complaint portal traffic (Coombs, 2002). The indicators signal the ability of the issue manager to make connections with others through a variety of methods.

Reputation Management

As previously discussed, corporations are concerned about their reputations. Similarly, activist stakeholders must be concerned about their own reputations, or, more specifically, the reputation of the issue. This section explores how the internet can be used to affect reputation.

Protecting its reputation is an important motivation in corporate behavior. Favorable reputations are associated with positive outcomes, including financial success, ability to recruit talent, community support, and admiration. Reputational threats carry weight. When issues are evaluated as having the potential to “go public”, corporations are more motivated to respond.

As part of their issues management function, savvy corporations monitor the activities of groups that might influence their organizational activities. They hope to anticipate threats through risk assessments and to plan strategies to counter stakeholder claims that they perceive are not in their best interests. Corporations are aware of the potential of the Internet to grant legitimacy to stakeholder claims. Corporations are worried about attack sites, blogs, discussion groups, e-mailing lists, and other forms of e-communication that can gain traction and generate attention. This has led them to monitor these sites over time to track the activities of activist groups and the potential development of issue contagions.

So how do a resistors know if they are succeeding? There are channel-based markers of the successful creation of an Internet contagion. Using various Internet channels can alter a network dynamic, increase a resistor's power, and make them more powerful in the eyes of an organization. Table 1 reviews some basic markers of success in using Internet channels to spread a contagion.

Table 1

Evidence of contagion Success

Centrality (is an individual-level variable:

closeness - the issue manager's ability to independently access others; directly, without intermediaries

- traffic to the websites*
- links to the issue web sites *
- search engine results placement of the issue web sites *
- number of subscribers to the email alert systems*
- traffic to discussion groups*
- traffic to complaint portals*
- popularity of blog site
- number of trackbacks to a blog
- links to the website search engine results placement (it should be close to the organization being challenged and within the top 10 placements)
- number of subscribers to email alert systems
- blogging; blogs written about the issue

degree - the issue manager's ability to connect to many relationships; number of different ways linked; can use a variety of internet-based tools

- the variety of Internet-based channels used (e.g., web sites, blogs, discussion groups, e-mail lists, etc.)
- amount of web site traffic
- amount of discussion group traffic
- complaint portal traffic

Legitimacy: Content Concerns

Every message has content as well as channel. When discussing contagions or buzz it is easy to just focus on the channel—how it is spreading. What a message says is also important. Legitimacy is critical to a contagion. The perceived legitimacy of the issue must be a concern for activist stakeholders. While for some the legitimacy of the issue may seem self-evident, creating a contagion that is difficult for a corporation to ignore requires more than the involvement of a few committed “true believers.” The creation of legitimacy for an issue and the resisters themselves requires effective framing. Resisters must be concerned with how the issue is described, how the involvement of relevant corporations is depicted, and how recommendations for managing the issue are described. Attention should be devoted to how important values are implicated in the descriptions. This process of framing requires skill in managing perceptions and meanings.

Issue managers can use the Internet to build legitimacy through their web sites. The key is to attract other stakeholders who accept the legitimacy claims. The need to create legitimacy has an obvious, concomitant persuasive dimension. The hope is to attract and win over additional stakeholders who can benefit the cause and contribute to the contagion (Coombs, 2002). For this reason, careful attention should be devoted to the process through which legitimacy is socially constructed.

Stakeholders should use strategies to create legitimacy. Two common strategies are endorsement and self-evidence (Coombs, 1992). Endorsement requires that a person who is perceived to possess legitimacy support the issue. The endorser's legitimacy may derive from their position (e.g., they are a member of a regulatory board), credibility (perceived trustworthiness and expertise; e.g., a noted biologist offers testimony), and/or charisma (they possess extraordinary characteristics that attract others) (Coombs, 1992). For example, a website might include comments from members of parliament, research scientists, performers like U2's Bono or Alec Baldwin, or athletes like Lance Armstrong to support the legitimacy of the issue.

Legitimacy also is enhanced through the use of self-evidence. Self-evidence draws upon tradition, rationality, and/or emotionality. Tradition refers to precedents that demonstrate that things have been done this way in the past and there is no reason to change. Rationality relies upon logical reasoning and evidence to support the legitimacy of an issue. Emotionality is designed to create strong feelings and reactions to effectuate persuasion. Emotional appeals often create a sense of personal involvement with the issue (Coombs, 1992).

Overall, the framing of an issue, including the types of support provided and the language used, should be viewed as a social construction process (van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Ruc ht, 2004). Communicators contribute to the definition and development of the issue. This social construction process holds significant implications for the perceived legitimacy of the issue. Legitimacy resources should be used to demonstrate that an issue is worthy of public concern. The incorporation of legitimacy resources aids the cause by demonstrating that the issue is not merely an obsession of the lunatic fringe. Endorsement strategies and the bases of self-evidence often are used in combination to build a case for the legitimacy of the issue.

Attempts to build issue legitimacy via the Internet will rely most heavily on issue web sites and discussion groups (Coombs, 2002). Given the increasing attention given to blogging, this method of communication also should be added. Weblogs can contain personal stories or provide more acceptable evidence to support a claim.

Issue web sites can incorporate a variety of endorsement and self-evidence legitimacy resources to support the issue. For example, the web site may include links to news media stories related to the issue; links to scientific reports appearing in established research journals; outlines, time lines, or maps of the history of the development of the issue (e.g., a time line demonstrating destruction of rain forests; a time line of regulatory actions or litigation); testimony from scientists who are working on research related to the issue; comments from government officials in countries where the issue has gained prominence; and stories from individuals who have personally experienced adverse effects from the failure of corporations to address the issue (e.g., survivor stories).

High quality web sites are more likely to be seen as legitimate. Witmer (2000) contends that a quality website includes qualified creators, objective information, offers evidence to support claims, and is up-to-date. While stakeholders who are already strongly committed to the issue may enjoy reading diatribes by other like-minded individuals, web sites that are composed of only highly biased information or opinions may fail to attract and keep new stakeholders. Corporations can more easily ignore the rants of zealots than the well-reasoned, fact-based arguments of scientists or respected humanitarians.

Discussion groups also provide an opportunity for an issue to gain legitimacy. Discussion groups may either comprise a facet of an issue website or exist independently and be devoted to discussions of a particular issue. Discussion participants do not necessarily support an issue. They may participate in order to attack and argue against the legitimacy of an issue. Research suggests that rants are not likely to spread (Middleberg, 2001). Other discussion threads may include exchanges where participants are mutually supportive of the issue. Table 2 provides a summary of indicators that legitimacy resources are being used.

Table 2

Indicators of Attempts to Build Legitimacy

issue web sites (quality of website, utilization of legitimacy resources)

discussion groups (quality of the post, utilization of legitimacy resources)

blogs (quality of blog writing, utilization of legitimacy resources)

Success of Legitimacy

Coombs (2002) recommends using markers of success for postings at the issue website or discussion group. The markers indicate if the issue is building momentum and is becoming a contagion. These markers reflect others accepting an issue (grant it legitimacy): (1) the number of different people posting or commenting on a blog, (2) the valence of the posts or comments (supports or refutes the issue), (3) the length and valence of the threads (threads refer to exchanges of messages between people), (4) the valence of crossover stories, and (5) trackbacks for blogs. The number of different participants is important because it signals numerous people are involved (vs. length alone). As more people participate in the thread, do they seem to be validating the legitimacy of the issue? Valence refers to the positive (supportive) or negative reaction to the post. Negative valence indicates that people are not seeing the issue as legitimate; positive valence indicates acceptance of legitimacy claims (Coombs, 2002). The news media may cite the issue website as a source of their information. These crossover stories should be examined in terms of their valence. Media stories that are positively valenced signal that the media are endorsing the issue's legitimacy (Coombs, 2002; Ryan, 1991). Trackbacks will also provide an indicator of legitimacy if people deem a blog worthy of being linked.

Implications for Resisters

Resisters are a form of issue manager. Through the Internet, the resistor builds power and legitimacy. The goal is to have an organization take their issue serious and consider the option for resolving the issue. Organizations sort issue by a prioritization process as well. Issue prioritization by corporations requires an evaluation of the

importance of the issue for an organization in order to determine its threat potential.

Corporations can rank order issues based upon the extent of the issues' threat potentials.

Issues posing greater threats demand more attention.

Two variables typically affect a corporation's evaluation and prioritization of issues: (1) impact and (2) likelihood (Coombs, 1999). Impact refers to how strongly an issue could affect the organization (disrupt operations, threaten profits, damage reputation). Corporations can do little to affect the impact of an issue. Likelihood refers to probability that an issue will gain momentum. It forecasts the issue's potential for "going critical" - gaining attention and requiring action. Issue legitimacy and issue manager power provide the foundation for the likelihood evaluation (Coombs, 2002).

The visible activities of activists on the Internet can affect how corporations prioritize issues. If corporate monitors observe the rapid spread and anticipate a contagion, that issue will be perceived as a greater threat to the organizations. In this way internet activities affect "likelihood", the corporation's assessment of the probability of an issue gaining strength and requiring action (Coombs, 2002). It affects the way a corporation prioritizes its concerns. It is clear that a stakeholder issue that is perceived as having a strong potential for gaining legitimacy and is supported by a strong activist issue manager will more quickly become a priority than an issue that lacks these qualities. Issue legitimacy is an important factor to consider when evaluating the likelihood dimension because it refers to the extent to which an issue is seen as a public concern. It is an outgrowth of stakeholders seeing a connection between the issue and themselves (Coombs, 2002). Legitimacy is important to stakeholders who will support action on issues that they perceive to be legitimate. Evidence that an issue is becoming a contagion

will boost a corporation's concern for the issue. In this way corporations must be concerned with the reputation (i.e., legitimacy) of the issue itself.

Other Issues

One issue is cost. Social movements such as the Sierra Club, Greenpeace International, etc. have the financial resources necessary to purchase & use the hardware and to hire people to maintain sites. Moreover, ICT (Internet communication tools) offer a less expensive means of communication (van de Donk et al., 2004).

A second issue is the full utilization of the nature of the web. Activists are effective at using the ability to overcome geography. ICT (Internet communication tools) are likely to be used in cases where people need to be connected globally. The interactive capabilities of the internet have not been exploited. The interactive possibilities of the Internet have been missed. Most groups use it for one-way communication. The web site is used for information storage rather than for discussion groups (Rosenkrands, 2004; van de Donk et al., 2004).

Finally, the Internet sites are more likely to be able to present information that has not been reported in mainstream media (van de Donk et al., 2004). This provides a new mechanism for reaching other stakeholders.

Conclusion

Stakeholders will become resisters when actions or policies of organizations spur them to action. The Internet is a valuable new resource for resisters. By carefully crafting and spreading a contagion through the Internet, their issue can gain the attention of management. Coombs (2002) offers the issue contagion perspective as a way of understanding the Internet's potential for empowering activists and persuading

corporations to confront their issues. Corporations must assess the threat posed by an issue. Threat is a function of impact and likelihood, where likelihood refers to the probability that an issue will develop and require additional attention and impact refers to the amount of damage an issue can cause to an organization. Issue prioritization – how important the issue is perceived to be – is affected by the likelihood evaluation. The power of stakeholders is increased when it appears they can make a private problem a public issue by spreading concern for the issue (Coombs, 2002).

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