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A theoretical framework for the concept of 'Internet strategy'

ABSTRACT

Organisations know that the Internet could or should play an important role in goal achievement, but are uncertain about its strategic application. It can therefore be said that the Internet remains largely 'a technology in search of a strategy'.

This article explores 'Internet strategy' from the perspective of the corporate communication domain, specifically within the framework of two meta-theoretical approaches: the Excellence approach and the two-way symmetrical approach to public relations and communication management. 'Internet strategy' is conceptualised based on the following theories: information theory, the communication process, mass communication theory, strategic management theory, corporate communication roles theory, and the models for developing corporate communication strategy and communication plans.

The most important findings indicate that, with regard to the corporate communication process, the Internet is regarded as a medium or channel and, as such, it can make a contribution on all strategy levels. The concept of 'Internet strategy' is specifically seen to be part of operational strategy at the micro organisational level. However, considering the use of the Internet already at the functional strategy level ensures that its use is not decided upon in isolation, but forms part of corporate communication goal achievement.

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1.   INTRODUCTION

There is overall consensus in the field of information technology that business, commerce and industry, as we know them, are dead. Information technology has changed the way in which we live, work, communicate, contract, compete and obtain information (Austria & Jones, 1997:1; De Villiers, 1997:10; Graham, 1997:28; Moody, 2000:5; Negroponte, 1996:39; Ross, 1998:4; Simeon, 1999; Twine, 1997:21). Technology has affected all communications and relationships (Hauss, 1995:19).

The advent of the Internet has not only changed how organisations conduct their business, but it has also impacted on the social fabric of the global community. Its value and shortcomings are therefore witnessed globally. Some see the Internet as a threat, while others view it as the opportunity of a lifetime. It is not merely a passing fad, but a hard fact of business life (Wladawsky-Berger, 1997:19). Change is inevitable and information technology is acting as a change agent, causing upheavals in how organisations are managed (Schaffer, 1997:1). Change can be a threat or an opportunity, and organisations will lose their market position if they are unwilling to integrate technologies such as the Internet into their strategies and operations.

In most industries, the dependence on information technology is increasingly becoming mission critical. There is unrelenting pressure to establish competitive advantage and to focus on core business. In using information technology, a contribution should be made to the bottom line of an organisation (Ross, 1998:4).

An information technology such as the Internet is a powerful new tool with the promise (and sometimes hype) of revolutionising corporate communication and marketing, bringing the organisation closer to customers, expediting transactions and improving management decisions (Oliva, 1997:8; Anon., 1997a:8). The organisation's ability to survive in a global competitive environment will depend on its ability to integrate appropriate business information directly into business units, intranets and extranets, as well as to facilitate decision support as well as other enterprise business processes (Stear, 1998:61). By using these new technology tools, knowledge and proficiency are being built (Hauss, 1995:18).

Virtual social and business communities on the Internet are affecting the manner in which business enterprises approach this new communication medium (Simeon, 1999; Solberg, 1996). The Information Age is not just about technology; it is about communication (Weber, 1996a). Managers need to realise what the capabilities of these new mediums are, because of the impact of their characteristics on the communication process. Information technology is creating a new communication environment by influencing communication channels, corporate stakeholder identification, communication mediums, message content and form, communication feedback, corporate communication roles, the shared meaning of messages, information packaging, strategic information management and corporate identity (Ihator, 2001:199). The interactive and real-time value of the information superhighway will impact on all communication managers – even

if they are not directly involved in cyberspace (Hauss, 1995:17). It has changed, and will change, the corporate communication industry in ways no one ever expected (Crawford, 2000a:26).

The Internet is a complex technological medium with unique characteristics and functions, and it has created an unknown world of technological jargon for managers. Although it is imperative that managers understand this virtual world, it is not sufficient. They must also understand how to integrate this virtual world into the organisation's strategic decision-making processes. In the words of Millichap (in Angell, 1997:94):

> "The Internet is accelerating at a rate that everybody had better wake up and figure out some Internet strategy."

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Millions of websites exist all over the world. To be heard through the clutter, organisations need to stimulate continuing attention and interest. In the past, many thought that this meant 'glitz', and filled the Web with electronic 'junk food.' Confusing tactics with strategy, they focused on the technology rather than the business strategy needed to manage the medium; on the 'bells and whistles' rather than on the organisation, its product/service, its information/communication message (Kent & Taylor, 1998:330) or on achieving interactivity between the organisation and its multiple stakeholders (Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2004:33). They did not realise that corporate websites (indeed all web-based communication) needed to be developed within specific organisational goals and that an online presence alone is not enough to gain a competitive advantage (Du Plessis, 2004:119). Many organisations have since paid the price of unsuccessful websites or limited return on investment by not integrating this medium into organisational strategy (Porter, 1996:6). The effective use of the Internet has thus become one of the most urgent challenges faced by business (Preston, 1997:21).

However, the question of what 'Internet strategy' actually entails and which organisational strategy it should form part of remains unanswered. Managers know that the Internet could or should play an important role in achieving organisational goals, but are uncertain about its possibilities and applications in strategic management. The fact is that strategic application requires more than technical ability (Cronin, 1996:1; Herrington, 1999:23; Palmer, 1997:2). State-of-the-art Internet technology has limited application (Anon., 1996a:32). The answer lies not in 'killer' applications, but in 'killer' business models (De Beyer, 1998:85) or strategies.

Unfortunately, the Internet is known more for the rapidity of its technical advances, the proliferation of its interconnected networks, and the multimedia capabilities of the World Wide Web than for its strategic role in the organisation (Cronin, 1996:1). Yet it is the strategic contribution to the core business of the organisation that will ensure its continued use and value-added function. There is thus a growing need to make the Internet part of an integrated approach in the organisation's overall strategy formulation processes (Maloff, 1997:68).

According to Andrews & Trites (1997:14); Anon. (1996b;72); Bishop (1996:26); Colombo (2001:14); Trembley (1998:26), it is an organisation's strategic and business goals that should drive its strategy. Goals should be defined before assessing which digital tools to use. Managers need to know why an Internet presence is important – they need to take a cold, calm, calculating look at what the Internet can and cannot do for them and how it can contribute to the bottom line (Anon., 1997a:8). The Internet should be seen as a medium to achieve organisational goals, and not as a cure for every business problem (Bishop, 1996:27-28). Its use should therefore not be viewed in isolation, but as part of a holistic approach (Peterson, Balasubramanian & Bronnenberg, 1997:330).

In order to integrate the Internet into organisational strategy, it is necessary to address the question of which department or individual in an organization should take responsibility for it, i.e. which functional area or combination thereof contributes most to the effective management of the Internet. Some see it as a technological innovation that should be left to programmers and information specialists. Others regard the Internet as an instrument for e-commerce to be managed by marketing (Sterne, 2000). In the opinion of the authors, it is the communication capability of this medium that will ensure its continuing existence – a view supported by Barker (2004:97) when stating the following: "The Internet is not a mass marketing or selling medium. It is a communications medium". From this perspective, it is managers from either the communication or marketing function that should take this responsibility.

The approach followed in this research is that corporate communication should carry the overall responsibility. This presents a challenge, both to corporate communication academics and to practitioners. Academics will have to provide theoretical guidelines on how this is to be done (Barker, 2004:90). Furthermore, since this technological development has not been considered part of corporate communication's management responsibility in the past, communication managers will need to make a paradigm shift in the way they structure their area of responsibility and the skills they need to do so, as well as the way they view the use of the Internet (Ovaitt, 1997:21). The focus of this research is thus to determine where the Internet fits into the world of strategic communication management and how the Internet's potential in this approach could be realized optimally.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Internet, as a strategic tool to contribute towards organisational effectiveness, has not yet come into its own. It is still a learn-by-doing enterprise (Graham, 1997:25). Even though the Internet has been visible to business for years – and has been the focus of an extraordinary outpouring of creative energy, not to mention money – managers still do not understand how to think about it or integrate it into organisational strategy. The Internet remains a technology in search of a strategy (Cronin, 1996:1).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research is to build theory. As such it is heeding the call of Barker (2004:90) who said that "…at the root of on-line public relations, as a framework for explaining it, lies the need for an integrated theoretical approach".

Research Objective 1: To apply selected meta-theories and theories to the Internet in order to conceptualise 'Internet strategy'.

Research Objective 2: To investigate whether the concept of 'Internet strategy' can be considered a strategy in the true sense of the word.

Research Objective 3: To investigate whether 'Internet strategy' refers to functional or operational (corporate communication) strategy.

Research Objective 4: To suggest a framework for the formulation of 'Internet strategy'.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This exploratory, non-empirical study is conducted by means of a literature review (Mouton, 2001:175, 176). Based on Pavlik's (1987) research themes, it can be classified as follows:

- Firstly, it is basic or pure research, since it is conducted inter alia to increase the body of knowledge in the field, i.e. to build theory. As such, it is intended to increase understanding of the field of corporate communication, specifically with regard to a new concept of 'Internet strategy.'
- Secondly, it is applied research since it will help managers in organisations to take decisions.
- Thirdly, it is strategic research, since the problems addressed are strategic rather than tactical problems.
- Fourthly, it is qualitative research since the research process develops and changes as the research progresses. The researchers keep an open mind and immerse themselves in the complexity of the topic studied. The textual data is reported in narrative form.

Data analysis is conducted by means of conceptual analysis, specifically identifying and analysing theories in different disciplines that are relevant to the research objectives.

5. DEFINITION OF TERMS

5.1 Internet

The Internet can be seen as a type of global information infrastructure (Peterson, Balasubramanian & Bronnenberg, 1997:331) -- a free, and freely accessible, global community-based communications forum (Solheim & Henning, 1998:159).

It is a vast global network of computers managed by different entities (Frost & Strauss, 1998:11; Zaviona, 1997:23) and links together computer systems of every different make and design -- a network interlinking other networks (De Beyer, 1998:84; Flynn, 1996:201; Lescher, 1995:125; Moody, 2000:6; Murphy, 1997:14; Pieterse, 1995:10; Solheim & Henning, 1998:158; Van Schoor, 1995:10). These networks consist of different types of hosts and a varying number of users. The Internet Protocol addressing system (IP) keeps track of the millions of users, their addresses and the countless message and file transference that occurs 24 hours a day. It uses an 'open' set of standards that allows all users to communicate and pass data from one computer to another, regardless of which vendor or operating system is being used (Anon., 1997b:29).

5.2 Communication

Communication is seen as the process of transferring messages between sender and receiver, and not merely providing information to unspecified target audiences (Gibson & Hodgetts, 1991:5). Communication and information dissemination is therefore not the same concept (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994:228). According to Weaver (in Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994:228), the question to be studied in a communication system has to do with "... the amount of information, the capacity of the communication channel, the coding process that may be used to change a message into a signal and the effects of noise".

5.3 Public relations (corporate communication)

Harlow (in Seitel, 1995:6) provides an overview of public relations by indicating that it is "... a distinctive management function which helps establish mutual lines of communications, understanding, acceptance, and co-operation between an organisation and its publics".

6. META-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The theoretical framework of the study is summarised in Figure 1.

DOMAIN	Communication	Strategic management	Information technology
SUB-DOMAIN	• Corporate communication • Mass communication		
META- THEORETICAL APPROACH	Excellence in public relations and communication management Corporate communication (public relations) models		
THEORIES AND MAJOR CONCEPTS	Communication process/mass communication: • Sender • Message • Channel • Receiver • Feedback (SA) Corporate communication roles theory • Strategist • Manager • Technician (SA) Corporate communication strategy models: • Model for corporate communication strategy • Model for corporate communication plan	Strategy theory • Enterprise strategy • Corporate strategy • Business-unit strategy • Functional strategy • Operational strategy	Information theory • Data • Information • Knowledge

Fig. 1: Meta-theoretical, theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. Adapted from Steyn (2000 C:12)

6.1 Excellence approach to public relations and communication management

The general theory of excellence in public relations and communication management was the outcome of the literature review of the IABC Excellence Study (Grunig, 1992) and its findings (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995). The Excellence Study sought to identify a set of general attributes of excellent management that contribute to organisational effectiveness, and to identify the implications for the management of corporate communication (Moss & Warnaby, 1997:61).

One of the assumptions of the excellence approach is that corporate communication contributes to organisational excellence when practised on the macro, meso and micro organisational levels (Dozier et al, 1995:11-17; Grunig, 1992:3; Grunig, in Steyn, 2003a:8).
- At the micro organisational level, the planning, execution and evaluation of corporate communication programmes take place. At this level, the organisation interfaces with its stakeholders, and daily issues and stakeholders are identified. Decisions are taken on 'how' to communicate with stakeholders by selecting channels to convey the organisation's message effectively to the selected target publics.
- At the meso organisational level, the corporate communication department is organised and managed. Seven meso level characteristics of excellent corporate communication departments, as identified by the Excellence Study, are the following: an integrated corporate communication department; a separate function from marketing; direct reporting relationships to senior management; the practice of the two-way symmetrical corporate communication model; and a senior corporate communication practitioner playing the historic 'manager' role.
- The way in which corporate communication is practised at the macro level determines corporate communication excellence. This is influenced by certain organisational and environmental conditions. The contribution of corporate communication to strategic decision-making can only be realised if it is represented in the dominant coalition. Its role is to identify strategic stakeholders, publics and issues as well as the most appropriate corporate communication model for the organisational environment.

In the context of this study, the Internet is seen to contribute to corporate communication excellence on all three levels. It can for instance be used as a research technique to gather strategic information on organisational stakeholders and issues at the macro level. In the role of the strategist (Steyn, 2000a; 2000b), corporate communication practitioners functioning on the macro level can use the Internet to enhance organisational excellence by conducting environmental scanning and performing boundaryspanning activities to identify reputation risks that threaten organisational legitimacy.

On the functional and implementation strategy levels, the Internet can be regarded as a medium in the achievement of corporate communication (or any other functional) goals. At the meso or functional level, the Internet can be used by practitioners in the role of the corporate communication manager to enhance the organisation's two-way symmetrical communication relationships. It can also be used to identify stakeholders and issues; conduct evaluation research; communicate the organisation's identity;

manage a cyber crisis; improve productivity; enhance media relations; and manage employee communication.

On the micro level, the Internet has become one of the most important mediums (channels) to reach not only customers, but all organisational stakeholders. For instance, it facilitates the handling of queries in a matter of hours; the instant creation, coding and faxing of press releases to a customised list of stakeholders; and the delivery of corporate annual reports via alternative mechanisms such as multimedia CD-ROM and on-line services. But most of all, it establishes a virtual presence for the organisation.

6.2 Corporate communication (public relations) models

The four public relations models (Dozier et al., 1995:13; Grunig & Grunig, 1989:30; Grunig & Hunt, 1984:21-43; Leichty & Springston, 1993:328) depict four historical eras or stages in the evolution of the corporate communication function. They can also be regarded as four different world views, indicating the different purposes that organisational members see for the corporate communication function (Steyn, 2004). The models are the following:

- Press agentry: This model describes the purpose of corporate communication as being publicity, trying to gain coverage from the mass media in almost any way possible (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:21; Botan & Hazelton, 1989:29). It serves a propaganda function and spreads the faith of the organisation involved, often through incomplete, distorted or half-true information. Press agentry is a one-way model where information is given, but the organisation does not seek information from stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:23).
- Public information: In this one-way model, communication is seen as the dissemination of information (not necessarily with a persuasive intent) through the mass and controlled media such as newsletters, brochures, direct mail (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:21) or the Internet. Negative information is rarely volunteered (Botan & Hazelton, 1989:29).
- Two-way asymmetric: In this two-way model (Botan & Hazelton, 1989:29), information flows between the organisation and its stakeholders, but is unbalanced in favour of the organisation (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:22-3). This model is not confined to the dissemination of information, and research plays a key role. However, the latter is used to determine the most appropriate channels and messages to persuade stakeholders to behave as the organisation wants, without the organisation itself changing its behaviour (Botan & Hazelton, 1989:29; Grunig & Hunt, 1984:23).
- Two-way symmetric: In this two-way model, communication consists more of dialogue than monologue (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:23). Communication efforts are described in terms of the research base as well as the use of communication in improving understanding with key stakeholders. It presents the classic win-win situation, and implies that both the organisation and its stakeholders are benefiting (Botan & Hazelton, 1989:29; Dozier et al., 1995:13). The organisation is adjusted to fit the environment. This requires bargaining, negotiating and using strategies of conflict resolution to bring symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes and behaviours of the organisation and its stakeholders (Botan & Hazelton, 1989:29; Dozier et al., 1995:13).

The Internet started as two-way communication, but became one-way communication when it was commercialised – used mainly to disseminate information. However, because of its interactive nature, some organisations have started to use the Internet to build two-way, interactive relationships with their stakeholders, fostering dialogue through various methods. According to Vassos (1996:1): "The Internet is not about mass marketing and mass markets. It's about people – individuals with unique aspirations, needs, desires, and cultural backgrounds. It's not as much a mass market of 60 million people as it is 60 million markets, each containing one person". There is, therefore, a need to crystallise a message to individuals in one-to-one communication and to build one-to-one relationships at the same time (Heilbrunn, 1998:9). The Internet is the medium to meet this need.

7.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The theoretical framework of this study consists of information theory, the communication process, mass communication theory, strategic management theory, corporate communication roles theory, and the models for developing corporate communication strategy and communication plans. After a discussion of each of these theories, their application to this study is provided (in a box).

From these theories, it will become clear that the Internet is not merely the sole domain of one functional area in the organisation. Rather, the technical skills required to manage the technology should be combined with the communication know-how to drive the various functional strategies.

7.1 Information theory

In information theory, a clear distinction is made between data, information and knowledge. According to Davenport (1997:5), data is defined as simple observations of the state of the world. It is easily structured, easily captured on machines, often quantified, and easily transferred. Information is data endowed with relevance and purpose. It requires a unit of analysis, needs consensus on meaning, and necessitates human mediation. Knowledge is valuable information from the human mind that includes reflection, synthesis and context. It is hard to capture in general, difficult to capture on machines, often tacit, and hard to transfer.

Brookes (in Carr, 2002:14) summarises the link between information and knowledge by stating that "... knowledge is structured integrated information and information is fragmented knowledge". Davenport (1997:5) is of the opinion that: "For years, people have referred to data as 'information'; now they have to resort to the high-minded 'knowledge' to discuss information – hence the current boom in 'knowledge management'".

Data, information and knowledge are therefore not interchangeable concepts (Carr, 2002:14-22; Davenport, 1997:5). In order to create knowledge, stakeholders need to do more than passively access information by means of some channel – they need to do something with the information (Alexander, in Carr, 2002:16). By interacting with

information, a stakeholder may become aware of a lack of knowledge and will then be forced to search for new information to overcome this deficiency (Ingwersen, 1992:23). The process of knowledge transfer consists of two actions -- transmission and absorption. Transmission consists of the sending or presenting of information to a potential recipient. If this information is not absorbed, it has not been transferred (Carr, 2002:21-22). Simply making information available (as in the publicity and public information communication models) is therefore not knowledge transfer.

Furthermore, in information science, the term 'information' refers to the handling of information, whether the information consists of numbers, pictures, sounds or other forms, or a mixture thereof. The Information Technology department in an organisation is therefore responsible for the hardware, software and network support. Their focus is the technology, and not the information itself (Carr, 2002:18; Davenport, 1997:24-26).

In the opinion of the authors, there is a similarity between knowledge transfer and communication theory. Where the former is seen to consist of both transmission and absorption of information, communication is seen to be more than the mere transmission and receipt of messages. For communication to take place, a common understanding of the message is essential.

Whereas the information technology department is responsible for the handling of the information on the Internet, the corporate communication department (as well as other functional departments such as marketing and human resources) is responsible for the identification and management of information to be transmitted and absorbed by stakeholders and other interested parties -- facilitating a shared understanding of organisational messages, thereby achieving certain organisational goals.

7.2 The communication process

The main variables in the communication process are the following (Gibson & Hodgetts, 1994):

- The sender is the individual or organisation who initiates the communication (also called the encoder).
- The message is created to convey an idea (both verbal and non-verbal).
- The channel is the way that the message is conveyed.
- The receiver, who decodes the message, must attach the same meaning to the symbols as the sender intended during encoding, or communication does not take place.
- Feedback is the receiver's verbal or non-verbal response with regard to his/her understanding of the message.

For the purpose of this research, the Internet as a medium or channel is of particular interest. Organisational communication media are the methods or channels used in the communication process to send and receive information (Harris, 1993:167). In mediated communication, such as the Internet, messages are carried by electronic impulses. The choice of the medium has a direct impact on the effectiveness of the communication process. Computer-mediated communication media are communication message systems

that use computer text-processing and communication tools to provide a high-speed information exchange service (Sproull & Kiesler, 1990:93).

The Internet can be used by corporate communication (or any other function or business unit) in its goal achievement, providing information on the organisation and its products to organisational stakeholders and building two-way interactive relationships with these stakeholders. This differs from information technology goals that would specify end goals with regard to hardware, software and network support—i.e. goals that have to do with the handling (and not the content) of information.

7.3 Mass communication theory

Mass communication theory functions in the context of the communication process, but the various terms have a different meaning. McQuail & Windahl (1981:4) describe the sender, receiver, channel and message in the context of mass communication:

- The sender in mass communication is always part of an organised group and often a member of an institution or department that has functions other than communication.
- The receiver is an individual but may often be seen by the sending organisation as a group or collective organism with certain general attributes.
- The channel does not consist of a social relationship, means of expression and sensory organs, but includes large-scale technologically based distribution devices and systems. These systems will, however, still have social components since they depend on law, custom and expectation.
- The message in mass communication is not a unique and transitory phenomenon as it is in the usual communication process, but is rather a mass produced and infinitely repeatable symbolic structure, often of great complexity.

Characteristics of mass communication include its open and public nature, the limited and controlled access to 'sending' facilities, the impersonality and imbalance of the relationship between sender and receiver, and the intervention of institutionalised arrangements between sender and receiver.

Janowitz's definition of mass communication (in McQuail & Windahl, 1981:4) can be applied to the Internet as follows: "Mass communications comprise the institutions and techniques {website, e-mail etc.} by which specialised groups (department[s] responsible for managing electronic communication mediums) employ technological devices (Internet) to disseminate symbolic content to large, heterogeneous and widely dispersed audiences (all global users/stakeholders)".

Although the Internet appears to be a mass communication medium, it can be distinguished from other traditional mass communication mediums by its interactive nature. The Internet allows organisations to monitor issues, to collect information on stakeholders and to engage them proactively in direct dialogue – thereby creating 'virtual' relationships with these stakeholders (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). It also gives receivers more power to control the content and form of the interaction than in the traditional relationship. Interactivity on the Internet indeed makes it possible for everyone to act as both receiver and source (Naudé, Froneman & Atwood, 2004:34).

The Internet however shares certain mass communication characteristics in that its nature is open, public, impersonal (one reason being the lack of non-verbal communication) and accessible. There is a relationship imbalance between the sender and the receiver (traditional relationships are no longer relevant) and relationships are governed by the sender organisation (Brandon, 1996:31; Curry, 1996:54; Gilbert, Powell-Perry & Widijoso, 1999; Hauss, 1995:18; Levinson & Rubin, 1996:47; Moody, 2000:7; Solheim & Henning, 1998:160; Zaviona, 1997:24). The Internet can actually be viewed as the first controlled mass communication medium, because its messages are not filtered by gatekeepers and the sender can control the message that is received by the receiver (Newland Hill & White, 2000; White & Raman, 1999). Although websites produce mass messages, these messages can be targeted at different stakeholders (Heath, 1998).

The Internet can therefore be viewed as being both a mass communication medium and a one-on-one interactive communication medium. The communication model on which the organisation's communication is based, will determine how it is used (as a one-way or two-way communication medium).

7.4 Strategy theory

Moss & Warnaby (1997:43) describe the role of strategy in the organisation as: "… a continuous and adaptive response to external opportunities and threats that may confront an organisation".

Various authors see strategy as a pattern, namely:
- a pattern in the organisation's important decisions and actions, consisting of a few key areas or things by which the organisation seeks to distinguish itself (Kami, 1984);
- a pattern in a stream of actions–this pattern being the result of strategic decisions made by the organisation (Mintzberg, 1987);
- a pattern of major objectives, purposes, essential policies and plans for achieving those goals -- stated in such a way as to define what business the company is in, or is to be in, and the kind of company it is or is to be (Jain, 1997:9).

Every strategy should have a specific aim or goal, i.e. broad outcomes that the organisation wants to achieve (Lubbe & Puth, 2000:31). Objectives (specific outcomes) should be derived from this goal. Strategies will then be developed to realise the objectives, and these strategies will consist of specific action plans or tactics. Strategy implies the overall concept, approach or general plan, but tactics refer to the operational level: the actual events, media and methods used to implement the strategy (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994:354).

Different strategies are formulated on different organisational levels, namely enterprise strategy, corporate strategy, business unit strategy, functional strategy and operational strategy (Steyn & Puth, 2000:41-45; Steyn 2002:8-9; Steyn, 2003b).

7.4.1   Enterprise strategy

Enterprise strategy outlines the organisation's mission, purpose and role in society. It addresses issues such as the reason for the organisation's existence; what it contributes to society; which sector of the economy it forms part of; how the organisation can enhance its reputation; and how the organisation realises its social responsibility role (Steyn & Puth, 2000:41-42). Enterprise strategy is thus focused mainly on the achievement of strategic non-financial goals and is, to a large extent, stakeholder oriented (Steyn, 2002:9).

At the enterprise level, the Internet can be used as a research tool to gather information on issues and stakeholders--especially in the political, social and ecological environment (e.g. the media, communities, activists, government and society). The Internet can thus assist in the achievement of strategic, non-financial goals.

7.4.2   Corporate strategy

Corporate strategy tends to be financially oriented and focuses on the portfolio of businesses the organisation should compete in and how they should be integrated (Moss & Warnaby, 1997:52). Corporate strategy can be described as the responsibility of the board or the executive management for the organisation's financial performance (Steyn & Puth, 2000:43).

At the corporate level, the Internet can be used as a research tool to gather financial information (especially from the economic/financial environment) and thus assist in the achievement of financial goals.

7.4.3   Business unit strategy

A business unit strategy usually focuses on a single product or a group of related products to determine how to compete in the product or market or industry segment (Moss & Warnaby, 1997:53). It also seeks a competitive advantage or niche that it could exploit. Business unit strategy is often marketing oriented.

At the business level, the Internet can be used to realise business goals (such as e-commerce) set by the different business units.

7.4.4   Functional strategy

Digman (1990) indicates that the principal responsibility at the functional level is to implement and support the enterprise, corporate and business level strategies (Pearce & Robinson, 1997). The major focus is to maximise the productivity of resources by capitalising on any possible synergies and distinctive competencies that the organisation may possess. Functional areas (e.g. marketing, corporate communication, information technology) contribute uniquely to strategy formulation at the different levels (Moss & Warnaby, 1997:53).

Marketing strategy evolves from the cumulative pattern of decisions made by employees who interact with customers and perform marketing activities, and is oriented towards exchange relationships with stakeholders (Koekemoer, 1998), mainly in the task environment.

Corporate communication strategy provides focus and direction for an organisation's communication with stakeholders, building symbolic and behavioural relationships with its strategic stakeholders. It is the thinking, the logic behind the corporate communication function's actions -- determining what should be communicated rather than how it should be communicated. It is therefore not the same as communication plans, but provides the framework for the communication plans necessary to carry out the strategy (Steyn, 2002).

The pattern of decisions about how to make use of information systems creates an information systems strategy (Harrison & St John, 1998:217). The role of information systems in organisations has changed fundamentally since the early 1980s. Computer technology revolutionised the way organisations do business. In some organisations, an information systems department plans computer use throughout the organisation.

In the opinion of the authors, the term 'Internet strategy' is relevant when referring to a strategy to achieve information systems goals, i.e. the use of the Internet as an information system. The decisions on what the messages should be, at whom it is aimed and how it is to be managed, are to be taken in the process of formulating the various functional strategies, i.e. marketing, corporate communication and human resources.

7.4.5 *Operational strategy*

Operational strategy has to do with the implementation of the various organisational strategies. Short-term objectives and operational/implementation strategies are identified that can contribute to the achievement of the enterprise, corporate and business goals. These operational strategies are imperative to manage business units and functions in a cost-effective manner (Digman, 1990).

With regard to the marketing, corporate communication and human resources departments, 'Internet strategy' is defined as an operational strategy, i.e. referring to decisions to use the Internet as a medium or channel to transmit messages to specified target groups. (This point will be clarified under the model for communication planning).

7.5 Corporate communication roles theory

Steyn conceptualised (2000c; 2003a:16) and empirically verified (2000a; 2000b) three roles for corporate communication, according to the expectations and perceptions of the performance of chief executives in South Africa.

7.5.1 *Role of the corporate communication strategist*

The role of the corporate communication strategist is seen as:

- a strategic role at the top management/societal/environmental level of the organisation;
- being based on the outside-in approach to strategic management, conducting environmental scanning to gather information on stakeholders, publics and issues from the environment;
- the mirror function of corporate communication, consisting of scanning and monitoring

relevant environmental developments/issues and anticipating their consequences for the organisation's policies and strategies, especially with regard to the stakeholder and societal environment;
- the information acquisition role of the boundary spanner, being part of the strategic team that adapts the organisation to the future;
- the information processing role of the boundary spanner, interpreting information gathered with regard to its consequences for organisational strategies/policies and stakeholders; and
- corporate communication's inputs into the organisational strategy formulation processes – resulting not only in a strategic contribution toward enterprise strategy, but also supporting corporate and business unit strategy

Bunz (in Wright, 2001:7) is of the opinion that boundary spanning activities such as two-way communication are being advanced through the Internet. It can be used to gather intelligence about the world outside the organisation; to track issues, social trends and activities of stakeholders/publics; and to serve as an early warning system on sensitive changes among stakeholders (Johnson, 1997:217; Kornegay & Grunig, 1998; Wright, 2001:7). The organisation's image in cyberspace can be determined through chat rooms, forums and newsgroups on the World Wide Web (Kornegay & Grunig, 1998:144).

The Internet is very useful in performing the mirror function of corporate communication. It is a vast repository of information that can be employed to help an organisation understand its competitors, consumers, the economic environment, political and legal factors, technological forces, and other factors in the macro environment. Secondary data on the Internet is often more current than published data, and it is inexpensive, quick and easy to access. The Internet can also be used to gather primary data through email and Web surveys, website registration, and the observation of Internet user discussions. The Internet can play an important role in enhancing strategic counselling to management (Johnson, 1997:218), thereby contributing to the enterprise level of strategy formulation.

The Internet also allows the communication strategist an opportunity to manage the organisation's corporate reputation. The latter includes the outcomes of the organisation's behaviour, social responsibility, communication style, logos and visual identity. The presence of multiple stakeholders on the Internet increases the complexity of managing corporate identity. The organisation's website must meet the needs, goals and objectives of each stakeholder group, without alienating other groups. Identity management is therefore less complicated in a homogeneous stakeholder group than in a diverse, many-sided stakeholder grouping (Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Hauss, 1995:17-18; Heath, 1998; Ihator, 2001:199,202; Kent & Taylor, 1998:322; Kornegay & Grunig, 1998:143,145; Solheim & Henning, 1998:159; Steyn & Puth, 2000:21; White & Raman, 1999).

7.5.2   Redefined role of the manager
The (redefined) role of the corporate communication manager is seen as:
- a strategic role at the meso/functional level of the organisation;
- being based on the inside-out approach to strategic management, portraying the organisation's identity and values to stakeholders and other groups in the societal environment;

- (part of) the information disposal/external representational role of the boundary spanner.;
- (one) part of the window function of corporate communication, developing corporate communication policy and strategy that results in messages portraying all facets of the organisation; and
- making strategic inputs by considering the consequences of issues/organisational strategies/behaviour on the stakeholders, deciding 'what' must be communicated to solve the problems/capitalise on the opportunities presented. This strategic information provides the content of the functional (corporate communication) strategy. The corporate and business unit strategies are also supported.

Electronic communication applications such as the Internet must be integrated into performing the window function, i.e. to interpret the philosophies, policies, programmes and practices of the organisation to the various stakeholders. The Internet can thus help to establish an active outward orientation for the organisation (Steyn & Puth, 2000:19).

The Internet can be used to build organisational-public relationships (developing communication goals and themes) for the various stakeholders. It also provides an excellent opportunity for research on stakeholders, done quicker and more productively (Johnson, 1997:218). The Internet allows feedback from stakeholders to be embedded in the (public relations) tactic itself. An instant email response can be built into web pages making feedback available instantaneously, without the cost and lack of response of business reply mail. Stakeholders can query organisations, and organisations have the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns and problems immediately.

Computer- or telecommunications-mediated technologies can greatly improve mass media communication and the evaluation of media coverage (Johnson, 1997:218). Media contacts can be identified more readily via the Internet, and messages to media contacts can be customised. One can learn about journalists and other stories they have written before returning their calls; pitch stories electronically; keep electronic records regarding media contacts; do online tracking to determine immediately whether releases issued were used; and track news for information about competitors (Johnson, 1998:218). The Internet is also invaluable to manage a cyber crisis (Johnson, 1997:217).

The managerial role in the electronic environment can also include enhancing employee and investor relations (Newland Hill & White, 2000). The Internet can be used to provide employees with information, to get their feedback and respond to their needs. The manager can create, nourish and activate 'instant interest groups' through electronic networking. By employing technology in the internal management of corporate information, the Internet can also improve corporate memory (Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Hauss, 1995:17-18; Heath, 1998; Ihator, 2001:199,202; Johnson, 1997:219; Kent & Taylor, 1998:322; Kornegay & Grunig, 1998:143,145; Solheim & Henning, 1998:159; Steyn & Puth, 2000:21; White & Raman, 1999).

7.5.3   Role of the technician

The role of the corporate communication technician can be seen as:

- an implementation role at the micro or programme (operational) level of the organisation;
- being based on the inside-out approach to strategic management, contributing to corporate communication planning by deciding 'how' messages should be communicated to reach the strategic stakeholders/publics/interest groups;
- (one) part of the window function of corporate communication, developing implementation strategy and communication plans that result in portraying all facets of the organisation to the stakeholder and societal environment;
- (part of) the information disposal/external representation role of the boundary spanner, in developing and implementing unique corporate communication activities that portray the organisation's identity and values to the stakeholder and societal environment; and
- supporting the enterprise, corporate and business unit strategies by aligning communication activities to the organisational mission and goals.
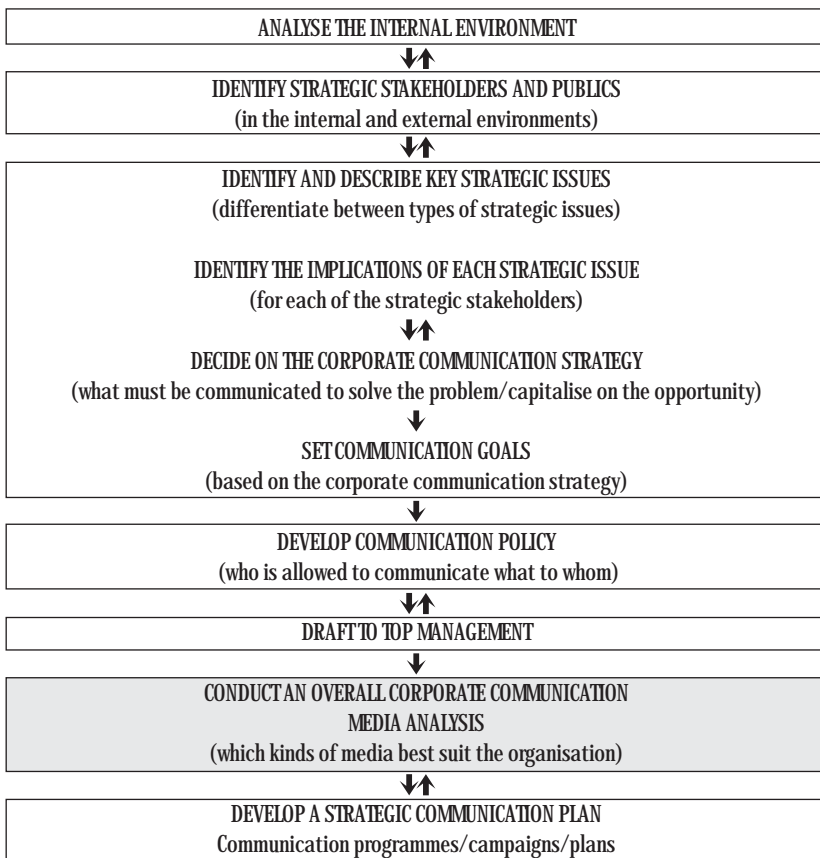
Communication technicians are engaged in various electronic corporate communication activities. They can publish employee newsletters (that allow for control of items read and feedback) and create web pages to publish executive biographies and speeches, product information and fact sheets. They can arrange teleconferences use email and create bulletin boards (Johnson, 1997:219). They can use the Internet to handle queries; instantly create and fax electronic press releases (Kornegay & Grunig, 1998:141) and deliver corporate annual reports via multimedia CD-ROM and on-line services. Technicians can even conduct computerised public opinion polling on issues in just a few hours (Anon., 1998:3; Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Hauss, 1995:17-18; Heath, 1998; Ihator, 2001:199,202; Kent & Taylor, 1998:322; Kornegay & Grunig, 1998:143,145; Solheim & Henning, 1998:159; Steyn & Puth, 2000:21; White & Raman, 1999).

7.6 Models for developing corporate communication strategy and communication plans

7.6.1 Model for developing corporate communication strategy

Steyn (2000c) developed a model for formulating corporate communication strategy as a functional strategy. This model consists of an analysis of the organisation's internal environment as well as stakeholder and issues analyses of the external and internal environment by means of environmental scanning. The organisation's key strategic issues (strategic organisational issues, strategic communication issues and tactical communication issues) are identified. The impact of these strategic issues on each of the stakeholder groups is also identified and becomes the focus of the communication with the strategic stakeholders. Communication goals to be addressed in the implementation phase are developed based on the corporate communication strategy for each strategic issue. A communication policy is formulated, an overall media/channel analysis is conducted and a strategic communication plan is developed. The process of developing corporate communication strategy (Steyn & Puth, 2000; Steyn, 2002:19-20) is described graphically in Figure 2 (see below).

It is during the overall media analysis that the use of the Internet as a channel or medium for the achievement of functional goals is to be considered (although implementation only takes place during the communication planning phase, when decisions with regard to channels are refined). The idea of the channel analysis is not to specify channels for specific plans, but rather to provide an overview of what is available to, and suitable for, an organisation's stakeholders. It is during this 'stock-taking' exercise that relatively new channels such as the Internet should be considered (if not used before). If the Internet has indeed been used, decisions should be taken on whether its use has been successful and cost effective in achieving organisational goals.

ANALYSE THE INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

⇓⇑

IDENTIFY STRATEGIC STAKEHOLDERS AND PUBLICS
(in the internal and external environments)

⇓⇑

IDENTIFY AND DESCRIBE KEY STRATEGIC ISSUES
(differentiate between types of strategic issues)
IDENTIFY THE IMPLICATIONS OF EACH STRATEGIC ISSUE
(for each of the strategic stakeholders)
⇓⇑
DECIDE ON THE CORPORATE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY
(what must be communicated to solve the problem/capitalise on the opportunity)
⇓
SET COMMUNICATION GOALS
(based on the corporate communication strategy)

⇓

DEVELOP COMMUNICATION POLICY
(who is allowed to communicate what to whom)

⇓⇑

DRAFT TO TOP MANAGEMENT

⇓

CONDUCT AN OVERALL CORPORATE COMMUNICATION
MEDIA ANALYSIS
(which kinds of media best suit the organisation)

⇓⇑

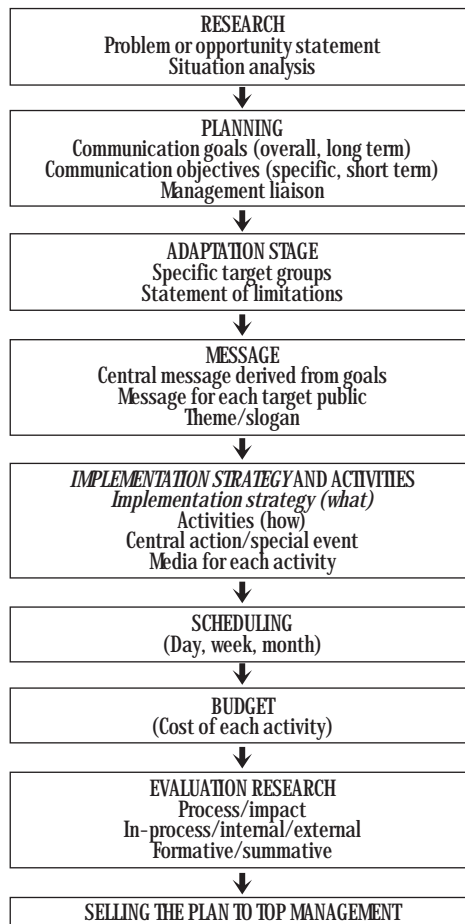| DEVELOP A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PLAN |
| :---: |
| Communication programmes/campaigns/plans |

Source: Steyn & Puth (2000:63)

Figure 2: MODEL FOR DEVELOPING CORPORATE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

7.6.2   *Model for developing a communication plan*

Communication plans, programmes and campaigns should be managed strategically. This means that their objectives should be aligned to the organisation's enterprise/corporate/business/functional strategies. During the corporate communication strategy phase (see Figure 2), only broad communication goals are set -- flowing naturally from the strategic issues (both organisational and communication). In the communication planning phase (see Figure 3 below), communication plans/campaigns/programmes are developed around

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                RESEARCH                  │
│      Problem or opportunity statement    │
│            Situation analysis            │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                     ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                PLANNING                  │
│   Communication goals (overall, long term)│
│  Communication objectives (specific, short term)│
│             Management liaison           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                     ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│             ADAPTATION STAGE             │
│           Specific target groups         │
│          Statement of limitations        │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                     ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                 MESSAGE                  │
│       Central message derived from goals │
│          Message for each target public  │
│               Theme/slogan               │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                     ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│   IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY AND ACTIVITIES │
│       Implementation strategy (what)     │
│               Activities (how)           │
│         Central action/special event     │
│            Media for each activity       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                     ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│               SCHEDULING                 │
│            (Day, week, month)            │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                     ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                 BUDGET                   │
│           (Cost of each activity)        │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                     ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│            EVALUATION RESEARCH           │
│              Process/impact              │
│         In-process/internal/external     │
│            Formative/summative           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
                     ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│    SELLING THE PLAN TO TOP MANAGEMENT    │
└─────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Source: Steyn & Puth (2000)

Figure 3: MODEL FOR DEVELOPING A CORPORATE COMMUNICATION PLAN

these goals. A number of communication objectives are set for each communication goal, and implementation strategies and activities are developed to achieve these objectives, by conveying specific messages to targeted publics (Steyn & Puth, 2002).

Implementation strategy concerns, *inter alia*, decisions about the communication media/channels most likely to achieve the objectives by reaching the targeted publics. If an organisation wishes, for instance, to build interactive relationships with its stakeholders, the Internet should be considered because of its interactive nature. According to this model, the Internet can be regarded as part of the decisions taken on 'implementation' strategy. It is in this step that final decisions on the use of channels such as the Internet are taken.

8. FINDINGS

Research Objective 1: To apply selected meta-theories and theories to the Internet in order to conceptualise 'Internet strategy'.

Excellence approach to public relations and communication management:
- The Internet is seen to contribute to corporate communication excellence on the macro, meso and micro organisational levels.

Corporate communication models:
- Although the initial commercial application of the Internet was one-way communication, some organisations have started to use it to build two-way, interactive relationships with their stakeholders, fostering dialogue.

Information theory:
- There is a similarity between knowledge transfer (a concept in information theory) and communication theory. Knowledge transfer is seen to consist of both the transmission and absorption of information. Likewise, communication is seen to be more than the mere transmission and receipt of messages. For communication to take place, a common understanding of the message is essential.
- The information technology department is responsible for the handling of the information on the Internet, i.e. decisions regarding the hardware, software and network support. Their focus is the technology, and not the information itself.

The communication process
- For the purposes of this research, the Internet as a medium/channel is of particular interest. Organisational communication media are the methods or channels used in the communication process to send and receive information.

Mass communication theory
Although the Internet shares a number of mass communication characteristics, it can be differentiated in many ways from the typical mass medium. For instance:
- It is a controlled medium, because messages are not filtered by gatekeepers.
- It can proactively engage stakeholders in direct dialogue, thereby building interactive virtual relationships.
- It is accessible and flexible.

Strategy theory
Although the Internet can be used as a research tool in the development of enterprise and corporate (financial) strategy, the term 'Internet strategy' is seen by the authors to refer to functional strategy created in the information systems department, i.e. a pattern of decisions on how to make use of information systems (Harrison & St John, 1998:217). In some organisations, an information systems department plans computer use throughout the organisation.

With regard to functions such as corporate communication, marketing and human resources, 'Internet strategy' is seen as referring to implementation/operational strategy. That is, decisions that have to do with selecting channels to best communicate messages to reach stakeholders and publics.

Corporate communication roles theory
The Internet can be used by practitioners in all three corporate communication roles to perform their specific activities:
- The corporate communication strategist uses the Internet as a research tool, i.e. to obtain information on stakeholders and issues in order to make a contribution towards the achievement of strategic, non-financial goals at the macro organisational level.
- The corporate communication manager uses the Internet to interpret the philosophies, policies, programmes and practices of the organisation to the various stakeholders, for instance, to manage media, employee and investor relations as well as crisis situations.
- The corporate communication technician is engaged in various electronic corporate communication activities such as publishing employee newsletters; arranging teleconferences; creating electronic bulletin boards; handling Internet queries; instantly creating and faxing electronic press releases; and delivering corporate annual reports via multimedia CD-ROM and on-line services. The technician thus uses the Internet as a medium or channel to send messages to targeted publics.

Model for developing corporate communication strategy
- It is during the overall media analysis that the use of the Internet as a channel or medium for the achievement of functional goals is to be considered. The idea of the channel analysis is not to specify channels for specific plans, but rather to provide a good overview of what is available and which media should ideally be used for the specific organisation and the goals that have been set.

Model for developing communication plans
In this model, the Internet is seen as an 'implementation' strategy where final decisions on the use of channels such as the Internet are taken.

Research Objective 2: To investigate whether the concept of 'Internet strategy' can be considered a strategy in the true sense of the word.

According to theory, strategy is a pattern of major goals, purposes, essential policies and plans for achieving those goals (Jain, 1997:9). Strategies are developed to realise

organisational goals and objectives, and these strategies will consist of specific action plans or tactics (Lubbe & Puth, 2000:31). Strategy implies the overall concept, approach or general plan, but tactics refer to the operational level, i.e. the actual events, media/channels and methods used to implement the strategy (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994:354).

Based on the insights obtained by applying the meta-theories and theories to the Internet, the term 'Internet strategy' (in the true sense of the word) is seen to refer to the functional strategy of the Information Technology department of an organisation. In this perspective, 'Internet strategy' is a pattern of decisions about how to handle the information on the Internet, i.e. decisions on hardware, software and network support. The focus here is the technology, and not the information itself (Carr, 2002:18; Davenport, 1997:24-26).

In some organisations, an information systems department plans computer use throughout the organisation. The use of the term 'Internet strategy' in this instance refers to a pattern of decisions on using the Internet as an information system.

Research Objective 3: To investigate whether 'Internet strategy' refers to functional or operational corporate communication strategy.

With regard to corporate communication, the term 'Internet strategy' is seen to refer to implementation (operational) strategy at the micro organisational level. It is thus a medium or channel to convey messages to strategic stakeholders.

Research Objective 4: To suggest a framework for the formulation of 'Internet strategy'.

The models for developing corporate communication strategy as well as communication plans (Steyn & Puth, 2000) are regarded as suitable frameworks for understanding 'Internet strategy' in the context of the corporate communication function.

By employing the model for developing corporate communication strategy, the Internet will be used only when regarded as a suitable vehicle for functional goal achievement. As such, it will make a contribution towards achieving communication excellence.

By employing the model for developing communication plans, the Internet will be regarded as an implementation strategy. As such, it will be the approach for communication activities such as electronic newsletters, electronic bulletin boards, handling Internet queries, electronic press releases, delivering corporate annual reports via on-line services, or using the Internet as a research tool to evaluate the effectiveness of electronic communication programmes.

9.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Technological change has impacted on the manner in which organisations conduct their business as well as society as a whole. According to Negroponte (in De Villiers, 1997:10): "The information superhighway may be mostly hype today, but it is an understatement about tomorrow. It will exist beyond people's wildest predictions".

Communication practitioners not equipped to manage this new medium will become a part of the past. The Internet is about the delivery of value and not merely the communication of messages. The success of communication does not lie in the technology, but in the knowledge and skills of the communication practitioner who utilises it. New communication skills are therefore required in the on-line environment (Crawford, 2000a:26; Ovaitt, 1997:22). Practitioners must be comfortable with more than desktop publishing and company email—they must use technology to reach highly specified segments of stakeholders (Heron, 1997:27) and build virtual relationships with them. They must be able to identify trends and issues that have consequences for their stakeholders, evaluate their impact, set priorities and prepare action plans and proactive responses in the on-line world (Kornegay & Grunig, 1998:144; Solheim & Henning, 1998:165). Although the use of communication tools such as the Internet falls within the realm of the corporate communication technician, the Internet has the potential for the largest impact on the corporate communication profession if used by senior practitioners in performing their strategic activities (Johnson, 1997:220).

It must be realised that the Internet is not only a sales or marketing tool, but a communication medium where stakeholders come to the organisation seeking information versus the organisation sending out information to its stakeholders (Kornegay & Grunig, 1998:145). It is no longer enough for an organisation simply to provide information to its stakeholders (as in the public information communication model). Rather, in the two-way communication model, the information provided must match the stakeholder information needs. Knowledge and understanding must be cultivated in the communication exchange on the Internet. This can only be achieved if organisations participate in two-way interactive relationships with their stakeholders (Stear, 1998:61). To achieve this, knowledgeable communication practitioners must manage the communication exchange. Information technology, as a functional area, is only responsible for the management of the technology.

With the advent of the Internet, managers were confronted with a completely new medium and were uncertain about its application in the organisation. As with most new mediums, managers implemented it at a tactical level. This proved, however, to be unsuccessful and many members of top management are now questioning the vast amounts of money being poured into Internet applications.

In the opinion of the authors, the Internet is not to be used in isolation but in the context of the achievement of organisational goals. It could be used at the strategic level as a research tool in gathering information to assist in the formulation of enterprise and corporate strategies. It could also be used as a medium in achieving various functional goals – whether it be corporate communication, marketing or any other goal.

With regard to the corporate communication function, it was classified in this research as being part of the decisions on implementation strategy. However, its use should already be considered in the corporate communication strategy formulation phase (i.e. in the overall media analysis). In so doing, the Internet becomes the means to an end and not the destination in itself.

According to Parnell (1996:11): "In this information age, the need for effective communication will increase... the penalty for poor communication will increase... and the rewards for effective communication will increase". If used strategically, the Internet will contribute to communication excellence and increase organisational effectiveness, thereby making a contribution to the core business of an organisation.

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