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Assessing corporate communication strategies on *Fortune* 500 web sites

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to propose a typology of corporate communication strategy; to investigate whether the typology is present among *Fortune* 500 corporations; and to explore whether there is a dominant strategy and industrial differences among them.

Design/methodology/approach – A content analysis of all 2008 *Fortune* 500 corporate web sites was undertaken.

Findings – This paper finds that there are three corporate communication strategies used to affect publics' corporate associations: corporate ability (CAB) strategy; corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy; and a hybrid strategy. The results demonstrate that a majority of corporate public relations for *Fortune* 500 companies emphasize a CAB communication strategy over a CSR or hybrid strategy, whereas the top 100 *Fortune* 500 corporations focus on a CSR strategy over the other two strategies. Industrial differences are also found in adopting different corporate strategy among the companies.

Originality/value – The applied value of this research it is that provides convincing and realistic insights about contemporary corporate communication strategy and a valuable set of communicative directives to public relations practitioners managing corporate-context communications with stakeholders since it explores dominant corporate strategy among *Fortune* 500 companies.

Keywords Corporate social responsibility, Corporate communications, Corporate strategy, Relationship marketing, Supply chain management

Paper type Research paper

Building mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and publics has been recognized by public relations and marketing academia as one of the most important tasks for organizations. For instance, public relations scholars have emphasized that the goal of public relations itself should be on building, nurturing, and enhancing relationships between organizations and their publics (Brunig and Ledingham, 2000; Ehling, 1992; Ferguson, 1984). The key indicator of public relations effectiveness is considered to be the extent to which an organization's communication efforts influence their target public's perception, attitude, and behavior toward their relationships with the organizations (Brunig and Ledingham, 1999, 2000; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Ki and Hon, 2007; Ledingham and Brunig, 1998).

Similarly, marketing scholars have also indicated the importance of long-term relationships with customers. "Relationship marketing" is a prominent marketing strategy that focuses on the establishment and maintenance of consumer-company bonds over time (Solomon, 2002). Solomon and Stuart (2000) also define relationship



marketing as a process of building long-term relationships with consumers to keep them satisfied and coming back.

Although the marketing literature primarily deals with consumers as a public, the goals for creating and maintaining favorable relationships are similar to those of public relations. In essence, building positive corporate associations is fundamental to creating, maintaining, and enhancing favorable relationships with the various publics of an organization. There are two different kinds of corporate associations identified in marketing literature (e.g. Brown and Dacin, 1997; Madrigal, 2000): corporate ability associations (CAB associations) and corporate social responsibility associations (CSR associations). CAB associations refer to cognitive associations that a consumer has with an organization regarding its expertise in product and service quality in the marketplace, whereas CSR associations are based on consumers' perceptions about a company's social obligations as a member of society (e.g. Brown and Dacin, 1997; Madrigal, 2000).

To address these two types of corporate associations, our paper proposes three different corporate communication strategies that are based on the objectives of the organization:

- (1) CAB (corporate ability)-focused strategy;
- (2) CSR (corporate social responsibility)-focused strategy; and
- (3) a hybrid strategy.

A CAB-focused corporate communication strategy emphasizes the objectives of building publics' cognitive associations related to an organization's expertise and ability in terms of their products and services. A CSR-focused corporate communication strategy attempts to create corporate associations regarding an organization's social responsibility. Last, a hybrid corporate communication strategy refers to the existence of both CAB and CSR strategies. Therefore, depending on the objectives of an organization, different kinds of corporate communication strategies could be adopted. For instance, if the goal of an organization's corporate communication efforts is to create strong CSR associations by their publics, then the organization would emphasize a CSR-focused communication strategy. If an organization intends to be perceived as an expert in producing high quality products or services, they might put more emphasis on a CAB-focused communication strategy.

Through content analysis, the current study evaluates how *Fortune* 500 corporations implement their corporate campaigns on the web and classifies the web sites according to evidence of the three aforementioned corporate communication strategies. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to investigate which corporate communication strategy is more dominant in an organization's corporate communication efforts on the web and if there is significantly different emphasis among the three corporate strategies in the market. In addition, this study attempts to investigate if there are any differences among industry types in terms of corporate strategy usage. The elaboration of a corporate communication strategy typology suggested in our study will foster future research that explores the communication process and different consequences from three different strategies as it relates to publics' evaluations of organizations and could result in extending the body of knowledge in corporate-level public relations efforts. The applied value of this research lies in that it will provide convincing and realistic insights about contemporary corporate communication strategy and a valuable set of communicative directives to public relations practitioners managing corporate-context communications

with stakeholders since it explores dominant corporate strategy among *Fortune* 500 companies.

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Relationship management in public relations

Corporate web sites have been recognized as useful tools for building and maintaining relationships between organizations and publics (Esrock and Leichty, 1999; Kent and Taylor, 1998; Ki and Hon, 2006). Public relations scholars have suggested that corporate web sites could provide corporations with ample opportunities to communicate their corporate identity, product promotions and issues management with their publics, which include shareholders, consumers, suppliers, employees, government, and activists (Esrock and Leichty, 1999; Heath, 1998; Kent and Taylor, 1998; Ki and Hon, 2006). For instance, Esrock and Leichty (1998) argue that one way for corporations to communicate their social responsibility activities with their publics is to use their corporate web sites, suggesting that the majority of corporate web sites examined at the time of their research demonstrated at least one corporate social responsibility issue. Heath (1998) suggests that corporations employ their web sites to deal with issues management, and corporate web sites could facilitate involvement of inactive publics through online communications. Strategically designed web sites have been recognized as increasing the chance to engage in organization-public relationships through dialogue (Kent and Taylor, 1998).

Considering public relations from a relationship management perspective, the main purpose of public relations is to build, nurture, and enhance mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics (Ferguson, 1984; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham and Bruning, 1998). Scholars have suggested that the notion of relationship management has shifted the direction of public relations from public opinion manipulation and measuring organizational communication messages to building and enhancing the quality of organization-public relationships and evaluating the influence of public relations on the relationship between an organization and its publics (Bruning and Ledingham, 2000; Ki and Hon, 2007; Ledingham, 2006).

Thus, many scholars have focused on measuring the influence of public relations on the quality of organization-public relationships. Bruning and Ledingham (1999) suggest there are three types of organization-public relationships arguing these three dimensions are fundamental in measuring relationship quality:

- (1) interpersonal;
- (2) professional; and
- (3) community.

Additionally, to measure the influence of public relations on organization-public relationships, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) propose five dimensions:

- (1) trust;
- (2) openness;
- (3) involvement;
- (4) investments; and
- (5) commitment.

They argue these dimensions affect consumer satisfaction with an organization. Similarly, Hon and Grunig (1999) suggest five dimensions for measuring organization-public relationship:

- (1) trust;
- (2) satisfaction;
- (3) commitment;
- (4) communal relationship; and
- (5) exchange relationship.

To emphasize the importance of an organization's behavioral versus communicational relationships with its publics, Grunig (1993) argues that when communication-based (i.e. symbolic) relationships are separated from behavioral relationships (i.e. grounded in actions and events), public relations functions could be relegated into the simplistic notion of image building. However, it is important to note that an organization's communication efforts with its publics are fundamental and an initial step for relationship-building, although a communications strategy alone might not be enough for developing relationships. Organizational communication efforts play a pivotal role in creating organization-public relationships, nurturing the quality of the relationships, and maintaining the long-term relationships.

Additional considerations are necessary for building relationships. For instance, Thomlison (2000) has suggested that expectations between two parties are a fundamental aspect of relationships. Specifically, when one person or entity's expectations toward another person or entity are met, the relationships endure. When expectations are not met, one tends to seek alternatives. In order to have a certain type of expectation toward another party, one needs to have standards for judgment or evaluations. These standards of judgment or evaluations toward another party are usually influenced by perceptions, attitudes, and feelings toward the party through either direct or indirect experience or general knowledge about the party and its behavior (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Keller and Aaker, 1998). Thus, a target public can be influenced by direct or indirect experience or general knowledge about an organization and this experience or knowledge can be engendered and cultivated by organizational communication efforts. In sum, corporate communications are essential for the initial establishment of publics' expectations toward an organization-public relationship. Based on this acknowledgement, some scholars have suggested that publics' perceptions, motives, and needs toward an organization are antecedents to a relationship (Broom *et al.*, 1997). In addition, Broom *et al.* (2000) suggest that the communication-centered patterns of how publics access and use corporate information and communication engagement are indicators for the state of relationships.

This study takes the approach that publics' perceptions are an important indicator for the quality of an organization-public relationship. If a relationship can be defined as a set of expectations that publics hold toward an organization (Thomlison, 2000), the first goal for practitioners is to build favorable cognitive or psychological associations between their organizations and respective publics, with other behavioral consequences following subsequently, such as loyalty through repeated behavioral commitments. Thus, the types of psychological associations that publics hold toward an organization are essential to public relations efforts in attempting to build

relationships between the two parties. Subsequently, the question could be raised regarding how corporations in the market attempt to create, enhance, or reinforce these different psychological corporate associations of publics through their corporate advertising campaigns.

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Corporate associations and corporate communication strategy

In building, maintaining, and enhancing favorable relationships with various publics of a corporation, creating positive psychological associations of the corporation has become fundamental. Corporate associations can be defined as beliefs, feelings, and attitudes toward a company obtained from either direct or indirect experiences, knowledge about the corporation's past behaviors, and summary judgment of the corporation and its perceived attributes (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Madrigal, 2000). Corporate associations are memory-based associations with a company and comprise corporate image or how it is perceived.

Research has shown that there are different types of corporate associations, resulting in different effects on consumers' evaluations of a company and its products (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). For instance, Brown and Dacin (1997) suggest two different types of corporate associations:

- (1) corporate ability (CA) associations; and
- (2) corporate social responsibility (CSR) associations.

CA associations refer to consumer psychological associations with a company in terms of their ability and expertise to produce high-quality products or services, whereas CSR associations are related to the status of a company as a good member of society with regard to social, environmental, or political issues. In other words, CA associations are closely related to product or service aspects of a company, and CSR associations are related to non-product aspects or social responsibility effects of the company. While these two corporate associations have been suggested in the literature as primarily focusing on the consumer as a public, the categorization of corporate associations could apply to all other publics such as employees, suppliers, community members, and government or policy makers.

With respect to the general effect of corporate associations, some researchers have indicated that there are different types of consumer corporate associations effects on their product and corporate evaluations (e.g. Berens *et al.*, 2005; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Keller and Aaker, 1998; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). For instance, Brown and Dacin (1997) suggest that CA associations have a greater influence on both product perceptions and the overall company evaluation than do CSR associations. In other words, corporate ability (CA) associations have a stronger impact than CSR associations in terms of consumers' evaluations for both product and company. It is because the routes of CA associations' influences on consumer attitudes are through both products attributes evaluations and overall evolution of the company, whereas routes of CSR associations are only through the overall company evaluation. Brown and Dacin (1997) argue that CSR associations influence consumers' evaluations of brand via their influence on the overall evaluation of the company, while CA associations influence consumers' evaluations of brand via their influences on both product attributes and overall evaluations of the company.

As discussed, there are two distinct psychological associations with a corporation identified in the literature, and these could have different influences on people's evaluations of the company's products and the company in general. This is because people's corporate associations could establish their expectations toward the corporation and reinforce the perceived standard of the corporation. As previously mentioned, in the relationship management literature of public relations, a relationship is often defined as "a set of expectations two parties have for each other's behavior based on their interaction patterns" (Thomlison, 2000, p. 178). Thus, the types of corporate associations that the publics hold for the organization have an impact on the expectations established by the publics and hence affect the effort of building the relationships between the organization and publics.

Corporations can be seen attempting to affect expectations, and thus relationships, through their corporate communications strategies. Public relations practitioners and marketers have used various types of corporate campaigns to enhance public associations with the company in general. These campaigns are often differentiated from their product- or service-focused advertising efforts. Since many corporations have multiple products or services these days, they tend to implement both product campaigns and corporate promotion campaigns. Previous research has suggested that the effect of corporate associations could be different based on corporate brand strategies (Berens *et al.*, 2005; Milberg *et al.*, 1997). Three corporate brand strategies have been employed in the marketplace (e.g. Berens *et al.*, 2005):

- (1) "stand-alone" brand strategy where companies label a product by a separate brand name;
- (2) "monolithic" strategy refers to labeling a product by only a corporate brand name; and
- (3) "endorsed" or "dual" brand strategy is to label using both the corporate brand name and the product brand name.

Research has suggested that the influence of corporate associations on a person's attitudes toward the company's products only occurs when the corporate brand appears on the product advertisements (Sheinin and Biehal, 1999). Similarly, a monolithic strategy, which employs only a corporate brand name appearing in advertisements, has resulted in better stock market evaluations of the company than a stand-alone strategy (Rao *et al.*, 2004).

In addition, Milberg *et al.* (1997) have indicated that the effect of fit between a product and a corporate brand on product evaluations is greater when only a parent corporate brand appears on the advertisement than when both a corporate and a product brand appears. Berens *et al.* (2005) have also shown that the influences of corporate associations on consumer product evaluations are smaller when a corporate brand is not dominantly visible. In addition, they found that when using a monolithic branding strategy, CA associations are most effective, whereas in the case of an endorsed (or dual) strategy, CSR associations are most effective.

Drumwright (1996) has also classified three different corporate campaigns in the market based on their objectives:

- (1) economic campaigns;
- (2) non-economic campaigns; and
- (3) mix campaigns.

The objectives of economic corporate campaigns are to increase product sales, to build brand equity, and to influence company image, expecting immediate bottom-line results from the campaigns. The objectives of non-economic campaigns are to enhance the company's image of corporate social responsibility activities in order to demonstrate that the company contributes to society. Mixed campaigns attempt to combine the objectives of economic and non-economic campaigns. Similarly, Schumann *et al.* (1991) have classified three different types of corporate communications focusing on corporate advertising:

- (1) sales-related corporate advertisements;
- (2) good-will advertisements; and
- (3) hybrid or umbrella advertisements.

Sales-related corporate advertisements focus on the benefits of products or services, whereas goodwill advertisements (e.g. social issue advertising or advocacy advertising) deal with the advertising company's corporate social responsibility. Last, hybrid or umbrella advertisements combine the promotion of product sales and conveyance of corporate social responsibility which is similar in definition to mixed campaigns in Drumwright (1996)'s classification.

Based on the literature, it is reasonable to state that the objectives of economic corporate campaigns (Drumwright, 1996) or sales-related corporate advertising (Schumann *et al.*, 1991) are to create, maintain, or enhance CA associations of publics because CA associations refer to psychological associations with regard to corporate ability and corporate expertise in producing high-quality products or services. The objectives of non-economic corporate campaigns or good-will corporate advertisements are intended to influence CSR associations with companies. An organization may intend to focus on building either favorable corporate ability (CA) associations or corporate social responsibility (CSR) associations among publics based on the organization's economic objectives or non-economic/social objectives. Based on the discussion, this study proposes the typology of three corporate communication strategies:

- (1) CAb (corporate ability)-focused strategy;
- (2) CSR (corporate social responsibility)-focused strategy; and
- (3) hybrid strategy.

This typology is similar to the classifications by Schumann *et al.* (1991) and Drumwright (1996). However, the proposed typology in this study suggests a relationship between corporate communication strategy and the subsequent types of publics' corporate associations.

By adopting a CAb-focused strategy that promotes product attributes, benefits, or a company's ability to deliver high-quality products or services, an organization may facilitate CA associations of publics. Similarly, CSR associations could be facilitated based on a CSR-focused strategy promoting the company's goodwill or commitment as a reliable member of society. Since there is little research addressing this relationship between corporate communication strategy and corporate associations, it is important to ask if the proposed three corporate communication strategies are in active in the market, and if so, which strategy is more dominant than others or if there is different

allocation of indicators among these three corporate communication strategies. It is worthwhile to investigate corporate strategy via corporate campaigns in order to better understand corporate communication strategy with regard to corporate associations. The present study intends to analyze corporate web sites to explore whether the three corporate communication strategies are manifest in corporate campaigns on the web. Examining how the *Fortune* 500 corporations express their corporate identities on the web could reveal their strategies for building a particular type of corporate association in order to influence organization-public relationships.

Based on the preceding discussion, the following research questions explore how top corporations implement their corporate communication strategies on the web:

- RQ1.* Are the three types of corporate communication strategies (CAb-focused corporate strategy, CSR-focused corporate strategy, and hybrid corporate strategy) *present* on corporate web sites?
- RQ2.* Is one of the three types of corporate communication strategies *dominant* on corporate web sites?
- RQ3.* Is there any difference in a dominant communication strategy adopted by industry type?
- RQ4.* Is there any difference in the degree of CAb and CSR strategies adopted by industry type?
- RQ5.* Are there any differences in six indicators of CSR communication strategy being adopted by industry type?
- RQ6.* Are there any differences in six indicators of CAb communication strategy being adopted by industry type?

Method

Content analysis was performed on the *Fortune* 500 web sites in order to examine the research questions. Content analysis is a technique for studying and analyzing communication data in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner in order to measure variables (Wimmer and Domink, 2000). The 500 web sites of the 2008 *Fortune* 500 corporations were selected for the sample[1].

Noting that most corporations today implement both product advertising and corporate public relations campaigns at the same time, and yet the purpose of corporate-focused campaigns is primarily to facilitate positive public perceptions toward the corporation itself (Schumann *et al.*, 1991), analyzing only the corporate campaign related sections of the respective web sites is appropriate to the purpose of the present study. In other words, since this study is primarily interested in web-based corporate-focused campaign efforts which attempt to influence corporate associations (both corporate ability and corporate social responsibility) of publics, corporate campaign related sections on the web such as company overview, corporate information, or "About the company" were designated as the unit of analysis. In addition, areas of the web site that specifically promoted corporate social responsibility issues were also included as a unit of analysis because our study intends to explore how corporations attempt to build either corporate ability or corporate social responsibility associations through their corporate communications strategy. In more

than half the cases, corporate social responsibility messages were located outside of the “About the company” section and were highlighted prominently on the main home page. In such cases, that section was also examined.

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Operational definitions

In order to examine the three corporate strategies (CAB-focused strategy, CSR-focused strategy, and Hybrid strategy), CAB and CSR strategy were operationally defined. Corporate Ability (CAB) strategy was operationally defined as attempts to create corporate ability associations which focus on an organization’s expertise in terms of its product or service quality, whereas CSR (corporate social responsibility) strategy was operationalized as any attempt to create corporate social responsibility associations that emphasize an organization’s contribution to society in terms of social concerns. Research has suggested that a company focusing on its corporate ability would rely on the expertise of employees, the company’s commitment to research and development, implementation of quality control programs, manufacturing expertise, and/or industry leadership. A company focusing on corporate social responsibility would emphasize environmental friendliness, philanthropic activities, commitments for education, employee involvement activities, public health, and/or sponsorship of cultural activities (e.g. Brown and Dacin, 1997). Based on the literature, six items were developed as components of CAB-focused strategy and CSR strategy respectively (see Tables I and II for the measurements).

CAB strategy	Presence of indicators		Highly emphasized indicators	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1. A company’s expertise in product or service quality	478	95.6	425	85
2. A company’s global success	284	56.8	191	38.2
3. A company’s implementation of quality control program	148	29.6	115	23
4. A company’s industry leadership	311	62.2	135	27
5. A company’s market orientation	273	54.6	152	30.4
6. A company’s innovation and R&D efforts	176	35.2	118	23.6
Total company <i>n</i>	500		500	

Table I.
Six indicators of
CAB-focused corporate
communication strategy

CSR strategy	Presence of indicators		Highly emphasized indicators	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1. A company’s environmental stewardship	233	46.6	193	38.6
2. A company’s philanthropic contribution	281	56.2	232	46.4
3. A company’s educational commitments	160	32	117	23.4
4. A company’s employee involvement	334	66.8	279	55.8
5. A company’s public health commitments	102	20.4	68	13.6
6. A company’s sponsorship of cultural activities	78	15.6	57	11.4
Total company <i>n</i>	500		500	

Table II.
Six indicators of
CSR-focused corporate
communication strategy

All indicators were coded based on the dichotomy of the message's presence (e.g. 1 or 0) in order to minimize possible subjective decisions of coders. Then, a composite measure for both CAB and CSR strategies was created by summing up the score of each indicator. For instance, if all indicators of a CAB strategy were present on the corporate web sites, the total score for the CAB strategy was six. For assessing deployment of a hybrid strategy, the CSR strategy total score was subtracted from the CAB strategy total score. Thus, in the case of the presence of both CAB and CSR strategy indicators, the strategy used on the web was designated as a hybrid strategy. In addition, to examine which of the three strategies is the most dominant, researchers divided companies based on the weightings of the corporations' emphases on either CAB or CSR strategy by creating a dummy variable that differentiated a high CAB strategy and a high CSR strategy from a true hybrid strategy (i.e. if the CAB score minus the CSR score is 0 in the case where both strategies are present, it indicates a true hybrid corporate strategy).

In addition, to explain the case where indications of both CAB and CSR strategies were present, but corporations emphasized a particular strategy more distinctly by adding additional graphics, links, and screen space, the researchers added a degree of emphasis for each indicator using a scale ranged from 1 to 3, with "1" being low emphasis and "3" being high emphasis of the indicator. The degree of emphasis of each message was operationalized based on the presence of related content text, hyperlink or bold text, and graphics. When all three of these techniques for emphasis were present, the emphasis score for the particular message indicator was coded as "3" (highly emphasized). After taking into account this emphasis of CAB and CSR strategies, the aforementioned procedure of comparing the scores from the two strategies and assigning dominance was followed.

The industry categorization of the top *Fortune* 500 companies used in this study was coded based on the ten industry "Sector" codes used by Standard & Poor's. Ten industry types are:

- (1) Consumer discretionary;
- (2) Consumer staples;
- (3) Energy;
- (4) Financials;
- (5) Health care;
- (6) Information technology;
- (7) Industrials;
- (8) Materials;
- (9) Telecommunication services; and
- (10) Utilities.

Two independent coders evaluated the corporate web sites. Inter-coder reliability ranged from 0.87 to 0.97 using Krippendorff's alpha (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007).

Results

The industry categorization of the top *Fortune* 500 companies used in this study was coded based on the ten industry "Sector" codes used by Standard & Poor's. Industry type classification is presented in Figure 1.

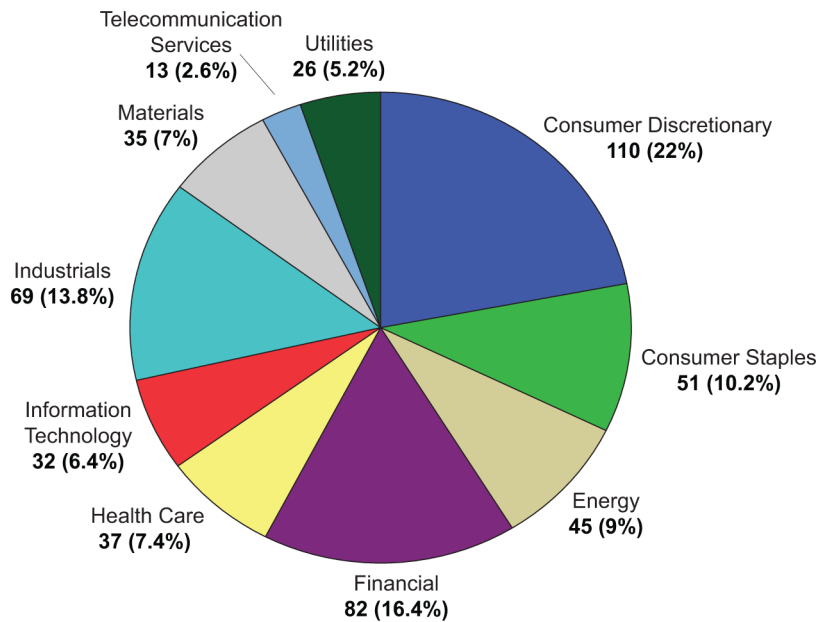


Figure 1.
Industry type (sector) of
the *Fortune* 500
corporations

As seen in Table I, with regard to CAb (corporate ability) communication strategy, 95.6 percent ($n = 478$) of the *Fortune* 500 companies mention companies' expertise in product or service quality in their corporate web sites and 85 percent ($n = 425$) highly emphasize those messages. Following in rank order, the frequency of CAb strategy messages were: claims about the company's industry leadership, mention of the company's global success in terms of delivering products or services, messages about market orientation, information about the company's innovation and R&D efforts, and messages about the company's implementation of a quality control program.

With regard to CSR (corporate social responsibility) strategy, the most frequently mentioned message was a company's employee involvement activities: 66.8 percent of the *Fortune* 500 companies mentioned employee involvement. When considering the degree of emphasis of that message, 55.8 percent of the *Fortune* 500 companies highly emphasized their employee involvement activities such as community service. The second most frequently present CSR indicator was a company's philanthropic contribution, with 56.2 percent displaying this indicator (see Table II). When the companies displayed their philanthropic giving, 46.4 percent highly emphasized those messages with graphics, bold text, and content text. The third most frequent indicator was environmental stewardship, with 46.6 percent of the *Fortune* 500 mentioning the message and 38.6 percent highly emphasizing it. A total of 32 percent of the *Fortune* 500 displayed their educational commitments, which was the fourth most common CSR indicator, and 23.4 percent highly emphasized the message. Messages regarding a company's public health commitment (20.4 percent) and sponsorship of cultural activities (15.6 percent) finished out the list (see Table II).

The first research question (RQ1) sought to explore whether the three corporate communication strategies (CA-focused, CSR focused, and hybrid strategies) are present

on corporate web sites. About 417 (83.4 percent) of the *Fortune* 500 companies adopted a hybrid communication strategy, which indicates that these companies displayed at least one indicator among six from both CAB and CSR strategies. A total of 81 companies (16.2 percent) employed only a CAB corporate communication strategy whereas only two companies (0.4 percent) adopted a complete CSR strategy.

However, in order to address the second research question (RQ2) and assess the dominance of either CAB or CSR strategies adopted in the market, high CAB and high CSR strategies were identified by differentiating those from a true hybrid strategy (i.e. the same number of CAB and CSR strategy indicators was present). When considering the dominance of either CAB or CSR strategy among companies who employed a hybrid strategy, 63.2 percent of the *Fortune* 500 companies adopted more CAB corporate communication strategy indicators, whereas 19 percent used more CSR strategy indicators. A true hybrid corporate communication strategy, where the numbers of CAB and CSR indicators employed are equal, was used by 17.8 percent of *Fortune* 500 companies (see Table III). In sum, the results suggest that *Fortune* 500 companies used more CAB strategy indicators than CSR strategy indicators, and about 18 percent took an evenly balanced approach of using both CAB and CSR messages.

In addition, to take into account the degree of emphasis in terms of CAB and CSR strategy indicators, three variables were created based on the previously described accentuation of message indicators: a high CA strategy emphasis, a high CSR strategy emphasis, and a true hybrid strategy. After considering not only the number of indicators, but the degree of emphasis of those indicators, the results suggest that 63.6 percent of the *Fortune* 500 companies adopted a highly CAB-focused strategy, whereas 23 percent used a highly CSR-focused strategy. The result indicates that *Fortune* 500 companies put more emphasis on CAB-related messages than on CSR-related messages in general (see Table III).

However, bigger corporations tend to focus more on CSR strategy than on CAB strategy. Among the top 100 *Fortune* 500 companies, a CSR-focused strategy was more often adopted than a CAB-focused strategy. Overall, 51 percent of the top 100 *Fortune* 500 sites used CSR strategy which was higher than the average percentage of CSR strategy adoption (23 percent) among the entire *Fortune* 500. Only 31 percent of the top 100 corporations employed a high CAB strategy. On the other hand, the bottom 100 *Fortune* 500 corporations put more emphasis on CAB strategy than on CSR strategy: 78 percent used CAB strategy, whereas 10 percent employed CSR strategy. Also, note that the percentage (10 percent) of CSR strategy use among the bottom 100 corporations was lower than the average (23 percent) for all *Fortune* 500 companies (See Figure 2).

Table III.
Dominant corporate communication strategy on the *Fortune* 500 web sites

Corporate strategy	Dominant strategy based on message presence		Dominant strategy based on considering the degree of emphasis	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
High CA strategy	316	63.2	318	63.6
True hybrid strategy	89	17.8	67	13.4
High CSR strategy	95	19	115	23
Total company	500	100	500	100

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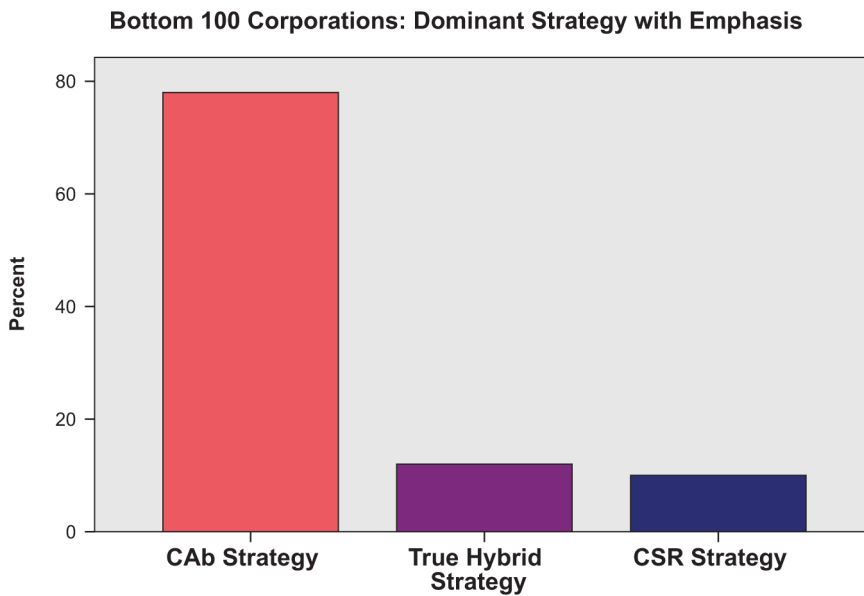
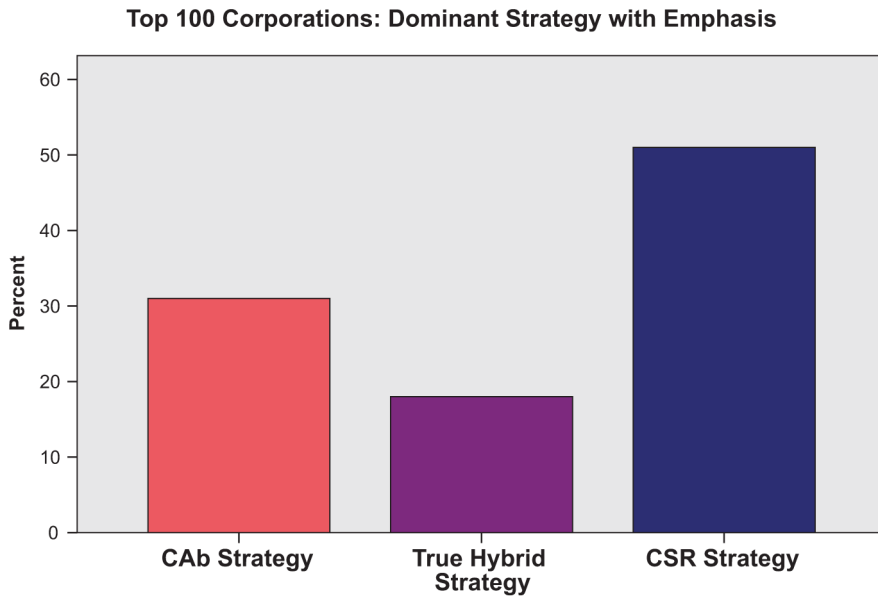


Figure 2.
Comparison between the
top 100 and the bottom 100
Fortune 500 corporations

Regarding *RQ3*, if there is any difference of a dominant communication strategy by industry type, the results suggest that all ten industry types adopted CAb strategy more frequently as a dominant strategy than CSR strategy or true Hybrid strategy. There are no differences found in a dominant strategy adopted by industry type among all *Fortune* 500 companies (see Table IV).

However, among the top 200 *Fortune* companies, CSR strategy was adopted as a dominant strategy by some industry types: Energy, Financials, and Information Technology. In Financials industry, 59.5 percent (22) of the top 200 *Fortune* companies used CSR strategy as a dominant strategy, and 29.7 percent (11) adopted CAb strategy as a dominant strategy. Among Energy industry, 50 percent (8) of the top 200 *Fortune* companies employed CSR strategy as a dominant strategy, whereas 31.3 percent (5) adopted CAb strategy. In addition, in the Information Technology industry, CSR strategy (40 percent) was used as a dominant strategy more frequently than the other two strategies (26.7 percent for CAb strategy, 33.3 percent for true Hybrid strategy) (see Table V).

Table IV.
Dominant corporate communication strategy by industry type among the total *Fortune* 500 companies

Industry type	CAb strategy		Hybrid strategy		CSR strategy		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Consumer discretionary	80	72.7	13	11.8	17	15.5	110	100
Consumer staples	32	62.7	6	11.8	13	25.5	51	100
Energy	28	62.2	4	8.9	13	28.9	45	100
Financials	45	54.9	11	13.4	26	31.7	82	100
Health care	27	73	6	16.2	4	10.8	37	100
Information technology	14	43.8	11	34.4	7	21.9	32	100
Industrials	49	71	7	10.1	13	18.8	69	100
Materials	28	80	2	5.7	5	14.3	35	100
Telecommunication services	6	46.2	2	15.4	5	38.5	13	100
Utilities	9	34.6	5	19.2	12	46.2	26	100
Total company	318	63.6	67	13.4	115	23	500	100

Table V.
Dominant corporate communication strategy by industry type among the top 200 *Fortune* 500 companies

Industry type	CAb strategy		Hybrid strategy		CSR strategy		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Consumer discretionary	21	55.3	5	13.2	12	31.6	38	100
Consumer staples	10	43.5	4	17.4	9	39.1	23	100
Energy	5	31.2	3	18.8	8	50	16	100
Financials	11	29.7	4	10.8	22	59.5	37	100
Health care	12	57.1	6	28.6	3	14.3	21	100
Information technology	4	26.7	5	33.3	6	40	15	100
Industrials	13	48.1	2	7.4	12	44.4	27	100
Materials	5	55.6	1	11.1	3	33.3	9	100
Telecommunication services	1	16.7	1	16.7	4	66.7	6	100
Utilities	2	25	1	12.5	5	62.5	8	100
Total company	84	42	32	16	84	42	200	100

In addition to see if different types of industries show different levels of CAB and CSR corporate communication strategies adopted (RQ4), analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were performed for the all *Fortune* 500 companies. Based on both presence of corporate strategy indicators and the degree of emphasis, new variables with low, medium, and high strategy usage were created for both CAB and CSR strategies. The results revealed that there were significant mean differences of adopted corporate strategies among industry sectors for both CAB and CSR strategies (see Table VI). The mean scores for CSR strategy are significantly different across industry types ($df = 9/490$, $f = 4.39$, $p = 0.000$). Information Technology and Utilities sectors displayed the highest levels of CSR strategy usage ($M = 2.34$ and $M = 2.23$, respectively). In contrast, Consumer Discretionary and Industrials sectors revealed the lowest levels of CSR strategy usage ($M = 1.60$ and $M = 1.75$, respectively). The mean scores for CAB strategy usage were also significantly different among the ten industry sectors ($df = 9/490$, $f = 7.17$, $p = 0.000$). As Table VI indicates, the Information Technology and Materials sectors revealed higher levels of CAB strategy usage ($M = 2.50$ and $M = 2.31$, respectively), whereas Financials and Telecommunication Services sectors show relatively lower levels of CAB strategy usage ($M = 1.54$ and $M = 1.69$, respectively).

Regarding RQ5, if there are industry type differences in adopting the six CSR indicators, it seems that *Fortune* 500 companies focused on different indicators depending on their industry types. The first indicator, environmental stewardship, was frequently adopted by Utilities (e.g. Dominion Resources, Duke Energy, Exelon), Information Technology (e.g. HP, IBM), Energy, and Materials (e.g. Dow Chemical, DuPont) sectors. About 92 percent of Utilities sector companies (24), 88 percent of Information Technology (28), 71 percent of Energy sector (32), and 69 percent of Materials sector companies (24) employed the environmental stewardship indicator. Philanthropic contribution indicator was most frequently employed by Consumer Staples (e.g. Kroger, Walgreen), Financials, and Utilities sectors (76.5 percent for Consumer Staples, 68 percent for Financials, and 69 percent for Utilities). The third indicator, educational commitment indicator was most frequently adopted by

Industry type	CAB strategy		CSR strategy		<i>n</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Consumer discretionary	1.75	0.81	1.60	0.72	110
Consumer staples	2.20	0.74	2.10	0.78	51
Energy	1.89	0.78	1.93	0.78	45
Financials	1.55	0.61	1.94	0.74	82
Health care	2.22	0.85	1.89	0.91	37
Information technology	2.50	0.71	2.34	0.70	32
Industrials	1.94	0.86	1.75	0.74	69
Materials	2.31	0.80	1.94	0.80	35
Telecommunication services	1.69	0.85	1.92	0.86	13
Utilities	1.77	0.82	2.23	0.65	26
Total	1.92	0.82	1.89	0.78	500
Sum of squares	38.985		22.741		
<i>F</i>	7.168		4.399		
Significance	0.000		0.000		

Table VI.
Results of ANOVA tests:
levels of CSR and CAB
strategy usage by
industry type

Telecommunication Services (e.g. Sprint Nextel corporation, Comcast) and Information Technology sectors (62 percent for Telecommunication Services and 53 percent for Information Technology). Employee involvement was also frequently employed by Information Technology (81.3 percent) and Financials sectors (72 percent). In relation to the public health commitments indicator, Health Care sector was the one used the public health indicator most often (about 43 percent of health care companies employed it). Lastly sponsorship for cultural activities was most frequently adopted by Financials (29.3 percent) and Information Technology sectors (28.1 percent).

The results for answering RQ6 regarding the six CAB strategy indicators revealed that the first indicator, a company's expertise in product or service quality was highly adopted by all industry types (over 90 percent companies of each industry type employed the first CAB indicator). Materials (77 percent), Information Technology (72 percent), and Consumer Staples (65 percent) sectors companies most frequently employed the second CAB indicator, global success. Quality control indicator was highly adopted by Materials (63 percent) and Utilities (54 percent), while rarely adopted by Financials (3.7 percent), and Telecommunication Services (7.7 percent). Most of Health Care sector companies (82 percent) and Telecommunication Services (77 percent) employed the industry leadership indicator very frequently. In addition, market orientation indicator was often used by most of Consumer Staples sector companies (75 percent). Lastly, R&D commitments indicator was the most frequently adopted by Information Technology sector companies (84 percent).

The results of this study revealed a significant trend among top corporations to address social responsibility issues on their web sites, both as messages within corporate public relations campaigns (i.e. the company information section(s) of the sites), as well as more prominent display on the company's main home page itself. Looking across the sample of the top 100 *Fortune* 500 companies, consistencies were found in the way that corporate social responsibility messages were displayed. To start, nine of the top ten *Fortune* 500 companies and 65 percent of the *Fortune* 500 companies overall displayed some indicator of corporate social responsibility on their main home page (i.e. the "landing" page a visitor is first presented with when accessing the company's main URL). Typically, this indicator took the form of a prominent link from the main navigation menu labeled as specifically as "Social responsibility" or "Corporate citizenship" to seemingly more ambiguous descriptions like "Our commitments" or "Community."

Discussions and conclusions

Based on a review of public relations, advertising and marketing literature, the present study finds that there are three different types of corporate communication strategies employed to influence publics' corporate associations as an initial attempt to build relationships between corporations and their publics. Consequently, this study explores whether the three corporate communication strategies are present in the real market and if so, which strategy is more dominantly used among the *Fortune* 500 corporations. Our results suggest that all three corporate communication strategies are actively manifest in corporate public relations efforts on corporate web sites: CAB strategy, which is mainly concerned with influencing publics' corporate ability associations, CSR strategy, which primarily focuses on affecting publics' corporate

social responsibility associations, and hybrid strategy using both CAB and CSR strategies at the same time

Regarding the dominance among corporate communication strategies on corporate web sites, our results reveal that among the total *Fortune* 500 companies, more corporations adopt a high CAB strategy than other strategies, indicating that corporations use corporate communications through their web sites to focus more on influencing publics' corporate ability associations than corporate social responsibility associations. In other words, more corporations appear to want to be perceived by their publics as having corporate expertise in products or services. However, our results suggest the completely opposite trend in adopting a dominant strategy among the top 100 *Fortune* 500 corporations. Larger corporations tend to put more emphasis on a CSR strategy than a CAB strategy or a true hybrid strategy (i.e. the same weight between CAB and CSR strategy indicators) which is different from the trend found among the *Fortune* 500 corporations. For instance, the top 100 corporations among the *Fortune* 500 emphasize a CSR strategy more than the other two strategies, whereas the bottom 100 corporations more highly emphasize a CAB strategy.

This particular result could be explained by the fact that as a corporation becomes larger, public scrutiny against it increases as do the expectations for the corporations to address social responsibilities. Since the possibility is greater that larger corporations can affect more people and receive more media attention, it stands to reason that larger corporations tend to adopt a CSR corporate communication strategy over a CAB strategy. This result confirms the findings of Esrock and Leichty (1998)'s study. Their results also suggest that corporations with greater revenues are more likely to communicate social responsibility issues on their web sites, with 82 percent of *Fortune* 500 corporations mentioning at least one corporate social responsibility issue at the time of their research. Our research reveals that 94 percent of the top 100 *Fortune* 500 corporations and 84 percent of the entire *Fortune* 500 corporations implement at least one corporate social responsibility strategy indicator.

While web sites are not archived for historical analysis, our findings imply that corporations are increasingly giving more attention to social concerns, which in turn lends support to Frederick's (1994) argument that a sense of pro-active corporate social responsibility will continue to develop and mature in the future.

Regarding the six indicators of CSR communication strategy, a corporation's community involvement related messages are the most frequently used (66.8 percent), and the message of philanthropic contribution is the second most frequently used (56.2 percent) in our study. It seems that the *Fortune* 500 corporations pay more attention to communicating their community involvement and philanthropic contribution activities now than before as only 60 percent and 48 percent of the *Fortune* 500 corporations promoted their community involvement and philanthropic contribution activities respectively in the findings of Esrock and Leichty's (1998) study. It is worthwhile to point out that our study's designated unit of analysis was only company overview, corporate information, or "about the company" menu on *Fortune* 500 web sites due to the study's specific interest in corporate associations while Esrock and Leichty's (1998) study explored all sections of corporate web sites. Considering the differences in the unit of analysis between the two studies, it is more evident that there has been a considerable increase of CSR corporate strategy since 1998 among the top corporations' corporate campaign efforts.

What they can
do versus how
much they care

As to differences by industry type with regard to adopting a dominant strategy, a company's expertise and relative potential consequences for social issues seem to be important factors. For instance, among different CSR strategy indicators, the utilities, energy and materials sectors include businesses that could be perceived as engaging in practices or developing products and/or services that are detrimental to environment. In these cases, the current study revealed higher instances of the environmental stewardship indicator. Similarly, the public health indicator was most often present among companies in the Health Care sector, and the educational commitment indicator was often used by Information Technology and Telecommunication Services companies. These findings are in line with previous research that suggests higher consumer acceptance of cause-related marketing when a company's core business is congruent with a cause supported by the company (e.g. Hoeffler and Keller, 2002). In addition, when industry type is highly related to consumers' high risk perceptions with its product purchase (Gürhan-Canli and Batra, 2004) such as Information Technology and Material sectors, our study indicates a likelihood of companies in such sectors adopting a CAb strategy over a CSR strategy. Thus, when it comes to adopting a dominant strategy for a company, the company's expertise, its relevance to social issues, and risk perceptions of product purchases all seem to affect the dominant corporate strategy adoption decision.

Academic implications and future research

Our research is primarily exploratory because the main purpose of this paper is to examine whether the three corporate communication strategies represent a real trend in the marketplace. These three strategies offer new insight with regard to considerations of the relationship between corporate communication strategy and publics' psychological corporate associations (CA and CSR associations). As our results indicate, CSR strategy is more prominent in the market these days than a CA strategy or a hybrid strategy among the top 100 *Fortune* 500 corporations, whereas CAb strategy is still more prominent in the market when considering all *Fortune* 500 corporations. In addition, this study suggests that corporations' CSR strategy adoption has increased and is likely to grow in the future among the top *Fortune* companies. It implies that the climate surrounding CSR has changed over time as many corporations used in this study have started to focus more on their corporate social responsibility. As such, academia should pay more attention to the process of CSR communication strategy. By contributing to a better understanding of how a CSR communication strategy works to influence publics' corporate associations, and in turn to affect their overall evaluations of corporations, academics could provide insights regarding why contemporary corporations put more emphasis on a CSR strategy. In fact, many scholars and practitioners have expressed skepticism about the impact of corporations' social responsibility-related activities on the bottom line of company financial performance. Part of the reason for this is because there has been little research supporting a clear connection between CSR and financial performance indicators. Thus, exploring the relationship between the three corporate communication strategies and the two corporate associations (CA and CSR associations), and in turn how these corporate associations of publics influence evaluations of a brand and a company would be an important next step for future research. Moreover, since there are some differences in terms of a dominant strategy adoption based on corporations' revenue

size, future research that examines an effective corporate strategy as it relates to a company's current status (i.e. a starting company vs. a well known company) is required.

In addition, it is worthwhile to examine differences in organizational adoption of these three corporate strategies as it relates to targeting different publics (e.g. consumers, community members, stockholders, or government policy makers). For instance, a CA strategy is likely to be adopted by corporations in an effort to target stockholders, whereas a CSR strategy could be adopted for targeting other community members as implied by the present study. Thus, another important extension of our study would be exploring the possible effects of targeting different publics by adopting different corporate communication strategies.

Last, considering organization-public relationship-building efforts, it is important to note that any behavioral attempts by an organization to build relationships with its publics are not meaningful until they are interpreted by its publics. In other words, behavioral-focused relationship-building efforts cannot be seen as successful until communication-focused relationship-building efforts are perceived by publics. Thus, the relationship between publics' corporate associations, which are possibly influenced by different corporate communication strategies, and their behavioral consequences such as loyalty, brand bonding, and company bonding should be explored in the future to provide a more holistic view of communication strategy influences in terms of organization-public relationships.

Implications for practitioners

The most popular CSR indicator among the sites we analyzed was employee involvement in the act of community service (66.8 percent), typically labeled "Volunteerism" among the *Fortune* 500 companies. Employees were often prominently featured in vignettes and appeared in photographs working alongside members of the community. This "human touch" aspect seemed to be favored by many companies, allowing them to simultaneously address not only employees, but also benefactors of the community service who, concomitantly, could be potential customers as well. Philanthropy is certainly one of the oldest forms of CSR, and in our study represented the next most popular indicator of a CSR-focused strategy (56.2 percent). Consistencies appeared with regard to the convention of addressing environmental concerns. This CSR indicator was the one most frequently highlighted on the main home page and was especially prominent within certain sectors (e.g. most of Energy sector sites and Materials sector sites). Typically, it was labeled as "Environmental stewardship" and included activities ranging from biodiversity conservation to recycling and sustainability. Practitioners should acknowledge these techniques used on *Fortune* 500 web sites as examples "best practices" among the world's largest companies as indicated by this study.

Pressure from regulators, activist groups and erstwhile communities disappointed by business scandals, as well as an "always on" global media cycle have brought the discussion to a strategic level for some organizations. These groups have collectively caused companies to consider "stakeholder theory" and focus more on "socially responsible" initiatives that extend beyond just maximizing profit for shareholders. Now companies are considering a broader constituency of publics that include suppliers, customers, employees and other members of communities, both local and

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global. A more refined focus on specific societal issues has led to American businesses “increasingly seeing social responsibility as a strategic initiative” (Grow, 2005). For example, in addition to standard financial information and their annual report, General Electric released for the first time its “Citizenship Report” in 2005 which outlined corporate social responsibility activities. More recently, in February of 2007, Coca-Cola’s Chairman and CEO addressed CSR, stating:

International corporations today face growing pressure for greater accountability and transparency. Corporate leaders, inevitably, must address critical choices: whether to engage stakeholders or turn a deaf ear, whether to complain of unfair treatment or accept accountability as part of the social license to do business (Isdell, 2007).

In sum, companies are increasingly sensitive to the fact that, as Wal-Mart’s CEO described during a recent analyst conference: “We thought we could sit in Bentonville (Ark.), take care of customers, take care of associates – and the world would leave us alone. It doesn’t work that way any more” (Grow, 2005). In our study, Wal-Mart’s web site reflects that change in sentiment, with greater presence and emphasis of corporate social responsibility messages than corporate ability messages. Practitioners should heed to these fundamental strategic changes among top businesses, which are reflected in the respective web-based communication strategies as illustrated in this study.

In addition, when it comes to choosing a dominant communication strategy among the three strategies, practitioners need to consider a company’s industry type and its congruency to socially responsibility activities. In the case of industries where consumers tend to perceive higher risk toward purchases such as high-tech or durable products, a CAb strategy is more likely to be adopted by top businesses compared to other strategies. Also, top businesses tend to adopt message indicators of a CSR strategy in correspondence with their relevance to social issues as well as their expertise in addressing those issues.

Note

1. Selection of 2008 *Fortune* 500 corporations came from the list found at www.fortune.com/fortune/fortune500

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