Utilization of Corporate Websites as a Dialogic Public Relations Tool in Turkey

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Abstract

Public relations develop relationships between an organization and the public through dialog and negotiation. Communication technologies provide public relations with new tools to improve dialog and negotiation in the implementation of public relations. One of these tools is corporate websites, and public relations uses these to negotiate relationships among groups. Kent and Taylor (1998) state that public relations firms that use the World Wide Web can benefit from dialogic communication, and they established five principles that offer guidelines for successful integration of dialogic public relations and the World Wide Web. The purpose of this study is to analyze corporate websites of Turkish corporations from the perspective of dialogic public relations. In line with this purpose, websites were analyzed using content analysis, and the findings showed that corporations do not use their websites as a tool for dialogic public relations.

Keywords: Dialogue, Dialogic communication, Public Relations, Corporate Web Sites

Türkiye'de Diyalojik Halkla İlişkiler Aracı Olarak Kurumsal Web Sayfalarının Kullanımı

Özet

Halkla ilişkiler, kuruluş ve paydaşları arasındaki ilişkileri diyalog ve müzakere aracılığıyla geliştirmektedir. İletişim teknolojileri, halkla ilişkiler uygulamalarında diyalog ve müzakereyi geliştirmek için halkla ilişkilere yeni araçlar sağlamaktadır. Bu araçlardan biri ise kurumsal web sayfalarıdır ve halkla ilişkiler web sayfalarını gruplar arasındaki ilişkileri müzakere etmek için kullanmaktadır. Kent ve Taylor (1998) halkla ilişkilerin diyalojik iletişimde web sayfalarından yararlanabileceğini belirterek diyalojik halkla ilişkiler ile World Wide Web arasında başarılı bir bütünlük sağlamak adına beş ilke ortaya koymuşlardır. Bu çalışma diyalojik halkla ilişkiler perspektifinden Türkiye'deki kuruluşların web sayfalarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaç çerçevesinde web sayfaları içerik analizi tekniği ile incelenmiş ve kuruluşların web sayfalarını diyalojik halkla ilişkiler aracı olarak etkili bir şekilde kullanmadıkları sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Diyalog, Diyalojik İletişim, Halkla İlişkiler, Kurumsal Web Sayfaları

Introduction

Most of the public relations theories and research are based on four models of public relations, as put forward by Grunig and Hunt. Among these models, the ideal one is mentioned as two-way symmetrical model and Kent and Taylor (1998: 323) emphasize that the dialogic communication is to be understood primarily in order for the symmetrical communication to be fully understood. The relationship between the two-way symmetrical communication and dialogic communication could be seen as a process and a result. Two-way symmetrical communication provides the tools which enables corporations and publics to communicate with each other theoretically. For two-way symmetrical public relations, organizations need to form rules, processes and structured systems and dialogic communication refers to a certain kind of relational interaction and the dialog is explained as a result rather than a process. Although the approach of four models of public relations is commonly approved, it is also suggested that it is being replaced by the approach to relation and dialogic theory. (Theunissen & WanNoordin, 2012: 6). Even though the importance of the dialogue for the public relations is being emphasized more and more in current studies, the concept of dialogue was mentioned in early works as well. Thus Pearson (1989) handled dialogue as the public relations strategy in his doctoral dissertation and elaborated that a dialogic system was more ethical than a monologic one.

Many scholars who have theorized about effective public relations have been using the term of dialogue to describe ethical and practical approaches to public relations, and Kent and Taylor (2002) explain that there is an inclination towards two way relational communication model. With the development of new communication technologies, the change in the quality of communication between organizations and partners could be said to lead public relations to attach more importance to dialogue communication.

It is expressed that Internet does not only bring speed, effectiveness and mobility to the public relations but it is also being used to inform partners about the agenda via websites, provide the media with information, collect data about the target mass, strengthen the corporate identity, and execute all other functions of public relations (Okay & Güçdemir, 2009: 230). Apart from these, it can be said that the Internet encourages the dialogic communication between organizations and publics.

The fact that public relations practices are affected so heavily by new communication technologies causes an increase in the studies about public relations, ICTs and digital, social and mobile media; and the research by Vercic et al. (2015) reveals that among the tools used by public relations, websites are used the most. Advancements in communication technologies provide public relations with new communication tools which are absent from corporations that do not maintain an online presence. In this sense, corporate websites can be used as a dialogic communication tool for the public relations as well.

Dialogic Communication and Public Relations

Relations management has been seen as an important new approach for public relations based on the two-way symmetrical model at the end of 1990's. The focus of public relations is no longer preparing and distributing the communication messages because messages that have been effectively prepared in relation management approach cannot find solutions to all public relations and corporate problems. Relations management approach integrates symbolic communication messages and corporate behaviors in order to initiate relations based on mutual benefits between the organization and partners (Steyn, 2011: 18). Ledingham and Bruning (2000: xiii) indicate that relations management approach suggests an important change in the main aim of public relations from the manipulation of public opinion to a relation-centered approach. The increase in the number of media outlets causes a fragmentation in the mass communication. This situation causes a shift in interpersonal communication channels of public relations and creates a big opportunity to develop a new theoretical approach. This can change the nature of the relationship between dialog, organization and partner by emphasizing the relationship, but cannot make the corporate act morally or force it to answer the partners. In this scenario, the necessity for the organization to be willing to make a dialogic commitment to its partners is important (Kent & Taylor, 2002: 23). Therefore, despite the fact that new communication technologies direct organizations to establish dialogic communication, it should not be ignored that organizations also should be willing to establish a communication based on dialogue.

In their work where they put forward the principles of dialogic public relations theory, Kent and Taylor (2002: 24-32) list five properties of dialogue; mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and commitment. They argue that these basic principles include implicit and explicit assumptions of the notion of dialogue. From a public relations perspective, these principles are stated as the recognizability of the relation between the organization and

partners, spontaneity of the interaction with partners, acceptance and support of purpose and benefits of partners, willingness to interact with partners and individuals while their circumstances are taken into consideration, and the degree to which the organization interacts with its partners based on dialogue, comment and understanding. Considering these principles, it is stated that dialogue is not a simple result of relationships and communication and it is desired product of public relations communication. It is emphasized that there are at least three ways to include dialogue in public relations practices which are interpersonal, mediated and organizational. Corporate leaders and members who interact with the partners should be comfortable to establish dialogue. It is stated that corporate members who are educated on crisis communication, conflict management and public speaking should also be subjected to a dialogue education. Organizations can enhance their commitment to dialogue and encourage interaction with partners by using mediational communication channels. In this sense, they should use communication tools such as e-mail, web addresses, 800 telephone numbers and partners should engage in discussions regarding the corporate issues and interact via these tools. Certain procedures are also stated to be needed as founding steps in order to develop the dialogic relationship building and procedural approach is offered for dialogue.

Dialogic communication is seen as the interchange of deliberated thought and ideas and it expresses dialogic communicational reception and delivery. Kent and Taylor (1998: 325) also state that the term "dialogic" is driven by two principles. Primarily, individuals who are in a dialogue want to reach mutually satisfying positions even though they do not have to compromise. Even though the sides cannot compromise, the process is still worth analyzing since what really matters is the deliberated process of compromising rather than the dialogue itself. Secondly, the dialogic communication is about intersubjectivity, not reality or subjectivity. It should be taken into consideration that dialogic communication is an ethical way in occurrence of public relations and public dialogue because of its nature and the fact that it emphasizes the deliberated communication process.

Use of Corporate Websites as Tools of Dialogic Public Relations

Development of communication technologies change the quality of communication since it removes the limits for time and space in the communication of organization and partners, and considers the properties such as interaction. There are also innovations in the tools that organizations and partners use, such as blogs, social media and websites which are used as important public relations tools.

World Wide Web is an important communication tool and used for certain purposes such as keeping the interactions with partners updated, providing information to media, obtaining information about the public, strengthening the total image, and supporting other functions of public relations (Alemdar, 2006: 192). Websites of organizations support the awareness and understanding of partners about goods and services and also have a potential to improve mutual communication. Corporate websites which are one of the most important tools for image making for organizations provide support for public relation practices by facilitating two-way communication and providing a wider and richer content to the target group (Güçdemir, 2012: 85-87). Websites are used to inform partners and communicate with them as well as shaping and protecting the corporate identity and reputation (Madichie & Hinson, 2014: 339). They can also be used as mediators in the dialogue between the organization and partner, (Taylor & Kent, 2004: 60) and make the relationship between the corporate and partner more stable (Kent et al., 2003: 63).

Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) create a strategic framework by using the dialogic theory of public relations in order to develop relations between organization and partners via websites. Nowadays, it is not possible to practice efficient public relations without internet (Taylor & Kent, 2002: 31) and dialogic potentials of websites enable two-way communication that allows for interaction (Madichie & Hinson, 2014: 338). It can be said that the necessity for organizations to develop relations with partners, which are based on dialogue increases with the internet, making it possible for them to make use of websites.

Kent and Taylor (1998) identified five principles that offer guidelines for dialogic communication between organizations and its publics: dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits (RV), intuitiveness/ease of the interface, and the rule of conversation of visitors. These five principles of dialogue are based on interpersonal relationship building and organizations establish a dialogue with publics by strategically designing their websites with these relationship building characteristics (Taylor & Kent, 2004: 62). One opportunity of new technologies is that it enables to receive feedback from the target group. The dialogic loop enables target group to question the organization and more importantly, it provides organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns and problems. Answering constitutes an important part of dialogic loop but the content of answers are also crucial to be able to establish relations. The usefulness of information says that websites should work to include information that involves general values for everyone.

Organizations should provide content which is useful for public. Websites are visited because they present ongoing information to the users. This property constitutes the basis for dialogic relation because the public believes that the organization provides useful and trustworthy information on their website. The generation of return visits suggests that websites should possess qualities that enable them to be visited again such as updated information, reply sections, online experts who answer the questions of visitors. The intuitiveness/ease of the interface suggests that people who visit the page in order to be informed should understand the page easily. The rule of conversation of visitors suggests that one important point that web designers should pay attention to is the links that direct visitors to other websites. Some websites involve links that direct visitors to other websites with a legitimate purpose, even though the users' primary intent is to see the content of the original website. A visitor that leaves the website with some links may not come back. If the purpose of web-based public relations is to develop and maintain relations with users, websites should only include "important links" and develop strategies to bring the users back to your website. It is stated that the organizations that carry out these five principles which are put forward by Kent and Taylor (1998) can establish a dialogic communication with their partners via their websites.

Method

It is aimed to analyze whether organizations in Turkey have developed relations based on the dialogue with its shareholders via their websites within the scope of the conception of dialogue, which is important through the process of forming those relations. Under this purpose, the websites of the organizations in Turkey were examined with content analysis technique, based on the dialogic principles pre-established by Kent and Taylor (1998), and within the framework of criteria that were used by Madichie and Hinson (2014).

The sample space of the research was formed in the frame of the survey result of "The Most Popular Companies in Turkey" which was published by the business and economy magazine Capital", on its 15th issue. It is stated in the research that access was gained to more than 1.602 people from over 500 organizations. Capital magazine evaluates the most popular companies under 20 criteria. Among these criteria are information and technology investment, employer satisfaction, communication and social media management, and social responsibility. According to the research, the most popular companies are Koc Holding, Turkcell, Arcelik, Unilever, Coca-Cola, P&G, Garanti Bank, Eczacıbaşı Holding, Turkish

Airlines, Vodafone Turkey, Borusan Holding, Ülker, Türkiyeİş Bank, Sabancı Holding, Yemeksepeti, BSH, Microsoft, Eti, Mercedes-Benz Turk, Tüpraş (Capital, 2015).

The websites of the organizations were examined between 10 – 15 December 2015. The data were processed with SPSS 15.0 in digital media and descriptive statistical analysis was conducted.

Findings

Following are the criteria that were examined by the principles of dialogic loop, useful information, return visit, ease of interface and conversation of visitors that were in the websites of organizations and the data that were obtained after the examination.

Table 1. Dialogic Loop Principle

Dialogic loop	Existent		Nonexistent	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Opportunities to send messages on the site	18	90%	2	10%
Fill out survey instruments	3	15%	17	85%
Express opinions on issues	1	5%	19	95%
Online feedback option	6	30%	14	70%
Chat forum	3	15%	17	85%
Subscribe for news and tips	1	5%	19	95%

According to criteria prepared according to the dialogic loop principle, 90% of organizations (18 organizations) provide opportunities to send messages via the site whereas 2 organizations (10%) do not possess this feature. Fill out survey instruments are present in 15% of organizations (3 organizations) while absent in 85% of them (17 organizations). Only one of the organizations have options of "express opinions on issues" and "subscribe for news and tips." 6 organizations meet the criteria of online feedback options whereas 14 organizations lack this characteristic. The feature of chat forum on websites is present in 3 organizations out of 20.

Table 2. Useful Information Principle

Useful Information	Existent		Nonexistent	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent

Presence of updated information	20	100%	0	0
Logo display	20	100%	0	0
Downloadable media files	19	95%	1	5%
Statements on philosophy and mission	19	95%	1	5%
News stores posted	19	95%	1	5%
Links to other like-minded institutions	10	50%	10	50%
FAQ of Q&A	13	65%	7	35%
How to join	18	90%	2	10%
Calendar of events	0	0	20	100%
How to support the service (aside information)	8	40%	12	60%
Service emergency numbers	20	100%	0	0
Downloadable publications and forms	19	95%	1	5%
Dedicated section to answer question	7	35%	13	65%

As seen above, updated information, logo display, and service emergency numbers are present in all of the organizations examined under the principle of useful information. 95% of organizations provide information of downloadable media files, statement on philosophy and mission, news stores, and downloadable publications and forms in their websites. While frequently asked questions are present in 65% of (13 organizations), no organization has any information on calendar of events. 90% of organizations present data about how the shareholders take part in the organization. While the information of how to support the service is present in 40% of the organizations, dedicated section to answer question is present in 35%.

Table 3. Return Visit Principle

Return visit	Existent		Nonexistent	
	Frequency	**Percent**	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Safety tips	17	85%	3	15%
Explicit statements inviting them to return to their sites	0	0	20	100%
Updates on organizational news items within last 30 days	18	90%	2	10%
Bookmark now	1	5%	19	95%
Automatic information delivery through mail/e-mail	18	90%	2	10%

Update of official news of last 30 days and sending of information automatically via mail are observed in 90% of the organizations that were examined under the principle of return to visit. Furthermore, 85% (17 organizations) have access to safety tips on their websites. While none of the websites of organizations that were examined have explicit statements inviting them to their sites, only one has the section of "bookmark now".

Table 4. Ease of Interface Principle

Ease of interface	Existent		Nonexistent	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Site maps on home pages	13	65%	7	35%
Search engine on home pages	17	85%	3	15%
Menu links on home page	18	90%	2	10%
Low reliance on graphics	2	10%	18	90%

When examined under the principle of ease of interface, 65% of the organizations have the site map in their websites while 85% have a search engine and 90% have menu links. The low reliance ratio of the organizations has a very small value of 10%.

Tablo 5. Conversation of Visitors Principle

Conversation of visitors	Existent		Nonexistent	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Important information about organization	19	95%	1	5%
The amount of time that the site loads	20	100%	0	0
Date of site's last updates	7	35%	13	65%
Outside links	20	100%	0	0

Within the framework of the principle of conversation of visitors, 95% of the organizations have important information about the organization, while all of them have outside links and the amount of time that the site loads is short in all. When the ratio of presence of date of site's last updates is considered, 35% (7 organizations) lack such information.

Conclusion

One encounters many studies that show the rising importance of dialogue for public relations, and the development of communication technologies even increases the emphasis on dialogue. Along with the opportunities that internet provides to public relations, it also encourages the dialogic communication between the organization and its shareholders. Thus, among instruments that public relations use in order to form relations and dialogic communication, websites should not be disregarded.

As an instrument of dialogic public relations, organizations may communicate with their shareholders via their websites. Kent and Taylor (1998) define 5 principles that make dialogic public relations possible. These five principles were used to determine whether organizations in Turkey use their websites as instruments of dialogic public relations, with the criteria pre-established by Madichie and Hinson (2014). The presence of these 32 criteria was examined with content analysis technique.

After this investigation, dialogic loop criteria turned out to be nearly nonexistent in the websites of the organizations. Organizations provide the opportunity to send messages through the site within the scope of dialogic loop principle but the other 5 principles are absent in many of the websites. Thus, one can conclude that organizations do not use their websites efficiently within the framework of dialogic loop principle. Criteria like dialogic loop, express opinions on issues, chat forum enable shareholders to question organizations, and as Taylor and Kent (1998) have stated, they also enable organization to respond to questions, concerns, and problems. The absence of these criteria on the websites results in the perception of insufficiency that shareholders have towards the sites. For organizations, this means that they do not efficiently benefit from the actual potential of their websites.

Many of the websites examined under the principal of useful information tend to meet the related criteria. For instance all organizations include their logos and downloadable media files in their websites. On the other hand, calendar of events is absent in all and 'how to support the service" or dedicated "section to answer" appear in only few organizations' websites. Therefore, it can be concluded that organizations examined under the principle of useful information use their websites efficiently, but some level of amelioration is still needed.

While return to visit criteria is absent in some organizations' websites, a majority of organizations meet some of the criteria on their sites. For instance, many organizations update news about the organizations within the last 30 days. The presence of updated information on the website is quite important for shareholders to re-visit the website. But none of the organizations include explicit statements for shareholders to re-visit their site. Thus, improvement is also required for websites due to this principle.

When examined with the criteria determined by the ease of interface principle, the organizations that are studied generally include the site map, a search engine, and menu links on their websites. However, very few organizations pay attention to the necessity of including less images and charts, especially emphasized under this principle. In this sense, one can conclude that excessive use of visuals will disturb the users who want to operate quickly.

Nearly all organizations meet the criteria of conversation of visitors. Organizations include important information on their websites, the loading of the site does not take too much time and outside links are present on all websites. At this point, outside links are not evaluated as links associated with irrelevant websites, but rather as links that direct us to organizations' social media pages like Facebook, Twitter. This situation might result in dissatisfaction of the visitors and cause them to leave the website.

In the study that was carried out regarding the results of the research "The Most Popular Companies in Turkey" conducted by Captial (2015), it turned out that the organizations examined do not fully use their websites as instruments of dialogic public relations. Especially the criteria of dialogic loop seem to be absent in many of the sites. Organizations generally use their websites to inform their shareholders. Along with this, those who meet the examined criteria are organizations in the information and communication sectors. As a matter of fact, the investment on information technologies has influenced this year's research results. In this sense, one might conclude that more emphasis is put on communication technologies and communication strategies in Turkey. Thus, it might be inferred that organizations will attach more importance to dialogic communication in the future.

McAllister-Spooner (2009), in their studies where they examine the investigations conducted within the framework of dialogic principles of Kent and Taylor, concluded that websites are hardly ever used as dialogic tools in general, and that the relation-building

functions of the many are mostly at beginner level. It was stated that many websites examined in the studies are easy to use, offer useful information but do not perform the dialogic functions very well. It seems that organizations do not fully use the actual potential of Internet in order to form relations with their shareholders. Similar results were obtained for organizations in Turkey. Hence, for organizations to be able to use their websites as instruments of dialogic public relations, they must especially meet the criteria determined within the framework of dialogic loop principle.

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