

# **What makes u click?:**

**Best practices in public relations for effectively  
communicating with opinion leaders of virtual  
communities**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study investigates what online opinion leaders want and need from virtual communities to better understand and determine how public relations practitioners can improve online communication using Web 2.0 technology. The findings indicate five uses and gratifications of opinion leaders that are aligned closely with seven unique characteristics of the Internet and an additional use and gratification of documentation. The data also suggest online opinion leaders are influenced by other online opinion leaders. In addition to providing an understanding of these uses and gratifications as they relate to the public relations practitioner, the researcher concludes there is a need for an “online community relations” role within public relations departments and that public relations practitioners must be aware of the information overload barrier to online communication. A set of best practices drawn from the findings serves as a guide for public relations practitioners to better understand how to effectively communicate in the Web 2.0 world. This exploratory study is not generalizable to all online opinion leaders. However, the research does confirm the existence of possible applications of various theories about opinion formation.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The communication channels offered by Web 2.0 are a mainstay in current culture and represent a paradigm shift in online communication. Web 2.0 gained mainstream acceptance in 2006, which is reflected by TIME magazine naming “You” (meaning users and drivers of Web 2.0 technology) as its 2006 Person of the Year. Time reporter Lev Grossman explained, “[The new Web] is a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter...And for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, TIME’s Person of the Year for 2006 is you” (Grossman, 2006). At the same time, Web 2.0 received tremendous attention from trade associations such as the Public Relations Society of America, which offers a variety of professional development seminars for communicating using Web 2.0

technology. In 2006, PRSA formally recognized blogging and podcasting as public relations tactics when it added the media to its annual Bronze Anvil Awards (PRSA, 2006).

One of the most prominent examples of how Web 2.0 has become a powerful communications platform is the announcement of Apple's iPhone, which has become a test case for marketers. For the ten days following Apple's announcement of the new product, the term "iPhone" was mentioned in more blogs than "George W. Bush." Within minutes of the announcement, online reference Wikipedia had an entry for "iPhone," photos of the product were posted on Flickr, and videos were posted on YouTube (Grande, 2007).

Apple announced the iPhone during CEO Steve Jobs' keynote speech at the 2007 MacWorld Conference. Popular technology blogs, such as Engadget, TUAW-The Unofficial Apple Weblog, and Business 2.0 (still in beta testing), were among the first to break the story by having bloggers produce live coverage using their laptops from the auditorium seats. The live coverage consisted of short quotes and paraphrases from the speech and photos of the presentation visuals posted and updated continually on a Web page, each update time-stamped. Readers could view the live coverage by continually clicking "refresh" on their Web browsers to view the updates on the Web page in real time. The timely detail offered by these technology bloggers was unmatched by mainstream cable news outlets MSNBC and CNN Headline News. The blog posts received substantial Web traffic, driven in large part to members of online communities such as Digg.com, an online social network that enables users to

determine top news stories featured on the Web and share them with friends. Based on the iPhone case, Grande (2007) suggests, “The bigger long-term question may turn out to be how Web commentators – often collectively a large voice, but individually reaching very small audiences – feed back to the offline mainstream” (p. 2).

If the iPhone announcement is not convincing in itself of the importance of Web 2.0, consider Engadget’s continuing coverage of the iPhone. On May 16, 2007, at 9:09a.m., Engadget bloggers received a Bullet News e-mail originating from inside Apple announcing the company would delay the release of the iPhone and its Mac OS X Leopard operating system (Block, May 16, 2007; Block, May 17, 2007). Shortly after, the story was posted on the Engadget blog. The market response to this news knocked more than \$5 off Apple’s share price, translating to a \$4 billion loss for Apple’s market capitalization (Yahoo! Finance). At 10:47a.m., Apple issued an alert that the delay announcement was fraudulent and that the iPhone and Leopard were scheduled to ship as expected. Engadget posted a correction on the blog, and Apple stock recovered by the end of the day (Block, May 16, 2007; Block, May 17, 2007)(Yahoo! Finance). A firestorm over culpability has ensued; however, the incident illustrates the power that one blog can have as a mass medium and why Web 2.0 deserves the attention it is getting from the public relations industry.

These examples demonstrate that Web 2.0 technology is a driving force in mass communication. Online opinion leaders, such as the Engadget bloggers, have tremendous power and influence among Internet users. According to a

2006 Ipsos MORI survey, one-third of blog readers said they had decided not to buy a product after reading a negative blog post, while 52 percent were persuaded to buy after reading a positive blog post (Bulik, 2007). A poll by We Media and Zogby Interactive suggests blogs are gaining credibility as 72 percent of adults said they were dissatisfied with the quality of American journalism today (Bulik, 2007).

Meanwhile, usage of Web 2.0 technology is growing rapidly and virtual communities are booming. In January 2006, the PEW Internet and American Life Project reported 39 percent of online adults read blogs. The most popular blogs are currently technology or news blogs. According to Technorati's December 2007 data, the most popular blogs determined by link relevancy are (1) Engadget (technology blog), (2) Gizmodo (technology blog), (3) Techcrunch (technology blog), (4) Boing Boing (news/technology blog), and (5) The Huffington Post (news/opinion blog).

As of April 2007, major online social networks MySpace and Facebook had 57 million and 38 million users, respectively (Snider, 2007). These online social networks are no longer limited to the teen market. Over half of MySpace visitors are aged 35 or older, with 40.6 percent of MySpace visitors aged 35 and 54 (comScore, 2006). LinkedIn, an online social network for professionals, has more than 10 million members and is growing at a rate of 100,000 per week (Kho, 2007).

Globally, Internet users are increasingly interested in online social networking. Each year, Google composes its Zeitgeist list of top search queries

and compares the data to the previous year. In 2006, the two most frequent Google searches were for online social networks “Bebo” and “MySpace,” respectively. Other Web 2.0 terms in the top ten most searched terms for 2006 were “metacafe,” a video sharing Web site, “radioblog,” “Wikipedia,” and “wiki.” Google explains, “A year’s worth of search speaks to our collective consciousness” (Google, 2006). Clearly, Web 2.0 is at the top of Internet users’ collective consciousness.

In addition to social networking, American adults are adopting other Web 2.0 technology. More than a third of American adult Internet users consult Wikipedia, at an average rate of 8 percent accessing the site each day (Rainie & Tancer, 2007). Research shows 28 percent of Americans online are using Web sites such as del.icio.us, Flickr, Technorati, and YouTube to categorize content, referred to as tagging, social bookmarking or folksonomy (Rainie, 2007). Podcasting is growing as well, with 12 percent of Americans online having downloaded a podcast in November 2006, up 5 percent from earlier in the year (Madden, 2006). Blogging is the most widely adopted of Web 2.0 technology, with 8 percent of Americans online publishing blogs and 39 percent, or 57 million people, reading blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

Incorporating Web 2.0 technology into public relations campaigns is important as more and more Americans are adopting this new technology. The rise of Web 2.0 technology as a mass media platform presents opportunities and challenges for communications professionals. Public relations practitioners must consider using Web 2.0 communication channels in public relations programs to

be effective in the new online environment. To use Web 2.0 technology effectively, practitioners must understand its users and be aware of methods of implementation that are successful. This study will help practitioners effectively communicate in the Web 2.0 world.

## **RESEARCH PROBLEM**

While the implications of Web 2.0 for public relations practice have garnered considerable industry attention, relatively few organizations have fully integrated Web 2.0 tools into public relations programs. For example, a poll by Edelman and Technorati (2006) reports 48 percent of bloggers have never been contacted by a public relations representative, although 70 percent of bloggers said they would be willing to review products on their blogs. The majority of communications professionals are unfamiliar with Web 2.0 technology, while the stakeholders they are communicating with are increasingly adopting it. Web 2.0 is reshaping the world of communication, and public relations practitioners must understand it and incorporate it into public relations programs to be successful.

Even more lacking is the impact of Web 2.0 on public relations in communications literature. This rapidly evolving technology has received limited pedagogic attention. Most of the academic literature focusing on Web 2.0 media exists in the computer science or marketing disciplines. Little is known about the uses and gratifications of Web 2.0 technology, its implications as a mass media platform, and how it can be used to communicate effectively with opinion leaders of virtual communities.

While this is exciting, uncharted territory for the public relations profession, there are some important factors that make Web 2.0 challenging. One generally seen downside to Web 2.0 technology is that people limit their social contacts to others who have identical interests. While many users of Web 2.0 see this as a benefit, there is a clear lack of diversity in such online communities. In a society that values diverse opinions, online collaboration may lack this diversity in its intention to bring together people of similar and specific interests. This lack of diversity has an impact as well on how public relations is practiced online. The public relations practitioner must have a narrower approach to publics, which can be segmented at micro-levels.

Additionally, the Internet levels the playing field by allowing individual bloggers to wield as much authority online as top news organizations. This has positive and negative implications for users of this new technology. On one hand this empowers individuals with access to information to share that information freely. On the other hand, this threatens the accuracy and integrity of online news and information sources.

This study is intended to bring forth a better understanding of how public relations practitioners can adapt their strategies to the opportunities and challenges in this new online environment. To do this, we must understand the drivers of this new technology. The purpose of this study is to explore how to effectively communicate with opinion leaders of virtual communities to offer communications professionals guidance for incorporating Web 2.0 technology into public relations programs.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

**RQ1:** What do opinion leaders of virtual communities want and need from their online social network membership?

Current research indicates that communicating directly with the opinion leaders of virtual communities is the most effective way to enhance online communication (Kozinets, 1999). This question explores the uses and gratifications of opinion leaders in virtual communities in an effort to understand their communication preferences. Understanding the characteristics of opinion leaders of virtual communities enables public relations practitioners to tailor strategies, tactics, and messages based on the characteristics of this important stakeholder.

**RQ2:** How can practitioners use this information about opinion leaders of virtual communities to create effective public relations programs?

Understanding stakeholders is a fundamental precept of excellent public relations. By gaining a better understanding of the uses and gratifications of opinion leaders of virtual communities, communications professionals can implement effective public relations campaigns that incorporate Web 2.0 technology. This research question seeks to identify best practices for using Web 2.0 technology in public relations programs based on the uses and gratifications of opinion leaders of virtual communities.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## ***Public Relations, Web 2.0 and Related Concepts***

This study investigated how public relations managers can best use Web 2.0 technology to effectively communicate with opinion leaders of virtual communities. During this study, the researcher referred to public relations as the “management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000, p.1). The term *public relations* was used interchangeably with *communications* during the study, as these terms are commonly accepted ways to describe the overall planning, execution, and evaluation of an organization’s communication with external and internal groups that affect an organization’s ability to accomplish its goals (Grunig, 1992).

The Excellence Study identified two key characteristics of excellent public relations: the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (described in the preceding definition of public relations by the concept of mutuality) and the practice of public relations as a strategic management function (McKie, 2001). The two-way symmetrical model describes two-way communication between an organization and its publics, which results in a beneficial relationship for both parties (Grunig, 2001). The result of two-way symmetrical public relations is achieving mutually satisfying decisions (Heath, 2001a). Strategic public relations, or a strategic planning approach that makes public relations a management function, also is a requirement of excellent public relations. Wilson (2001) defines strategy as “contributing to the accomplishment of organizational

mission and goals” (p.216). As a strategic management function, public relations involves key business skills such as planning, organization, and decision-making (Cralle & Vibbert, 1986, p.25).

This study was intended to offer a better understanding of how communications professionals can communicate more effectively with opinion leaders of virtual communities. The concept of effectiveness is defined by overall output of a public relations program. Evaluation research is required to determine if a public relations program is effective. Effectiveness is determined by comparing program results to the program objectives (Watson, 2001). Simple effectiveness asks whether a program has worked in terms of output. Objectives effectiveness evaluates programs based on meeting objectives and creation of desired outcomes (Watson, 2001, p. 260).

Excellent public relations is the frame of reference for communicating effectively, referred to in the research question for this study. To produce effective results, excellent public relations satisfies an organization’s own interests while simultaneously helping a public satisfy its interests (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). An updated approach to excellent public relations offers the mixed-motives model of public relations, which incorporates two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical models to achieve effective public relations. According to Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002), “The mixed motive model could almost always increase the contribution of public relations to organizational effectiveness” (p. 309).

A newer concept used in this study that requires explanation is Web 2.0. The concept of “Web 2.0” was coined by O’Reilly Media at a 2003 conference brainstorming session with MediaLive International. Web 2.0 describes how the Internet has evolved to a collaborative, open platform that fosters a shift of power to consumers and enhances user experience. The following is a summary of Web 2.0 practices and principles outlined by O’Reilly (2005):

- The Web as a platform - Web 2.0 products and services are delivered via the Web, not through the old software paradigm.
- The power of collective intelligence - Web 2.0 embraces the collective activity of Web users, which is the core of its value. A key Web 2.0 principle is that a service automatically gets better the more people use it.
- Internal data – Every significant Web 2.0 application is backed by a specialized database and database management is a core competency.
- The end of the software release cycle – Software must be maintained on a daily basis, powered by scripting languages, such as Perl, Python, PHP, and Ruby. This provides a “Perpetual Beta” scenario, where users are real-time testers. Users also are treated as co-developers who can participate in an open source environment.
- Lightweight programming models - Programming is loosely coupled, designed for hackability or remixability, and allows for syndication rather than control.
- Software beyond the single device - Web 2.0 is not designed exclusively for the PC platform. Web 2.0 is extended to devices (e.g., iPods, TiVo).

- Rich user experience – User interface innovation of Web applications enhances capabilities that were once held back by earlier Web standards.

Appendix B depicts O'Reilly Media's online examples of Web services that apply these Web 2.0 practices and principles. While media companies have latched on to "Web 2.0" as a marketing buzz word, these core competencies serve as a checklist to determine if an Internet technology meets the Web 2.0 criteria. Tapscott and Williams (2006) include these criteria to form the following definition of Web 2.0:

"There are many names for this new Web: the Web 2.0, the living Web, the Hypernet, the active Web, the read/write Web. Call it what you like – the sentiment is the same. We're all participating in the rise of a global, ubiquitous platform for computation and collaboration that is reshaping nearly every aspect of human affairs. While the old Web is about Web sites, clicks, and "eyeballs," the new Web is about the communities, participation, and peering" (p.19).

Some of the key technology that has developed through Web 2.0 practices and principles include RSS (Really Simple Syndication), blogs, podcasts, wikis, tagging, mashups and online social networks. Blogs are similar to personal Web pages, which have been around since the beginning of the Web. However, the key difference between traditional Web pages and blogs is RSS (O'Reilly, 2005). RSS allows for subscriptions to blogs, notifying users constantly of updates. Another difference between blogs and traditional Web pages is the opportunity for dialog through commenting and trackback functions (O'Reilly, 2005).

Blogs often receive the most attention from practitioners who incorporate new media in public relations campaigns. This is for good reason: blogs have

become so popular that a new blog is created every second (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). However, public relations practitioners should consider blogs among a variety of online social media that can be used in campaigns and select an appropriate medium depending on the intended audience and message. For example, Waggener Edstrom Worldwide's campaigns include corporate blogs, coordinated interviews on external blogs, podcasted speeches and interviews, hosted blogs on virtual newsrooms, microsites, video blogs, RSS feeds and measurement systems to understand the dissemination and impact of messages (Rand & Rodriguez, 2007). It also should be noted that while blogs are the most popular form of Web 2.0 technology, blogs still have not gained adoption by a widespread majority within organizations. Makovsky and Company's State of Corporate Blogging Survey found only 30 percent of corporate executives had a thorough understanding of blogs (Goodman, 2006).

As is the case with blogs, RSS is the backbone for podcasting and other applications, or "widgets," which provide continually updated information, such as weather, news, and stock quotes. Podcasts were introduced in 2004 through the developments of former MTV VJ Adam Curry and software pioneer Dave Winer. Winer is credited for writing RSS 2.0, the XML format that introduced blogs and later podcasts, while Curry created the Applescript application that automatically downloads and synchs audio files to iPods. While podcasting shares characteristics of other audio media, what sets it apart from other types of digital audio is its time-shifting ability. (Anderson, 2005). Additionally, like blogs, podcasts easily can be created by everyday Web users using minimal resources.

Derived from the Hawaiian word for “quick,” wikis offer a tool for mass collaboration over the Internet. Wikis run on software that enables anyone to add content or edit a Web page, facilitating collaboration in forming online content. The most popular wiki is Wikipedia, an open encyclopedia, which has grown to ten times larger than Encyclopedia Britannica with the work of only five full-time employees. Wikipedia’s success is due to thousands of volunteer collaborators across the Web. While critics are quick to point out that because anyone can edit Wikipedia this compromises its accuracy, a study by *Nature* magazine found that Wikipedia averaged four inaccuracies per entry compared to Britannica’s three. In addition, Wikipedia can instantly correct errors while Britannica’s inaccuracies must remain until the next version is released (Tapscott & Williams, 2006).

Social bookmarking, or tagging, is facilitated by Web services such as del.icio.us or Flickr. Tagging uses XML technology to allow users to affix descriptive keywords (tags) to Web content. Through collaboration, Web users who tag content create an organizational structure for the Web. In the case of del.icio.us, Web pages are tagged; however, Web services such as Flickr and Facebook allow users to tag photos and even songs can be tagged using services such as Last.fm. As Internet users tag content collaboratively, it creates a “folksonomy,” a bottom-up, organic taxonomy (Tapscott & Williams, 2006, p. 41-42).

Mash ups combine two sources of data to offer a new Web service. This is made possible by the open source environment of the Web. For example, Google Maps is often used for mashups because developers can access its

database and “mash” it with a second database to create more interactive maps. An example of a Google Maps mash up is GasBuddy, which combines Google’s mapping with gas price data (collected by a collaborative effort of its users) to provide an interactive visual of gas stations with the lowest prices. Mashups also are common with digital music. Recording artists, such as the Beastie Boys, make their music digitally available on the group’s Web site and allow fans to mash them up with their own music and content for noncommercial purposes (Tapscott & Williams, 2006).

Online social networks are online meeting places that foster virtual communities. Tapscott and Williams (2006) contend that successful online social networks such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr harness the power of mass collaboration to create real value for community participants. The authors consider this new art and science of collaboration “Wikinomics,” in which masses of people collaborate openly to drive innovation, value creation and industry growth.

For example, prominent online social network digg enables members to submit news stories and vote on submitted news items’ importance by “digging” them to appear on the home page. The community is such a powerful force that often when a news story reaches the digg home page, the traffic it generates to the source Web site temporarily overloads the host’s servers. This traffic surge is referred to as “the digg effect,” and it is a highly sought after commodity by Internet marketers. However, marketers must remain at the mercy of the digg

community because any attempt to undermine the voting system (considered astroturfing) results in a major lashing by the community.

Similar to the digg effect, is being “Slashdotted.” Just as digg members catapult stories to into making major headlines, members of Slashdot, another online news aggregate, can be just as powerful. Communities such as digg and Slashdot have major implications not only for Internet marketers, but for public relations practitioners. An unfavorable story that would otherwise remain quietly on the Web can become a major public relations concern almost instantly after being catapulted by members of highly active and powerful virtual communities.

In regards to online social media, Forrester research defined the following roles for Internet users: *Creators* publish Web pages, write blogs, and upload videos; *Critics* comment on blogs and post ratings and reviews; *Collectors* use RSS or tag content; *Joiners* participate in online social networks; *Spectators* read blogs, watch peer-generated videos, and listen to podcasts; and *Inactives* are online, but do not participate in social media. The research shows that all generations are socially active online in all roles. However, the most active Internet users in all roles are Generation Y or younger while Seniors retain the highest percentage of *Inactives* (Hempel, 2007).

Early research of new media and communication suggests two communication models must be fundamentally altered based on how information is accessed online: who provides information and how audiences get the information they need (Springston, 2001). Springston contends communication no longer requires a gatekeeper, as anyone with a computer can send or receive

information. The result is a shift from the traditional sender-based information model, to a receiver-based information model (Springston, 2001). However, Springston's observation does not take into account other barriers to free flow of information online such as access and the current debate over net neutrality, in which Internet Service Providers could limit access to free-flow of information online much in the same way as a traditional media gatekeeper would.

All of this development online impacts the future of public relations. A 2007 study by the Council of Public Relations Firms incorporated interviews of top communicators at leading companies to explore and examine how they use social media. The findings outlined four themes impacting corporate communications over the next five years: (1) information and influence coming from new sources, (2) corporations and marketers having less control, (3) the convergence of corporate communications, advertising agencies, online marketers and web design firms, and (4) more emphasis on corporate communicators to build trust with audiences (Rand & Rodriguez, 2007).

### ***Science of Networks***

A review of the science of networks provides a foundation for understanding the inner workings of online social media. The science of networks is recognized in physics and sociology literature as "a collection of objects connected to each other in some fashion" (Watts, 2004, p. 27). The generally accepted idea of social networks is that a person on one side of the world can be connected to a person on the opposite side of the world through a short chain of

six people (i.e., six degrees of separation). This idea first emerged in social psychology literature in 1967 by Stanley Milgram and has endured over time, even gaining popularity in popular culture through the “Kevin Bacon Game” (Watts, 2004; Barabási, 2003).

One of the first studies to understand social decision-making was conducted by Solomon Asch in the 1950s. Asch conducted a series of experiments using simple slides depicting a series of lines and asked study subjects to compare lengths of the lines. The participants were seated in a room among mock participants and instructed to announce aloud the responses to questions. The mock participants had been prearranged to all give an incorrect answer. The results of the experiment were shocking. Even when the correct answer was blatantly obvious, one-third of the subjects agreed with the incorrect answer promoted by the mock participants. While the other two-thirds of participants answered correctly, many showed agitation and signs of distress. When the mock participants were not unanimous in their judgment, subjects were much more likely to go along with their individual response (Watts, 2003).

This type of response describes coercive externalities, which occurs when a person alters beliefs in response to beliefs expressed by others (Watts, 2003). The term externality is borrowed from economic theory to describe how a person’s economic activity is affected by anything other than the decision itself (Watts, 2003). Information externalities describe how one seeks out information from peers to make decisions (Watts, 2003). Market externalities, also known in economic theory as network externalities, exist when products offer value after

they are widespread (Watts, 2003; Grant, 2005). Network externalities create positive feedback, so the more a trend or new technology is perceived to have a majority of the market, the more likely the tipping process will occur (Grant, 2005). According to Watts (2003), “When making decisions about how to act or what to buy, individuals are influenced not only by their own pasts, perceptions, and prejudices but also by each other. So by understanding the dynamics of decisions with externalities can collective behavior, from fads to financial bubbles, be understood” (p. 220).

According to O’Reilly (2005), “Network effects from user contributions are the key to market dominance in the Web 2.0 era” (p. 6). Online social networks can be looked at in much the same way as other network externalities.

Metcalfe’s Law, or the Law of the Network, states that the value of a community increases exponentially with the square of the number of participants in that community, denoting a geometrical increase in network value with every new member added. In a virtual community, more members provide a greater likelihood of finding the person, information or resource sought by other members (Roberts, 2003).

Several Web 2.0 entrepreneurs have developed online social networks based on the science of networks. For example, online social network LinkedIn was developed as a professional networking Web site to help members of the virtual community facilitate business-related contacts. Upon the site’s creation in May 2003, each of LinkedIn’s executive managers sent membership invitations to 50 to 100 professional contacts and asked them to invite their own contacts,

have those contacts invite more contacts and so on. From there, the network grew exponentially. A year and a half later, LinkedIn boasted 1.2 million subscribers globally. Explaining the benefits of making connections on LinkedIn, vice president of marketing Konstantin Guericke said, “A network has to be made of people and links between people. So it’s all about how people can find and contact people that they want to reach through the people they already know. And that makes [LinkedIn] very different from a database. It’s the human connection” (Bardon, 2004).

### ***Virtual Communities and Membership***

The term virtual communities was coined in 1993 by Howard Rheingold, and generally refers to “online groups of people who either share norms of behavior or certain defining practices, who actively enforce moral standards, who intentionally attempt to found a community, or who simply exist in close proximity to one another” (Kozinets, 1999). Virtual communities are established with computer interface among people with common interests and experiences. Social community emerges via the Internet when enough people interact with public discussion and human feeling to build personal relationships (Kim, Lee & Hiemstra, 2004). Information and knowledge sharing in virtual communities is often sent directly from member to member without hierarchical channels. Instead, community providers guide the community, plan and develop social policies, and design a platform with good usability (Koh & Kim, 2004). Virtual communities can be broken down further into virtual communities of

consumption, which are affinity groups of members who share enthusiasm for and knowledge of a specific consumption activity (Kozinets, 1999).

To understand the concept of virtual communities, it helps to review its similarities and differences with traditional communities. Virtual communities differ from traditional communities in that they are not constrained by place and time. Virtual communities allow members to exchange knowledge and experiences without the need for face-to-face interaction (Kim, Lee & Hiemstra, 2004). Kim, Lee and Hiemstra (2004) found three factors directly related to a sense of virtual community: membership in the community, influence and relatedness, and integration and fulfillment of needs.

Virtual communities offer several advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that virtual communities remove the barriers of time and distance, enabling groups to be formed by shared interests rather than shared space. Additionally, the Internet enables free flow of information through communities. Also, virtual communities may be more egalitarian than traditional communities. However, virtual communities are disadvantaged in that anonymity and lack of social cues make communication more challenging. Virtual communities also create a digital divide between those with access to the Internet or a high-speed Internet connection and those without access. Lastly, virtual communities offer less diversity as we confine our community to only those members with specific similar interests (Putnam, 2000).

Coinciding with Metcalfe's Law, virtual communities thrive on membership participation. The more personal relationships are established, the more

participation in the virtual community. This generates more usage and further builds the community. Because of this network externality, it is important for each community provider to maintain a sufficient number of members to be successful. Virtual community providers must build community by offering benefits that retain members while attracting new ones (Kim, Lee & Hiemstra, 2004). In terms of the types of social connections facilitated by the Internet, Putnam (2003) identifies two: virtual connections with people one already knows in the physical world and purely virtual connections with people who were previously unknown to each other.

The marketing literature identifies strategies for effectively targeting virtual community members by identifying various types of members determined by two factors: the relationship the member has with the consumption activity and the intensity of relationships a person has with other members of the virtual community (Kozinets, 1999). These two factors distinguish four distinct types of virtual community members: Tourists, Minglers, Devotees, and Insiders. As depicted in Appendix C, tourists simply pass by the community with only superficial interest or social ties, minglers maintain strong social ties while marginally interested, devotees maintain a strong interest and enthusiasm but have few social attachments to the group, and insiders (or opinion leaders) have strong social ties and strong interest to the consumption activity (Kozinets, 1999).

Generally, a virtual community member will start out as a visitor and make his or her way to becoming an insider as more time is spent with the group. During that time, the visitor will move from factual information exchange to mixing

factual and social (or relational) information (Kozinets, 1999). Marketing techniques for targeting specific types of virtual community members are selected based on how these members communicate within the virtual community and include interaction-based segmentation, fragmentation-based segmentation, opting communities, paying-for-attention, and building networks by giving product away (Kozinets, 1999).

Devotees and insiders as the most important targets for marketing (Kozinets, 1999). While devotees may not be loyal to a particular community, insiders, on the other hand, are highly influential to other members of a virtual community. So much so that researchers have found often if an insider switches devotion from one product to another, they will convert others and could completely change the dynamics of the virtual community. Therefore, insiders are opinion leaders whose high informational and social exchanges offer high value to virtual communities as influencers (Kozinets, 1999).

Virtual communities result in an economic trend that shifts power away from marketers and directs it to active consumers. According to Kozinets (1999), “It helps to remember that the goal is not to control the information, but to use it wisely in order to build solid, long-lasting relationships with products or brands” (p. 12). Understanding that consumers are now empowered, it stands to reason that these insiders also are critically important to communications professionals. Public relations professionals would be remiss to ignore the advantages that new media offer in helping to establish and maintain two-way symmetrical communication with these online opinion leaders.

New media, including Internet, mobile devices and digital technologies, offer practitioners a way to communicate effectively with opinion leaders of virtual communities within the constraints of a consumer-empowered environment. While the marketing literature begins to explore the strategic implications this has for marketers, the communications literature needs to catch up. Generally, communications literature offers tactical advice for Internet as it existed before Web 2.0. Very little information has been available for public relations practitioners to communication in the Web 2.0 or mobile and digital environments. In addition, the Internet tactics that are written about in public relations literature support more traditional strategies rather than investigating how new media might require modification of traditional strategies to facilitate more effective communication.

It should be mentioned that virtual social capital has its critics. Putnam (2000) contends that American social capital has been on the decline over the last third of the twentieth century and that virtual communities are no substitute. While new media came along much too late to be responsible for the collapse of American community, Putnam posits new media can threaten the restoration of social capital if it is not developed to enhance face-to-face communication. Putnam (2003) suggests, "Internet technology could create social spaces within which we see how our numerous networks of interest and interaction overlap and intersect" (p. 293-294).

The effects of this new boom in virtual community on social capital is a subject of continuing study. One study of Internet and social capital found the

Internet both supplements and increases organizational involvement and that people who use the Web often tend to be involved in more organizations. Evidence suggests people who already participate offline will use the Internet to augment their participation, while people participating online are more likely to get more involved offline. Additionally, the study found Internet use supplements network capital by extending levels of contact and helping to maintain ties with friends. However, Internet use is associated with decreased commitment to online community, possibly because high Internet use leads to bad experiences (Wellman, Haase, White & Hampton, 2001).

What we do know for certain is that virtual communities are thriving in the Web 2.0 world and this represents a fundamental shift in the user activity. The sense of community supported by Web 2.0 encourages mass collaboration and self-organization, rather than hierarchy and control (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). We must acknowledge that as a result, virtual communities have a direct impact on the current practice of public relations and that communications professionals must rise to the opportunities and challenges virtual communities present.

### ***Opinion Leadership***

While Putnam and other scholars contend social capital is on the decline, one subset of the population that remains socially active and strongly involved in community is opinion leaders. Research on opinion leaders shows they have higher levels of personal pride and as a result are more engaged in community (Scheufele & Shah, 2003). Paul Lazarsfeld and a team of researchers introduced the concept of opinion leaders in the early 1950s, debunking the

previous notion of an all-powerful media characterized by the Magic Bullet effect (Olson, 2001). Lazarsfeld, et al.'s two-step flow model identified opinion leaders, people who influence the opinions of others, as important diffusers of media messages to individuals (Olson, 2001) (Scheufele & Shah, 2002). Scheufele and Shah (2002) found "Individuals who view themselves as arbiters of style, innovations, or information serve as opinion leaders within their social networks, providing them with opportunities to influence others" (p. 15).

Opinion leaders are a key influential public for spreading new ideas and gaining widespread adoption, a notion grounded in diffusion of innovations theory. In the 1960's, Everett Rogers introduced the diffusion of innovations theory to explain the adoption of new technology and ideas (Watts, 2003). According to the theory, innovators introduce new technology and advocate new ideas. Early adopters are the members of a population who are the first to be influenced by a new technology or idea. Early adopters who act as opinion leaders are key to influencing the larger network to adopt a new technology or idea and generate a cascade or "tipping point" that reaches the larger population (Watts, 2003; Gladwell, 2000; Barabási, 2003). Ryan and Cross' landmark study of hybrid corn seed adoption found that the diffusion of innovations process yields a bell-shaped curve. If a product or idea passes the trial of innovators, early adopters will begin to adopt it. This is followed by a larger early majority, during which half of the people who will adopt the technology have done so. Eventually, this is followed by a late majority and ends with a small number of

laggards, who adopt a product or idea only after they have become a clear minority (Barabási, 2003).

According to Malcolm Gladwell (2000), there is a tipping point for any new technology, defined as “the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point” for widespread adoption (p. 12). The tipping point occurs between the early adopters and early majority stages of adoption. Gladwell contends that tipping points are driven by a handful of exceptionally influential people whom he identifies as Mavens, Connectors and Salesmen. Connectors are people who have large social circles and interact with an extraordinarily large number of acquaintances, Mavens are information specialists who share what they know with their acquaintances, and Salesmen are persuaders. In current diffusion of innovations literature, Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen also have been described as “hubs,” “power users,” or “influencers” – all synonymous with “opinion leaders” (Barabási, 2003). These opinion leaders play the most important role in bridging the chasm between the early adopters and early majority, which is required for any product or idea to reach the tipping point and enjoy widespread adoption.

Opinion leaders are found in specific community groups. Research suggests opinion leaders can be identified by the following traits: opinion leaders are perceived as experts; they are endowed with charisma and desire to be different from others; and they have a high social visibility (Kapferer, 2004). According to Kapferer (2004), “All consumers are not equal. Some are more involved, more interested in all that concerns, not the product itself, but the need.

They read more, use Internet much more, participate in chats and forums” (p.164). Opinion leaders have numerous social contacts and they are the first to notice and use the experience of innovators (Barabási, 2003).

Gladwell (2000) states, “Word of mouth is — even in this age of mass communications and multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns — still the most important form of human communication” (p.32). Further, Gladwell (2000) identifies this as The Law of the Few in starting word-of-mouth epidemics. The Law of the Few indicates, “if you are interested in starting a word-of-mouth epidemic, your resources should be solely concentrated on [Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen]” (p. 256). Word of mouth bears more weight when it is by opinion leaders, experts, and the press (Kapferer, 2004).

### ***Community Relations***

Little is known about virtual community relations in communication literature; however, an understanding of community relations provides a logical foundation. When establishing and maintaining relationships with stakeholders, practitioners must rely on community relations to promote socially responsible actions. Community relations is a specialized function of public relations that supports the business interests of an organization while contributing organizational efforts to enhance the overall welfare of society. Community relations includes strategies such as participating in philanthropic activities, encouraging dialogue between the organization and community, as well as informing the community of socially responsible actions (Ledingham & Bruning, 2001).

Community-building theory and communitarianism provide the underlying theories for community relations. These theories are predicated on the definition of public relations as a mutually beneficial function. Heath (2001a) posits, “To support socially responsible ends, public relations must put into play the best information evaluated by the most ethical observations in support of mutually beneficial choices” (p. 37).

The concept of community involves participation in the public sphere along a continuum between the individual and a centralized state. Community involves shared values/ends and symbolic interaction (Leeper, 2001, p. 98). Stark and Kruckeberg’s community-building theory is the rationale for using public relations to build mutually beneficial relationships between an organization, specifically corporations, and the community (Heath, 2001b, p. 4). Community-building theory proposes a corporation’s greatest stakeholder is the community, not investors, as public authorization is the basis for any corporation’s existence (Stark & Kruckeberg, 2001). Communitarianism is the worldview that embraces social cohesion, citizen empowerment, and acceptance of responsibility. The communitarianism worldview supports corporate social responsibility, as it is rooted in the belief that an organization-community relationship should be mutually beneficial (Leeper, 2001, p. 104).

Effective community relations is critical for an organization to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders offline or online. Whether virtual or traditional, communities have a significant stake in an

organization's success or failure. It is important to approach study of virtual communities in consideration of this community relations theoretical framework.

### ***Uses and Gratifications***

The uses and gratifications model offers a functional approach to understanding how individuals use the mass media assuming that users have needs and drives that are satisfied by both media and non-media sources. Research identifies four categories of uses and gratifications, which include cognition, diversion, social utility and withdrawal. Like the two-step flow model, uses and gratifications is a limited media effect model that "postulated the importance of the individual's thoughtful use of media messages in the media communication process, thereby reducing the power of the media" (Olson, 2001). The uses and gratifications approach to media assumes audiences take an active role in media usage, the mass media compete with other sources of satisfaction, and that people are aware and able to identify their own needs. (Dominick, 1996). History has shown that often new media emerge with untapped uses and gratifications (Angleman, 2000).

Early uses and gratifications research of the Internet suggests that users have certain needs when going online and most often, those needs are met (Angleman, 2000). However, the Internet has evolved rapidly and it is likely that Internet uses and gratifications have changed over this same period. Given the lack of knowledge in this area, it is helpful to review some generally agreed upon unique characteristics of the Internet that aided in its rapid diffusion: (1) The Internet provides a single common platform of the universally accepted

Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol, the standard language of all computing, (2) The Internet supplies information according to the perfect information concept of economic theory where information can be obtained from any Web-enabled organization at little or no cost, (3) The Internet offers interactivity and meaningful dialogue, (4) The Internet's global reach eliminates the distance barrier, (5) The Internet levels the playing field in that organizations can compete directly regardless of size or distance, (6) The Internet is always-on, available on user demand, and (7) The Internet is an interactive in nature, often referred to as many-to-many communications network (Roberts, 2003).

In contrast to one-to-one networks (e.g., telephones) or one-to-many networks (e.g., television, radio), the interactivity offered by Web 2.0 is many-to-many, facilitated by file sharing, RSS, wikis and tagging. According to Galloway (2004), "Many-to-many is a structure of communication where each receiver of information is also potentially a sender of information...Feedback loops are necessary to help produce the active subjectivity of the user" (p. 68). Consider Wikipedia as an example of this many-to-many communication: multiple users create and update an entry on Wikipedia for other multiple users to read, some of whom can potentially contribute to the entry. This many-to-many paradigm refers to the interactive nature of the Internet.

The most important result of these unique characteristics and the mainstream adoption of the Internet is shift in marketplace control to the consumer. According to Angleman (2000), "The ability of control seems to be the most appealing psychological aspect of the Internet." Through the Internet,

consumers have heightened expectations, demand personalized and customized products, expect privacy protection, and want support and service that is always assessable (Roberts, 2003). In addition, through collaboration fostered by Web 2.0, customers no longer just passively consume content, they are participants who generate value for businesses (Tapscott & Williams, 2006).

A look at uses and gratifications indicates what motivates members of online communities to participate. Participants in online communities have many different motivations for actively participating, including but not limited to the social and recreational aspects a virtual community offers, an altruistic motivation to help the community or self or professional fulfillment (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). However, a narrower focus on the uses and gratifications of opinion leaders is required for this study.

A new field of exploration, particularly within the marketing literature, is in understanding why certain people participate in online communities and others do not (these inactive community members have often been termed “lurkers”). Initial studies suggested Maslow’s hierarchical needs theory as an appropriate method of understanding and supporting members of virtual communities. Maslow’s theory in application to virtual communities suggests that individuals participate based on fulfilling their own deficit needs so that their own higher needs can be met. This theory posits that lurkers do not participate because their physiological or security needs are not being met, while active participants do so to meet their social and esteem needs (Bishop, 2007). While this is a leading theory, Bishop (2007) suggests Maslow’s needs-based theory is

inadequate because it does not take into account that community members will desire to do two things at one time. Bishop proposes that theories that are more goals-driven may better explain members' participation in a virtual community:

“An alternative framework for understanding such behaviours, which is based on the principles that individuals are driven to action by desires, these desires lead to plans that need to be consonant with their existing plans as well as their goals, values and beliefs, and how they carry out an action will depend on their interpretation of their environment. Some online community members, such as lurkers, believe that they do not need to post messages to online communities or believe that they are being helpful by not posting” (Bishop, 2007, p.1890).

This study offers a more narrow focus on uses and gratifications of online social networking specifically in regards to opinion leaders, those most active in an online community. Particularly, it investigates their motivations for active participation in virtual communities as well as their communications preferences. Understanding online opinion leaders' uses and gratifications with Web 2.0 media enables more effective communications with these important stakeholders.

## ***Summary***

This review of existing literature covers definitions of concepts used in the research questions of this study including public relations, Web 2.0, and virtual communities. Additionally, this literature review outlines related theories, including the science of networks, membership of virtual communities, opinion leadership, community relations and uses and gratifications. The explanation of

these concepts and theories demonstrates the need for public relations practitioners to better understand online social media so that public relations can sustain its importance as a management function. As Tapscott & Williams (2006) suggest, the mass collaboration fostered by Web 2.0 will cause “great upheaval, dis-location, and danger for societies, corporations, and individuals that fail to keep up with relentless change” (p.15). Recognizing this, practitioners must understand new media and include it in public relations programs. Rand and Rodriguez (2007) point out, “As for future skills, social media must become part of the way public relations practitioners do business or they will become obsolete” (p.4). Through the study of opinion leaders of virtual communities, their uses and gratifications and preferences, public relations practitioners can avoid Rand and Rodriguez’s dispiriting prediction and help organizations better communicate with publics.

Importantly, this literature review provides a foundation for further exploring how opinion leaders use Web 2.0 technology. While this study lays the groundwork for effectively communicating using Web 2.0 technology, it more importantly builds a pathway to effective communication throughout the Internet’s continued transformation. In essence, this study is meant to help public relations establish a playbook not only for Web 2.0, but assist in its preparation for Web 3.0 and beyond.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### *Population Studied*

To appropriately investigate the research questions posed, the researcher conducted primary research and compared the findings to secondary research. The population studied for the primary research portion of this study is opinion leaders of virtual communities. Opinion leaders of virtual communities were identified using Kozinet's assertion that opinion leaders of virtual communities have high social ties to an online community and have a high interest in the consumption activity of the community. This coincides with Lazarsfeld, et al.'s assertion that opinion leaders are people who are most concerned about an issue and articulate about it (Scheufele & Shah, 2003). Primarily, study participants were selected based on their highly active participation online within an Internet community. This was determined based on the researcher's review of a participant's publicly visible online profile within a given community. Study participants were considered opinion leaders of virtual communities if they met all of the following criteria:

- They are frequent users of and active participants on one or more Web sites that sustain a virtual community.
- They have a large number of social connections with that Web site, respective to the number of social connections of other members within the same community.
- Their contribution to the virtual community includes frequent posting of information or user-generated content relevant to the community's topic of interest.

Communities studied varied widely and eligible participants could be active in numerous online communities, ranging from social communities (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, SecondLife), news, information or opinion communities (e.g., Digg, Slashdot, iVillage, Reddit), online media communities (e.g., YouTube, Flickr) or brand/corporate communities. Although not a requirement for the study, most respondents had their own self-created online communities, meaning they are bloggers, podcasters, or video content creators in their own right.

The following offers a brief description of the interview participants selected. From the descriptions, it is apparent that each respondent participates in online communities for different reasons. It was the intention of the researcher to identify respondents with varying online interests. Respondents are referred to using generic descriptors to preserve their anonymity.

- Respondent 1 is an **online hobbyist** who updates her blog daily with photos and editorials regarding mainly cooking, fashion, home decor and arts and crafts. She often features product and entertainment reviews on her blog. Each of her blog posts typically receives 5 to 30 comments from readers. She also has an online storefront at craft community Etsy.com. In addition, she socializes and posts content on Flickr, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and Ravelry.com (an online knitting community). She also regularly and actively participates on at least nine message boards and a few Yahoo Groups.

- Respondent 2 is a **high-tech professional** in the online real estate industry who is active online mostly to support his career. He has a large network on LinkedIn and frequently answers questions posted on the site. Relating to his work, he participates in Activerain, an online community for real estate professionals. He also has maintained blogs in the past. While most of his online participation is professional, he is active personally on MySpace.
- Respondent 3 is a very popular **video creator** on YouTube. She has posted over 67 videos since becoming a member of YouTube one year ago. Her YouTube channel has nearly 6,000 subscribers. Her most viewed video has been watched more than 342,000 times. Her videos are entertaining and lighthearted and often are an artistic response to current affairs. In addition to having a substantial number of viewers on YouTube, she also has a large number of friends in the YouTube community.

### ***Study Method***

Semi-structured interviews provided qualitative data to explore the research questions set forth in this study. Interviewing enables free interaction with informants while following a protocol of open-ended questions as a guide to collect a wide range of relevant data. Interviewing as a research method offers several advantages. In particular, it enables the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of an under-explored topic. Interviews enable the researcher to review study participants in a natural setting, rather than the artificiality that

comes with experimental or survey research. Interviewers can develop a rapport with informants that may elicit more quality responses (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). The greatest strength of interviews is that they are flexible, allowing for the researcher to pursue additional areas of interest (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997; Baxter & Babbie, 2004).

The primary drawback of interviews is that this method of data collection is not generalizable to populations and universes. However, the information collected during interviews can be used to broaden understanding of a particular topic. Other disadvantages include the existence of possible researcher bias as well as time and costs (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). However, interview studies have a distinctive place in research, and knowledgeable and careful researchers can produce an informative and valuable study using the method.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

To answer the research questions posed in this study, the researcher conducted primary and secondary research. Secondary research provided the researcher with a base of knowledge regarding public relations and Web 2.0, which then was compared with the findings of the primary research. The secondary research consisted of reviewing public relations and marketing trade literature that detailed current best practices for incorporating Web 2.0 technology in communications campaigns. The researcher reviewed a convenience sample of 19 trade articles, blog posts, and presentations/interviews published or presented between Summer 2005 and July 2007. A complete list of articles reviewed as secondary research is provided in Appendix D.

The primary research for this study was collected in the form of in-depth qualitative interviews. The researcher interviewed three opinion leaders of virtual communities selected by purposive sampling. The researcher made an effort to identify a sample that represents a diverse group of virtual communities. As an incentive, respondents received a \$10 iTunes e-gift certificate for their participation. Taking into account that the population for this study is particularly comfortable communicating online, respondents were interviewed via e-mail. Anonymity was guaranteed to all study participants.

### ***Justification of Actual Interview Questions Used***

Interviews were conducted to explore the research questions posed in this study. Appendix E features the actual interview protocol, instructions, and questions. During the interview, the term “online community” was used in place of “virtual community.” As both of these terms refer to the same concept, “online community” is a term more familiar and relatable to the study participants. The following is a justification for selecting the questions used in the interview, showing how they correspond to the research questions posed in this study.

***RQ1: What do opinion leaders of virtual communities want and need from their online social network membership?***

- *Which virtual communities do you participate in frequently?* This question created a context for the informant to respond to the subsequent interview questions. This ensured the respondent understood the concept of virtual community used in the study. By listing the online communities the

respondent participates in, he/she had a comfortable frame of reference for responding to the remaining interview questions.

- *Which of the communities you listed from Question 1 would you consider yourself to most actively participate in as a knowledge, information or opinion sharer? Why?* This question began to determine the underlying uses and gratifications for participating actively in a virtual community. Particularly, it explored the wants and needs derived from participation in virtual communities.
- *What motivates you to share ideas, opinions or information with others online?* This question explored the respondent's motivations for being an opinion leader to better understand uses and gratifications of actively participating in a virtual community.
- *Why do you feel it is important to share this information with others online?* This question was purposefully left vague to gain an understanding of the opinion leader's thought process for sharing information with others online. Responses to this question could have referred to internal personal factors or external environmental factors.
- *What do you like most about participating in online communities?* This question is somewhat repetitive of some of the other questions used to obtain information about uses and gratifications. However, it was included as a second attempt to ensure that critical information about the respondent's wants and needs regarding online community involvement was obtained.

**RQ2:** *How can practitioners use this information about opinion leaders of virtual communities to create effective public relations programs?*

- *Where do you obtain the information that you share with others in your online community/ies?* This question helped determine the types of sources the respondent uses when sharing information with other community members. The question was deliberately left open to refer to either online or offline sources.
- *What types of online sources do you trust for information?* Like the previous question, this question helped determine the types of sources the respondent uses when sharing information with other community members. However, this question prompted the respondent to consider online sources only.
- *Why do you trust these online sources?* This question helped provide insight for how public relations practitioners can make their online communication more trustworthy according to the perceptions of opinion leaders.
- *What are some of the obstacles you face when participating as a member of an online community?* This question particularly addressed how public relations practitioners can better serve the needs and desires of online opinion leaders. As the goal of public relations is to solve a problem with a communications solution, this question served to identify the problem, the first step in designing a public relations program.

- *What triggers you to be interested enough in a topic to discuss it online?*  
In addition to obtaining information about the opinion leader's uses and gratifications, the question aimed to provide public relations practitioners an idea of how to best gain the attention of opinion leaders of virtual communities.
- *Are there any organizations (businesses, nonprofits or otherwise) that you relate with online and seek information from?* This research question served to set up the question that follows, providing a frame of reference for the respondent.
- *If so, what kinds of information do you prefer to receive from these organizations and in what format would you prefer to receive it?* This question sought to identify and understand what current public relations efforts targeting the respondent are working.
- *Is there information that you would prefer to get online that you are not receiving? If so, how could this be remedied?* This question sought to identify and understand what current public relations efforts targeting the respondent are not working and, importantly, how they could be altered to be more effective.
- *Lastly, do you know of another person who would be a good interview participant for my study?* This question was used to perpetuate a snowball sample for the study. Since opinion leaders often have a large number of social connections, it was likely the respondent could refer another opinion leader to the researcher.

## ***Data Analysis Techniques***

The analytic strategy for this study relied on pattern matching and explanation building. Data collected was compared to the body of knowledge presented in the literature review as well as a collected body of secondary research. Pattern-matching logic was used to reveal themes in the collected data (primary research) and relate the findings back to themes in the secondary research. By identifying common themes, the researcher was able to determine best practices for public relations using Web 2.0 based on perspectives of PR experts and online opinion leaders. Explanation building was used to review overall results, present data, and develop ideas for further study. The researcher took every precaution to ensure the highest quality of data analysis (Yin, 2003).

## **RESULTS**

### ***Primary Research Results***

*RQ1: What do opinion leaders of virtual communities want and need from their online social network membership?*

As opinion leaders of virtual communities are a key public for online communication, it is important to explore their uses and gratifications to understand their communication preferences. Understanding the uses and gratifications of online opinion leaders enables public relations practitioners to more effectively communicate with this group. In turn, this will facilitate communication with the broader online community.

Based on a view of the online profiles of participants and their responses to questions posed during the interview, each respondent has very unique uses for virtual communities: the online hobbyist uses virtual communities to share and learn helpful tips regarding topics she's interested in as well as to express herself artistically and document her life, the high-tech professional uses virtual communities to stay connected with professional colleagues as well as personal friends, many of whom he knows offline, the video creator uses virtual communities to express herself artistically and to connect with people online she would not otherwise meet due to geographic constraints.

Regarding gratifications, study participants offered varying motivators for sharing ideas, opinions, and information online. The researcher found it helpful to compare these responses to the seven unique characteristics of the Internet mentioned in the "Uses and Gratifications" subsection of the literature review. The online hobbyist views the Internet as her "gallery space," a place for showcasing her artistic talents such as writing, photography, and handmade crafts with others online. She also uses the Internet for documentation, in lieu of traditional forms of documentation and archiving, such as scrapbooking and photo albums. She likes that the Internet offers a place for her to document her life online and that she can easily retrieve information from the past through navigating her online contributions. The high-tech professional's main motivation for sharing ideas, opinions, and information online is efficiency, stating the Internet offers "a more efficient way of collaborating professionally and personally." The video creator's motivation was mainly social, citing that by

sharing her videos in the online community YouTube, she has made many friends. She mentioned that YouTube enables her and her friends to “share each other’s experiences.” Her social perspective of online community comes from her experience of and enjoyment in communicating with people all over the world. Of the seven unique characteristics of the Internet, those that most closely correspond to the respondents’ motivations are interconnectivity and meaningful dialog, global reach, and a many-to-many platform. However, documentation, a key motivation for the online hobbyist, does not directly correlate to one of the seven unique characteristics of the Internet.

These motivations are looked at more closely when asking opinion leaders why they feel sharing information with others online is important. The online hobbyist feels it is important to share information because of the positive feedback she receives from the community for doing so. Her aim is to pass on helpful tips to others, a motivation corresponding to Gladwell’s Mavens. According to the online hobbyist, “I also like to post helpful hints or tutorials so people can try things I’ve done or come up with. I do that all the time with info I get on other people’s blogs. I’m sort of passing it on.” The high-tech professional offered a collaborative perspective, “You give a little and get a lot. If everyone contributes just a little bit, the cumulative effect is profound.” This corresponds to the concept of Wikinomics, which indicates the high-tech professional sees himself as doing his part to collaborate with others online by sharing his information with others. The video creator’s motivation for sharing information is that the Internet makes the world a smaller place. The Internet gives her a way

to share information with a much a larger audience than she would otherwise have the opportunity to communicate with. She also likes that she is able to not only share information with people all over the world, but she sees it more of an exchange of information, much like the high-tech professional.

Participants also were asked what they liked most about participating in online communities to gain more insight into their gratifications. The online hobbyist mentioned the ability to find people online who she has a lot in common with, referring to the global reach of the Internet. According to the online hobbyist, "I can find another person just like me with the same interests and passions without even trying, where it is harder to seek out and meet likeminded people in your own town." She also mentioned that the Internet is an "endless, free resource" for information and learning, which relates to the perfect information concept of the Internet. Similarly, connecting with people online was the high-tech professional's favorite aspect of participating in online communities. He uses online communities to connect or reconnect with professional colleagues and personal friends, finding an online community to be a "central and convenient" location. This response is consistent with his response about online communities providing an efficient way to collaborate professionally and personally. The video creator's response relates directly to the "always on" characteristic of the Internet. According to her, "You can always find a friend awake online because of the time zones."

***RQ2: How can practitioners use this information about opinion leaders of virtual communities to create effective public relations programs?***

Part of understanding how public relations practitioners can best relate to opinion leaders of virtual communities is to know how and where these individuals obtain information (either offline or online). The online hobbyist said most of the information she shares online is her own creation, based on her own thoughts and opinions. However, she said that once she decided on a topic to comment on or share information about, she usually checks out other blogs mentioning it online and does additional online research before sharing her opinions. She never mentioned using any offline sources for information other than her own creativity. Like the hobbyist, the high-tech professional reported relying on personal experience for information to share online. He also mentioned that he shares information he finds interesting on online news sites or on other blogs. Like the hobbyist, he did not mention any offline sources other than his own personal experiences. The video creator also had a similar response. She uses her own personal and family experiences to make videos. She often creates video responses to stories that have gained widespread media attention, including celebrity news. For example, one of her more popular videos was a spoof on an iPhone ad, which she released when there was a media blitz (online and offline) regarding the iPhone launch.

Digging deeper to understand where online opinion leaders go for information, respondents were asked what online sources they trust for information and why they trust these sources. The online hobbyist said that for

her own posting purposes, she trusts other blogs or messages boards for information. She mentioned she trusts these sources because the information is based on other people's real-life experiences. For example, a person may post about a home improvement project they did and she would find that person's experience would help her and would trust that source of information. The high-tech professional said he does not trust many online sources at all, citing that most have an obvious agenda. However, he trusts the Associated Press for general news and highly regarded blogs, such as TechCrunch and "blogs with a degree of journalistic integrity." His reason for trusting these news sources and blogs is their attempt to be bipartisan and to report on news "as it is." The video creator did not relate to the question about trusting online sources for information because the information she shares on YouTube is artistic in nature. However, she mentioned that she gives little trust to random members of the YouTube community who post comments. She mentioned she trusts the YouTube staff and any businesses online with whom she has dealt with offline. She also mentioned that she trusts those members of YouTube whom she has gotten to know offline (at conferences and meet ups) or those with whom she has had long-term online contact. She feels these are personal contacts, not solely online contacts, which is why she trusts them.

To understand how public relations professionals can better communicate with opinion leaders of virtual communities, it helps to understand what obstacles they face when participating as a member of an online community. The online hobbyist mentioned her main obstacles are other members of the online

community who post malicious or negative feedback. She noted this happens on rare occasion. The high-tech professional mentioned “TMI,” or too much information as an obstacle. Also, he is unwilling to provide certain aspects of his personal information online, which sometimes inhibits him from participating in online communities that require the information. The video creator mentioned that some other members of the community, those she doesn’t know and who do not provide much information about themselves try to get too close to her online. The hobbyist and the video creator agree that other members of the community, particularly those whom they do not consider friends, can be a hindrance. Likewise, the high-tech professional and video creator are interested in protecting their personal information from online community members they do not know.

When asked what triggers the online opinion leaders to share information online, each respondent mentioned it had to be something they already had personal interest in. The online hobbyist mentioned she likes to share information online that she had to discover herself. For example, she said, “The fashion posts I do originated because I was looking for non-leather accessories and decided to share my findings with others.” The high-tech professional and the video content provider mentioned passion as their main trigger. The high-tech professional said, “If I am passionate enough about a topic to either defend it or attack it, I will discuss it online, while the video creator said, “Must be passion. Passionate about something to voice my opinion.” Clearly, all of the respondents were triggered to share information online based on their own personal feelings and experiences regarding a particular topic.

None of the online opinion leaders mentioned having a relationship with organizations online for information. The online hobbyist mentioned getting e-mails from certain online stores she where she makes purchases. In particular, she mentioned receiving sales notices from Nordstrom.com. The high-tech professional said he related to and sought information from the BBC, Associated Press and Reddit.com. The video creator mentioned she prefers to seek out information from organizations, rather than have that information pushed to her.

In regards to ways of obtaining information from organizations, the online hobbyist and high-tech professional preferred electronic correspondence. The online hobbyist specified e-mail or RSS feeds, while the high-tech professional mentioned SMS messaging and blog posts (RSS technology). The online hobbyist also mentioned she would like to receive coupons or information on discounts from organizations online. The video creator mentioned being able to find information fast on Web site is important. She mentioned she does not like newsletters or e-mails sent by businesses and organizations.

Lastly, all of the respondents agreed that there is no information they would prefer to get online that they are not getting. The respondents overwhelmingly agree that there is more than enough information online for what they need. They prefer to seek out this information on their own and feel they are able to find it online without any help.

## ***Secondary Research Results***

Before using this new understanding of the uses and gratifications of online opinion leaders to determine best practices for Web 2.0 public relations, it is important to review what experts in Web 2.0 public relations currently consider effective approaches. Analysis of 19 trade articles offering advice for incorporating Web 2.0 into public relations programs yielded the following suggestions ranked from 1 to 10, (1 being most recommended by a total of six articles and 10 being recommended by a minimum of three articles):

1. **Monitor online conversations.** Find out what is being said about you online. Technorati and Google searches are a good place to start. Identify your industry's "blog stars" and subscribe to their RSS feeds. Make sure to extend your monitoring to videos, podcasts and online community forums as well.
2. **Offer multimedia press releases.** Instead of issuing press releases targeting traditional media, create online press releases that incorporate video, tagging, links, images and comments. Make sure to include all of your information online because bloggers are not going to call you for additional details. Allow interested stakeholders to subscribe to your press releases via RSS.
3. **Be transparent.** Public relations practitioners must trade off controlling the message for credibility. Online publics are savvy and will not tolerate attempts at astroturfing or other forms of fakery. Rather than pitch an online community, offer a valuable information exchange. Always be upfront with who you are and the organization you represent.

4. **Collaborate with online publics.** Rather than simply expressing your message, facilitate a discussion. Allow publics to collaborate with you to find solutions for your organization. Allow publics to create, participate and share ideas for a mutually beneficial relationship.
5. **Learn about Web 2.0.** It is not acceptable to plead ignorance regarding new media. Your publics are using Web 2.0 technology, which means you must understand the various elements of online social media. Read blogs, download podcasts and videos, and join the online communities that are particularly relevant to your industry.
6. **Participate online.** Share comments and position yourself as a thought leader. Add sincere value to the online conversation, rather than only observing.
7. **Be a content creator.** Create your own blogs, podcasts and videos to share online. This is a proactive way to engage in dialog. Make sure your content has a strategic purpose and ties back to your overall public relations goal.
8. **Keep in mind real-time.** Monitor the online environment in real-time. The Internet is always on, so it is important to act immediately. Often the Internet is a source for breaking news in traditional media. Acting while stories are unfolding online is the best way to approach a crisis. Also, realize that once you release content or make a comment online, there is no taking it back.

9. **Establish an organizational Web 2.0 policy.** Allow employees to blog and share other content online. Blogs carrying your organization's name are an extension of your brand, so establish ground rules to keep the content within your organizational standards. Train employees who wish to represent your organization online.
10. **Seek new ways to measure your success.** Establish measures to evaluate the success of your online campaigns. Monitor feedback from online communities and track comments about your organization. While top agencies offer sophisticated tools for tracking online conversations, this can be done on a budget by using online monitoring tools (e.g., CoComment.com).

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Conclusions***

#### Understanding uses and gratifications of opinion leaders of virtual communities

There is a wide range of uses and gratifications for sharing opinions in virtual communities. According to the study participants, these include seeking unlimited information, collaborating with others by either sharing or learning information, connecting with others who have similar interests by eliminating geographic boundaries, artistic expression to a wide audience, facilitating relationships formed offline, documentation and archiving, convenience and efficiency, and no time constraints. These uses and gratifications related directly

to five of the seven unique characteristics of the Internet: a common platform is inherent in the use of the Internet by opinion leaders and is a critical component to Web 2.0, which facilitates the environment for thriving virtual communities; the perfect information concept of sharing information at little cost is a main part of the video creator's uses and gratifications because it enables her to share her artistic expressions with a wider audience that would traditionally be unavailable to her; interactivity and meaningful dialog is represented by the collaboration mentioned by the online hobbyist and the high-tech professional; the Internet's global reach was a key use and gratification for all study participants; the fact that the Internet is always on is a characteristic enjoyed by the high-tech professional who mentioned efficiency and convenience and by the video creator who enjoys being able to access the Internet's global reach in varying time zones. The Internet as a level playing field was not a characteristic of the Internet mentioned as a use and gratification of the online opinion leaders. However, in the case of the video creator, it is likely that she benefits from this characteristic, as she is able to share her content on YouTube just as larger broadcasters would be able to do. The same is likely true for the remaining unique characteristic of the Internet: the Internet facilitates many-to-many communications, instead of one-to-many or one-to-one communication offered by other media. While this was not mentioned specifically by the online opinion leaders, it is inherent in the concept of virtual community exchange and speaks to the collaborative aspect of Web 2.0. More research needs to be done to define general categories for the most

common uses and gratifications, however, the findings in this study offer a springboard for that research.

Documentation is a use and gratification mentioned by the online hobbyist that is unrelated to the seven unique characteristics of the Internet. This offers an example of how the Web has evolved to Web 2.0, as one of the products of Web 2.0 is folksonomy or collaborative tagging of Internet content. While fewer than three articles reviewed in the secondary research mentioned the importance of tagging, this finding underscores its importance in public relations Web 2.0 best practices. For that reason, the researcher added tagging content to the final list of best practices.

This understanding of Web 2.0 uses and gratifications presented in the study findings should be considered by public relations practitioners when planning campaigns to effectively communicate with these online opinion leaders. For example, understanding that online opinion leaders value collaboration, public relations practitioners should be more open with information online and allow users to create solutions based on this information. Rather than protecting organizational information, public relations practitioners should share the information online to obtain and ultimately use the feedback provided by this key public. A good example of this is the recent creation of an Apple iPhone commercial that was posted on YouTube by a student. When Apple became aware of the video, rather than fight this use of its brand in an unauthorized video, it decided to use the advertising concept for its nationwide television advertising campaign. Likewise, the band CSS, whose music was featured in the

student's video was better off enjoying the exposure it received from the publicity, rather than suing the video creator for copyright infringement. Public relations professionals need to be open to the ideas and opinions expressed online through opinion leaders of virtual communities and use this feedback to guide their organizations' communications strategy. This concept of collaboration was on the list of Web 2.0 best practices devised by the secondary research, however, the research findings underscore its importance as a best practice.

Another example of how public relations practitioners can use this information is in understanding how online opinion leaders value the always on aspect of the Internet. Public relations practitioners must understand that these key stakeholders expect to receive information on their own time schedule. This finding also was a concept listed in the Web 2.0 best practices list devised by the secondary research, which calls attention to its importance.

Similarly, the Internet's global reach is valued as a key use and gratification of online opinion leaders. Public relations practitioners must understand that by communicating online, they are likely to communicate with global audiences, whether intended or unintended. Having a multi-cultural approach to online communication is essential given the global nature of the Internet. As this finding was supported by a majority of the opinion leaders interviewed, it will be added to the researchers revised list of Web 2.0 best practices. The final revised list of best practices in public relations for Web 2.0 incorporating all of the conclusions from this study is provided in Appendix F.

### Online opinion leaders influence each other

Regarding how opinion leaders of virtual communities obtain information online, the results overwhelmingly show online opinion leaders influence other online opinion leaders. Most of the online opinion leaders interviewed mentioned they checked out what other bloggers had to say before sharing information and their own opinions online. This result is not surprising, given the nature of opinion leaders and their importance in the adoption of innovations process as early adopters. As expressed in Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*, early adopters often share ideas or innovations with each other, which builds a base of early adopters that bridges to the early majority.

Importantly, understanding that online opinion leaders influence each other is critical in communicating online. This adds value to communicating directly with an online opinion leader because not only are they likely to spread their opinions to others in the community, they are likely to share these opinions with other opinion leaders in the community, which creates an exponential word-of-mouth effect. Understanding this exponential effect, public relations practitioners may find it more valuable allotting media relations time and resources to their industry blog stars.

### Developing online community relations

The researcher did not find any reference in the academic literature regarding the concept of online community relations. The research data suggest that public relations practitioners pay more attention to members of online

communities and consider them an important stakeholder, similar in value to traditional community members. During the interviews, none of the online opinion leaders mentioned having a relationship with organizations online for obtaining information. This is not a surprising finding, given the lack of attention online communities get from the public relations industry. Recalling from the literature review, Edelman and Technorati (2006) reports 48 percent of bloggers have never been contacted by a public relations representative. Very few organizations have an “online community relations specialist” who concentrates on opinion leaders of virtual communities. The findings suggest it is important for organizations to designate the role of overseeing online community relations to a member of the public relations department. This role should be valued as strategically contributing to the organization’s goals, much in the same way as traditional community relations.

Given the primary and secondary research findings in this study, it is clear that in particular, technology and news communities (such as Digg and Engadget) as well as larger virtual communities, such as Facebook and YouTube, are ripe for developing online community relations. Niche online social networks, such as LinkedIn or Etsy.com, also are suitable for developing online community relations. Most industries have their own niche online social networking communities. For example, MyRagan is an online social network for communications professionals, while ParentHacks is an online community for parents. Public relations practitioners must identify the virtual communities most relevant to their organizations and participate in the dialogue.

In regards to ways of obtaining information from organizations, online opinion leaders prefer RSS feeds and SMS messaging. The findings also suggest it is important for online opinion leaders to find information quickly and easily on a Web site. This data reinforces the need for multimedia press releases, one of the best practices identified in the secondary research.

#### The barrier of information overload

The study findings suggest information overload, or “too much information” is a barrier to communication in the Web 2.0 environment. Public relations practitioners must be aware of this barrier and only share pertinent information with online publics. Online opinion leaders find it distracting and difficult to read through fluff and unnecessary information. More importantly, this makes Web site usability key when communicating with online opinion. Online opinion leaders expect to find the information they need quickly. An easy-to-navigate Web site where information can be retrieved efficiently is more effective than newsletters and other commercial contact with online opinion leaders because these stakeholders prefer to search for information and discover it on their own. For this reason, the researcher is adding Web site usability to the list of Web 2.0 best practices. Public relations practitioners must keep in mind that online opinion leaders prefer to actively seek information online rather than passively receive it. Online opinion leaders will expect to find exactly what they need on an

organization's Web site, which makes Web site usability analysis an important part of the communications function.

### ***Limitations***

This study gives insight into the uses and gratifications of a variety of opinion leaders online. However, the study is not generalizable to opinion leaders beyond those who participated in the study. While this limits the scope of the results, it still provides a thorough understanding of various perspectives from prominent online opinion leaders. While not generalizable, the information obtained in this study provides valuable, thorough insight into how public relations practitioners can relate to opinion leaders of virtual communities.

Researcher bias is another limitation of this study. The researcher selected a convenience sample based on her own contacts and predisposition to online opinion leaders. Therefore, the selected sample was not random and does not accurately represent all online opinion leaders. This study was intended to understand perspectives of opinion leaders of virtual communities as exploratory research to gain information on a topic that is not very well understood in public relations literature. Given the intention of the study, the research sample and methodology are adequate.

### ***Recommendations for Further Research***

Unlike the marketing literature, public relations literature has not remained current with trends in online communication. This study uniquely offers a look at Web 2.0 from a stakeholder perspective more appropriate for public relations and begins to update the communications literature with current trends. Therefore,

this study should be used as a springboard for future research in the area on online public relations.

Based on the findings and conclusions of this research, the researcher recommends additional research studies be conducted of opinion leaders of virtual communities to fully understand the uses and gratifications of these key stakeholders. Using the findings from this exploratory study, it is recommended that a more generalizable study method be used in future studies. Learning about this key online stakeholder group will provide solutions for practitioners who aim to contribute strategically to their organizations using new technology.

This researcher turned to the marketing literature as a guide for exploring how Web 2.0 communications can be used in an overall public relations strategy. More research should be conducted with the goal of creating a body of literature for Web 2.0 public relations, which will provide a more thorough basis for further research as the Internet continues to evolve. To be candid, the public relations literature has not done a good job at keeping up with new technology trends and this must be corrected quickly if we are to avoid being completely passed over by the rapid progression of new technology. This is especially important to proponents of public relations who wish for the profession to remain an autonomous strategic management function, rather than being organized as a subset of marketing or diluted as part of an integrated marketing communications. If public relations literature does not keep up with new technology, organizations will be inclined to shift the responsibilities of online communication to their marketing departments where there are employees better

educated and trained to strategize for the unique characteristics of the Internet and other new media.

## **DELIVERABLE**

This study was intended to help communications professionals better understand and utilize Web 2.0 technology. The researcher's deliverable compiles information from the literature review, results, and conclusions of this study to offer best practices in public relations for using Web 2.0 technology. This information is offered in the format of a blog available at [www.WhatMakesUClick.com](http://www.WhatMakesUClick.com).

Using the blog as a platform for the study enabled the researcher to share collected data in a way that is easily accessible by communications professionals. The blog format also enabled two-way, symmetrical communication between the researcher, public relations professionals and online opinion leaders of virtual communities throughout the course of the study. The blog served as a sounding board for the study research and compiled the latest relevant information in Web 2.0, some of which was beyond the scope of this study but worthy of discussion. The results of this study were used to compile a list of best practices, which is offered as a pdf document and blog post on the researcher's Web site. Presentation slides summarizing the study also will be made available for download after the researcher presents her findings onsite at Syracuse University.

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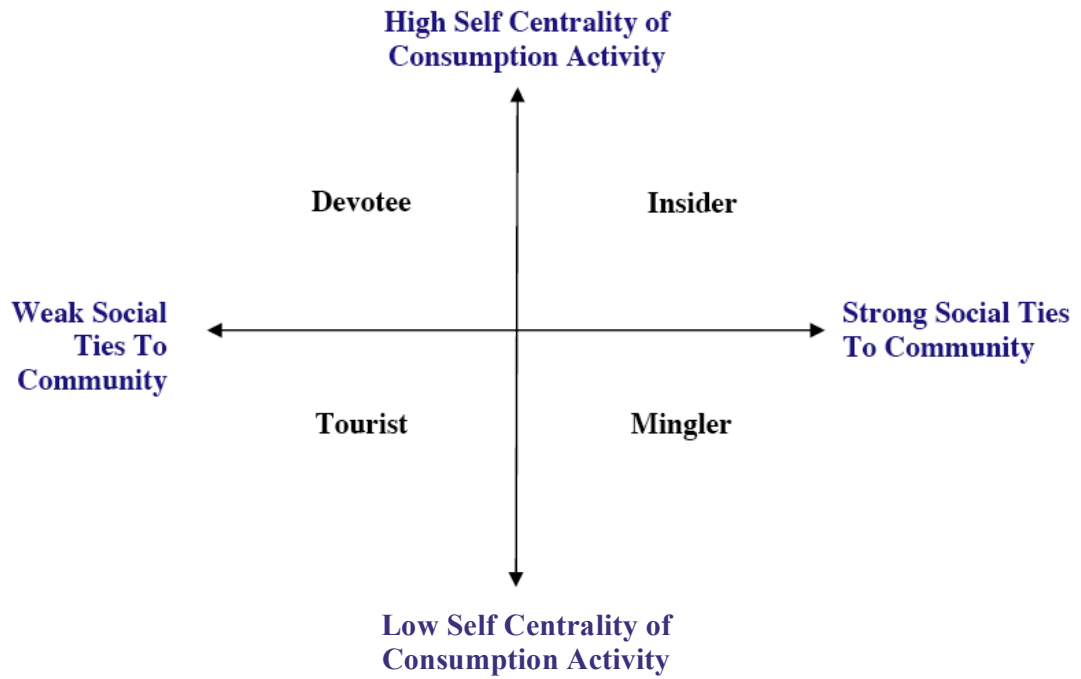
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## APPENDIX B: WEB 2.0 BY EXAMPLE

<b>Web 1.0</b>		<b>Web 2.0</b>
DoubleClick	⇒	Google AdSense
Ofoto	⇒	Flickr
Akamai	⇒	BitTorrent
Mp3.com	⇒	Napster
Britannica Online	⇒	Wikipedia
Personal websites	⇒	Blogging
Evite	⇒	Upcoming.org and EVDB
Domain name speculation	⇒	Search engine optimization
Page views	⇒	Cost per click
Screen scaping	⇒	Web services
Publishing	⇒	Participation
Content management systems	⇒	Wikis
Directories (taxonomy)	⇒	Tagging (folksonomy)
Stickiness	⇒	Syndication

Source: O'Reilly, 2005

## APPENDIX C: MEMBERS OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES



Source: Kozinets, 1999

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## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### *Interview Protocol*

#### *Initial Contact*

Dear [insert online name],

Hello, my name is Michelle Dragas and I am a graduate student at Syracuse University conducting a research study. I am looking to interview highly active participants in online communities who like to share opinions with others within the community. I noticed from your presence on [list Web site or community name] that you would be a good person to interview. Would you be willing to let me ask you a few questions regarding your use of the Internet? **In appreciation of your time, I will send you a \$10 iTunes e-gift certificate.**

I would really appreciate your help. I can promise your responses will be kept anonymous. If you are willing to participate and are over the age of 18, please send me a reply with an e-mail address or other means for sending the questions.

Thanks in advance for your reply,

Michelle Dragas

For more information about me or my research study, you can visit [www.WhatMakesUClick.com](http://www.WhatMakesUClick.com).

### *Interview Instructions and Questions*

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of my research study. In appreciation of your response, I will send you a \$10 iTunes e-gift certificate for completing the interview. You were selected for this research study because *[to be customized based on the recipient's online community participation or referral from a previous respondent]*. As I mentioned previously, this study is part of my master's degree project for Syracuse University. I can assure you complete anonymity in your responses.

Instructions: The following interview questions are aimed to gain a better understanding of your Internet usage. Please take a few minutes to respond to each question by typing an informal paragraph or phrases. When you have completed the interview, e-mail your responses to [WhatMakesUClick@gmail.com](mailto:WhatMakesUClick@gmail.com).

When you respond to the questions please consider the following definition of an online community:

An online community is a Web site or service where you interact with other people with common interests and experiences. In addition to online social networks, such as Facebook, Digg or YouTube, this may include a corporate community or any type of blog with a readership following (including your own personal blog).

- 1) Which online communities do you participate in frequently?
- 2) Which of the communities you listed from question 1 would you consider yourself to most actively participate in as a knowledge, information or opinion sharer? Why?
- 3) What motivates you to share ideas, opinions or information with others online?
- 4) Why do you feel it is important to share this information with others online?
- 5) Where do you obtain the information that you share with others in your online community/ies?
- 6) What types of online sources do you trust for information?
- 7) Why do you trust these online sources?
- 8) What do you like most about participating in online communities?
- 9) What are some of the obstacles you face when participating as a member of an online community?
- 10) What triggers you to be interested enough in a topic to discuss it online?
- 11) Are there any organizations (businesses, nonprofits or otherwise) that you relate with online and seek information from?
- 12) If so, what kinds of information do you prefer to receive from these organizations and in what format would you prefer to receive it?
- 13) Is there information that you would prefer to get online that you are not receiving? If so, how could this be remedied?
- 14) Lastly, do you know of another person who would be a good interview participant for my study? Again, I am looking to interview people who are highly active and engaged within any online community. These people should not only have a considerable number of friends or connections within the community but also be the kind of person who likes to post and share information or content with others. If you know of any person(s) who I could interview, please provide me

with their contact information (which will be used solely for the purposes of setting up the interview).

Again, thank you very much for your participation in my research study. **Please e-mail your responses to [WhatMakesUClick@gmail.com](mailto:WhatMakesUClick@gmail.com)**. I really appreciate your time. Feel free to leave me any additional comments regarding your responses to these questions. If you are interested, the findings of this study eventually will be posted on [www.WhatMakesUClick.com](http://www.WhatMakesUClick.com).

Sincerely,  
Michelle Rogerson Dragas

## APPENDIX F: BEST PRACTICES FOR WEB 2.0 PUBLIC RELATIONS

Based on the conclusions drawn from the primary and secondary research conducted in this study, the following best practices are recommended. This list has been modified from the list presented in the Results section of this paper to incorporate conclusions drawn from interviewing opinion leaders of virtual communities. Three new best practices were added to the list: Evaluate your Web site's usability, Make your content easy to tag, and the Internet has no boundaries. In addition, the researcher consolidated two best practices from the previous list (Participate online and Be a content creator) because the research indicates participation involves both sharing and receiving information. Because each of these best practices was supported considerably by the primary and secondary research, the researcher concludes they are of equal importance, and therefore are listed in no particular order.

- **Monitor online conversations.** Find out what is being said about you online. Technorati and Google searches are a good place to start. Identify your industry's "blog stars" and subscribe to their RSS feeds. Make sure to extend your monitoring to videos, podcasts and online community forums as well.
- **Collaborate with online publics.** Rather than simply expressing your message, facilitate a discussion. Allow publics to collaborate with you to find solutions for your organization. Allow publics to create, participate, and share ideas for a mutually beneficial relationship.
- **Evaluate your Web site's usability.** An easy-to-navigate Web site where information can be retrieved quickly is more effective than e-newsletters because online opinion leaders prefer to seek out specific information rather than receive general information. Regular usability analysis of your organization's Web site will ensure online publics find exactly what they need.
- **Offer multimedia press releases.** Instead of issuing press releases targeting traditional media, create online press releases that incorporate video, tagging, links, images and comments. Make sure to include all of your information online because bloggers are not going to call you for additional details. Allow interested stakeholders to subscribe to your press releases via RSS.
- **Be transparent.** Public relations practitioners must trade off controlling the message for credibility. Online publics are savvy and will not tolerate attempts at astroturfing or other forms of fakery. Rather than pitch an online community, offer a valuable information exchange. Always be upfront with who you are and the organization you represent.
- **Learn about Web 2.0.** It is not acceptable to plead ignorance regarding new media. Your publics are using Web 2.0 technology, which means you must understand the various elements of online social media. Read

blogs, download podcasts and videos and join the online communities that are particularly relevant to your industry.

- **Participate online and be a content creator.** Share comments and position yourself as a thought leader. Add sincere value to the online conversation, rather than only observing. Create your own blogs, podcasts, and videos to share online. This is a proactive way to engage in dialog. Make sure your content has a strategic purpose and ties back to your overall public relations goal.
- **Make your content easy to tag.** Help visitors to your site categorize the content they find interesting or useful. Provide links to popular tagging services, such as del.icio.us. This will help online publics document and retrieve your information for continued use.
- **Keep in mind real-time.** Monitor the online environment in real-time. The Internet is always on, so it is important to act immediately. Often the Internet is a source for breaking news in traditional media. Acting while stories are unfolding online is the best way to approach a crisis. Also, realize that once you release content or make a comment online, there is no taking it back.
- **The Internet has no boundaries.** Remember that online you are communicating with a global audience. Given the global nature of the Internet, it is essential to have a multi-cultural approach to online communication. Be prepared to respond to concerns that are expressed from international publics and value their feedback. Offer your Web content in multiple languages. If you represent a global organization, identify the popular blogs, podcasts and online social networks for those countries.
- **Establish an organizational Web 2.0 policy.** Allow employees to blog and share other content online. Blogs carrying your organization's name are an extension of your brand, so establish ground rules to keep the content within your organizational standards. Train employees who wish to represent your organization online.
- **Seek new ways to measure your success.** Establish measures to evaluate the success of your online campaigns. Monitor feedback from online communities and track comments about your organization. While top agencies offer sophisticated tools for tracking online conversations, this can be done on a budget by using online monitoring tools (e.g., CoComment.com).