

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION ON FACEBOOK:  
A MULTI-METHOD APPROACH TO CORPORATE USE AND STAKEHOLDER  
PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Title**

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and Stakeholder Perceptions of Social Media

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## ABSTRACT

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This study looked at how corporations are currently using Facebook and what stakeholders' perceptions are of current corporate Facebook usage. A content analysis of nine corporate profile pages was conducted. Pages were coded for the presence or absence of relational development strategies under the categories of information dissemination, disclosure and involvement. A survey was also distributed to the fans of the nine corporate profiles in order to gain the fan perspective. Results showed that while corporations include disclosure and information dissemination strategies, they rarely use involvement strategies. This lack of interactivity is inconsistent with the fan perspective of corporate profiles, where fans called for more interaction and use of all relational development strategies on the corporate profile.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

During the 2009 holiday season retailers were gearing up for Christmas shoppers. In order to draw in customers, one Mall of America retailer hired someone to blog, send out Twitter tweets and keep the store's Facebook page up-to-date (Crosby, 2009). On Black Friday, one customer was having issues with a new GPS system. Within five minutes of sending a Twitter message to Best Buy, she had heard from two employees with advice on how to rectify the situation (Rosenbloom & Cullotta, 2009).

The current state of social media allows businesses to interact online with their customers in a matter of minutes. Companies are taking increased initiatives with social media – 65 percent of retailers reported focusing on social network advertisements and widgets in their marketing campaigns (Grannis & Davis, 2008). 47 percent of retailers planned to increase their social media use while 60 percent of consumers planned to use social media to locate deals at numerous stores (Crosby, 2009).

More and more, consumers and businesses are going online. This trend reflects the shift into the digital age, a world where most information is available in digital form instead of print (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). In 2000, less than half (46%) of Americans went online. Just 10 years later, over 70% of Americans currently use the World Wide Web (Fox & Jones, 2009).

As Internet technologies develop, there has been a shift in corporate Web presence from a static model to a more interactive model. Applications like social networking sites (SNSs) have aided this shift. Sites like Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace are having a global impact. Facebook currently boasts over 400 million users and has been translated into more than 50 languages (Facebook, 2009a). Originally created for college students,

Facebook has now become the global social networking leader, with approximately half of the sites' users logging on daily (Facebook, 2009a). An estimated 5 billion minutes is spent on Facebook each day (Comscore, 2008).

SNSs have changed corporate communication, especially with the addition of various businesses and organizations to their membership base. In 2006, for instance, Facebook opened its registration to organizations and more than 4,000 organizations joined (Associated Press, 2006). Organizations have used these sites to advertise, promote events, launch products and more. The Commission of Public Relations Education (2006) highlighted the emerging field of new media technologies as a key area for public relations education. These sites have been heralded as excellent tools for recruitment, marketing research and lead generation (Dickie, 2005). Companies have even hired social media specialists who monitor SNSs and respond to customer thoughts and comments (Holson, 2009).

For the current project, it is important to distinguish between sites like SNSs and the more traditional Web sites. Internet applications are generally divided into two categories: Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 (Hanson, Thackeray, Bames, Neiger, & McIntyre, 2008). Early Internet applications were known as Web 1.0, which refers to static Web sites with read-only pages that are controlled by a Web developer. As technology has progressed, sites and applications have become more interactive. These newer, more interactive Internet technologies are known as Web 2.0. Sites are updated regularly with "user-generated information so that they include the collective intelligence of all contributors, not just one site developer" (Hanson et al., 2008, p. 159). Web 2.0 applications include blogs, wikis and SNSs.



While SNSs continue to grow, little is known about corporate use of social media. Previous research on SNSs has focused on impressions, friendship, online/offline connections, and privacy issues (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Technology is constantly changing, making many technology publications out-of-date within a short time after publication. Research on social media should begin to look at how corporations are using sites like Facebook and Twitter, especially in the context of the stakeholder-organization relationship.

With the continued growth of SNSs, a variety of stakeholder groups are establishing an online presence. These stakeholders may have an influence on organizational practices. Stakeholders are broadly defined as any group that has an interest, right, or claim within an organization and therefore can be affected by that organization (Clarkson, 1995). The salience of these stakeholder groups will have an impact on how organizations view and interact with them online. For this reason, stakeholder theory served as a background for this study.

Stakeholder theory is based on the principal of “who or what really counts” (Freeman, 1994; Huse & Rindova, 2001). It highlights the need for businesses to consider their various stakeholders in the context of the organization. Defining who a stakeholder is and what stakeholder groups are given priority is essential to an organization’s survival and success (Clarkson, 1995). SNSs play a unique role in the application of this theory, as they are sites that may involve multiple stakeholder groups, from customers to groups both for and against the organization.

Much work on stakeholder theory utilizes a normative approach to the theory, which looks at how organizations *should* deal with their various stakeholders. However,

given the lack of research on corporate use of SNSs, this paper used a descriptive approach to corporate use of SNSs in the context of stakeholder theory. A descriptive approach looks at what does happen (Steurer, 2006). Further, this study utilized the stakeholder perspective of stakeholder theory. The stakeholder perspective focuses on what stakeholders' claims are and how they try to achieve these claims (Steurer, 2006).

The use of this perspective allowed us to get an overall picture of what is currently being done in corporate social media. The use of SNSs like Facebook have led to a participatory media culture where "rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). This study addresses both what participants want to see on these sites as well as what corporations are currently including on their SNSs. The study also uses a normative element by asking what customers want to see happen on corporate SNSs.

Past research has shown that communication professionals have often been some of the slowest to adopt Internet technologies into their daily communication practices (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Moore, 1995). Today, corporate communication faces a similar challenge with new Internet features like SNSs. While there are potential benefits to organizations, research has shown that many are missing out on the unique qualities SNSs have to offer (Kang & Norton, 2006; Park & Reber, 2008; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

SNSs have the possibility to influence the field of corporate communication. This study looks at corporate Facebook usage using multiple methods. A content analysis looked at what corporations are currently doing on Facebook while surveys of Facebook

corporate fans helped increase understanding of what Facebook users look for on these sites.

## CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social media has grown in popularity in recent years. Donath (2008) argues that most people connect online and stay updated through their friends' status updates. SNSs like Facebook and Twitter have become an everyday habit for many computer users.

Recently, it has also become an important communication tool for corporations as well. The web has become an important corporate communication tool that has the ability to greatly influence public awareness of an organization. From the creation of a profile to the development of a friend network, SNSs are part of understanding the process of computer-mediated communication (CMC). As more people turn to the Internet for their information needs, corporate communication specialists are trying to utilize SNSs as a communication mechanism. SNSs allow companies to build relationships with their stakeholders.

### *Stakeholder Theory*

Stakeholder theory grew as a response to the "view that the corporation is a voluntary association of shareholders who own the enterprise and are the only members who really count" (Selznick, 1996, p. 271). While it has been around for over 50 years (Huse & Rindova, 2001), Freeman's (1984) book catapulted stakeholder theory into importance in management literature (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Huse & Rindova, 2001).

Stakeholders are defined as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Similarly, Clarkson (1995) suggested that stakeholders are any group that has an interest, right, or claim within an organization and therefore can be affected by that organization. In other

words, stakeholder theory is centered on “The Principal of Who or What Really Counts” (Freeman, 1994; Huse & Rindova, 2001).

Stakeholder theory can be sorted into three perspectives: corporate, stakeholder and conceptual (Steuer, 2006). Corporate perspective looks at how the corporation deals with stakeholders, stakeholder perspective centers on how stakeholders affect corporations, and the conceptual perspective focuses on particular concepts in relation to the organization-stakeholder relationship. This project focused primarily on the stakeholder perspective of the theory.

Much of the research on stakeholder theory is dominated by the corporate perspective (Steuer, 2006). Here, the stakeholder relationship is viewed as a management issue, with emphasis on how corporations handle various stakeholders (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, Wicks, & Parmar, 2004; Steuer, 2006). Corporate perspective, in other words, is centered on how the corporation views and reacts to its stakeholders. Corporate social media use from a corporate perspective may look at why corporations chose to build a presence on SNSs, how corporations maintain their SNSs and what policies and methods they use to guide their SNSs.

In a stakeholder perspective of the theory, research concentrates on the stakeholder’s views, claims and behaviors (Steurer, 2006). Studies look at legitimacy, status, stakeholder typology, and even the strategies stakeholders use to accomplish their claims (Dawkins & Lewis, 2003; Huse & Rindova, 2001; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Corporate social media use from a stakeholder perspective may look at how stakeholders use SNSs, why they chose to become fans of a particular site and how they communicate with corporations to ensure that their needs are being met.

While much literature on stakeholder theory exists, there is little agreement on what defines a stakeholder. Freeman's (1984) definition, while cited extensively, is incredibly broad in nature, leaving an array of possibilities for whom or what constitutes a stakeholder (Agle, Mitchell, & Sonnenfeld, 1999; Huse & Rindova, 2001; Mitchell et al., 1997). It is important to define what a stakeholder is, as this helps dictate a company's responsibilities to its various stakeholders. Mitchell et al. (1997) refer to this as stakeholder salience, or "the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims" (p. 854). Clarkson (1995) cites two types of stakeholders: primary and secondary stakeholders. These two types correspond with Mitchell et al.'s (1997) descriptions of the narrow and broad views of stakeholders.

A narrow definition of stakeholders is "based on the practical reality of limited resources, limited time and attention, and limited patience of managers for dealing with external constraints" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 857). These stakeholders are those who have some risk placed in their relationship with the firm (Clarkson, 1995). Often these stakeholders include shareholders, investors, employees, customers, and suppliers (Clarkson, 1995). In general, the narrow view of stakeholders looks at groups in terms of economic interest (Clarkson, 1995; Freeman & Reed, 1983; Mitchell et al., 1997), though some scholars have focused on groups who have moral claims (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1994).

The broad view of stakeholders emphasizes that "companies can indeed be vitally affected by, or they can vitally affect, almost anyone" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 857). This view encourages "a company's recognition of broad responsibilities, that it is part of society with consequent obligations, and that it should be concerned with more than just

profit” (Dawkins & Lewis, 2003, p. 188). Clarkson (1995) suggests that while these stakeholders may not be necessary to an organization’s day-to-day tasks, secondary stakeholders have the ability to seriously hurt or help an organization. This group can include political groups, unions, competitors and the community at large.

Another important criterion to consider when defining stakeholders is whether or not a relationship actually exists between the stakeholder and the organization. Mitchell et al. (1997) argue that the potential relationship can be just as pertinent as the actual relationship. Further, they argue that stakeholder theory “must somehow account for latent stakeholders if it is to be both comprehensive and useful, because such identification can, at a minimum, help organizations avoid problems and perhaps even enhance effectiveness” (p. 859). It is important to consider these potential stakeholders, especially in an increasingly digital age.

Technological advancements have changed the way corporations communicate with their stakeholders. “In the past our relationship could be threatened by a concrete campaign over a long period. Now it can be threatened by a teenager in his bedroom with a laptop” (Dawkins & Lewis, 2003, p. 185). As the use of Internet technologies, specifically social media, increase, corporations must decide what their responsibilities are toward a variety of stakeholder groups and how they will manage these responsibilities.

This paper argues for a stakeholder approach to corporate social media usage. A stakeholder approach is “intended to broaden management’s vision of its roles and responsibilities beyond the profit maximization function to include interests and claims of non-stockholding groups” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 855). Dawkins and Lewis (2003) argue for the “increasing prominence of corporate responsibility for a wide range of stakeholders

from consumers and employees to legislators and investors” (p. 185). Further, Mitchell et al. (1997) highlight that power alone cannot help constitute stakeholder salience. “There remain stakeholders who do not have power, but who nevertheless matter to firms and managers” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 864). One potential group are fans of corporate SNSs.

Given that little is known about corporate social media usage, this paper utilizes a descriptive view of stakeholder theory, or what is actually happening in the organization-stakeholder relationship. Much of past stakeholder theory work has focused on the normative approach, or what *should* happen (Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001; Steurer, 2006). Very little descriptive research exists on stakeholder theory (Berman, Wicks, Kotha, & Jones, 1999; Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001; Steurer, 2006). By coupling this descriptive look at stakeholder theory with the stakeholder perspective, we will begin to get an overall picture of how corporations are utilizing social media and how stakeholders view this usage.

### *The Internet's Role in Corporate Communication*

Past research has called for a re-examination of how individuals use different communication media in “the advent of an entire array of new electronic media” (Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987, p. 530). It is important to recognize that “media occurs within a web of social relationships” and “has important implications on new information technology” (Fulk et al., 1987, p. 546). This call is still relevant as new Internet technologies are introduced.

SNSs are unique in their interactive, relational nature. While research on organizations' use of SNSs to build relationships may be limited due to the sites' recent popularity, two competing bodies of literature exist regarding CMC's relational appeal.



Early researchers believed CMC to be impersonal and distant (Soukup, 2000). Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984) believed that because the CMC setting did not allow users to send traditional relational cues such as eye contact, significant levels of intimacy could not be reached through the medium. Further, theories such as media richness and social presence theory favor face-to-face interactions as opposed to mediated environments (Dennis & Kinney, 1998; Ramirez & Zhang, 2007).

Later research found CMC to be a more interpersonal and relational medium. Walther (1992) argued that if a relationship was given enough time to develop, participants could adjust to CMC's communicative limitations. CMC could be viewed as a "hyperpersonal" medium where users were able to adjust different cues as a way to increase intimacy (Walther, 1996). In other words, individuals could learn to replace certain cues that were missing (e.g., nonverbal behavior) with other cues (e.g., emoticons). Studies show that online interactions can enhance interpersonal relationships and make them stronger (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Ji & Lieber, 2008). CMC users often adapt both mentally and socially in order to create a set of norms to govern behavior in their new environment (Soukup, 2000). The use of technology to build relationships is even more important through the use of corporate SNSs, where corporations and fans construct relationships online without ever meeting face-to-face.

Research has shown that the Internet can be a very effective corporate communication tool (Coates, 1991; Coombs, 1998; Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 2000; Major, 1995). Messages are designed from an organization's point of view, allowing them to set their own agendas rather than following "the dictates of gatekeepers in print and electronic journalism" (Esrock & Leichty, 1998, p. 306). Further, practitioners can respond in a direct

and timely fashion to situations (Major, 1995). Esrock and Leichty (2000) argue that the Internet's benefits move beyond just the business realm:

The World Wide Web is potentially more than just a platform for selling to customers. In theory, the developing medium should enable an organization to simultaneously tailor messages to address the concerns and interests of a diverse set of people. A Web site can have multiple sections, each targeted to a different audience. (p. 328)

Research has credited the Internet with an increase in open organizational communication. Coates (1991) argues that there is no such thing as an organizational secret in the digital age. Rather, organizations must be transparent:

Business communication ... must face reality early; it must embrace the public generously and openly, and it must deal with the inevitable sides of its behavior and actions with refreshing openness rather than the traditional denial couched in organizational blatherskite" (p. 20).

This applies just as much to what is present as to what is missing from the Web. "The presences or absences of e-mail links and other feedback devices on a corporate Web site can be read as a statement of the kind of communication relationships the corporation prefers to have with its various publics" (Esrock & Leichty, 2000, p. 331).

Past research has also detailed the Internet's ability to create dialogue between an organization and its publics (Coates, 1991; Coombs, 1998; Lapham, 1996; Weber, 1996). The Internet allows organizations to have "direct access to, and interaction with," their publics (Esrock & Leichty, 1998). Publics also expect more. Weber (1996) found that those publics who utilized the Internet tended to be more active, continually engaged in the

information seeking process, and were looking for customized, one-on-one messages rather than a persuasive sell. More recent research has also suggested that the Internet is a key medium to build relationships with publics (Jo & Kim, 2003; Park & Reber, 2008).

### *The Social Networking Phenomenon*

SNSs attract millions of users, most of whom visit the sites on a daily basis. On Facebook, over half of the site's 400 million users log on daily (Facebook, 2009a). In just one year, MySpace gained over 14 million visitors worldwide (Comscore, 2007). Donath (2008) and Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Pérez (2009) argue that individuals stay in touch through instant messaging and SNS status updates rather than meeting face-to-face.

Most SNSs share a set of common characteristics, though some features vary. As such, they can be defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). The definition is purposely left broad in order to encompass the variety of features various SNSs have to offer.

SNSs allow organizations to access a diverse group of individuals in a short amount of time. The majority of white, African Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans young adults (ages 18-29) prefer using Facebook to any other SNS, while 18-29 year old Hispanic Americans often prefer to use MySpace (Hargittai, 2008). Women outnumber men on SNSs, with 50% of women and 42% of men reporting having had a SNS profile at some point (Taylor, 2009).

SNSs also affect different age groups. Only three percent of 18-24 year olds have reported that they do not use social media (Miller, 2009). While these sites are popular with teens and young adults, the rate of adult SNS users is growing rapidly. One third of American adult Internet users are members of a SNS, a number which has quadrupled in the past three years (Lenhart, 2009a). In the last year alone, SNS usage between 35-54 year olds rose over 60 percent (Miller, 2009). The average age of a Twitter user is 31 years old, while the average age of a Facebook user is 26 years (Lenhart, 2009b).

### *History of SNSs*

Since their inception, SNSs like MySpace and Facebook have attracted millions of users (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Yet these more popular SNSs have grown out of a rich history of SNSs and other Internet sites. SNSs as they are today have been influenced by dating sites, AIM buddy lists and sites like Classmates.com, which allowed people to connect with their high school and college classmates. SNSs have been used for work-related connections (LinkedIn.com), romantic relationships (Friendster), connection of shared interests (MySpace) or even specific populations (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). These original sites have contributed to the widespread presence and common functions of SNSs today.

Based on boyd and Ellison's (2008)'s definition of SNSs, SixDegrees.com was the first SNS. Launched in 1997, SixDegrees.com instructed users to create profiles, list their friends and search among those friends for new friends. SixDegrees was promoted as a tool to help connect with and send messages to one's friends. The site closed in 2000, due to the fact that its founders were unable to sustain it as a legitimate business (boyd & Ellison,

2008). Another contributing factor was the belief that the site was “simply ahead of its time”:

While people were already flocking to the Internet, most did not have extended networks of friends who were online. Early adopters complained that there was little to do after accepting Friend requests, and most users were not interested in meeting strangers. (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 214)

While several smaller sites contributed to the development of SNSs, three key SNSs are credited with shaping the future of SNSs: Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Tong, van der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008).

*Friendster.* Friendster was created in 2004 as a way to help friends of friends meet, primarily for romantic purposes. As a competitor to other online dating sites, Friendster was based on the assumption that friends of friends could be better romantic partners than complete strangers (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The site quickly gained popularity with special interest groups such as bloggers and gay men (boyd, 2004) as well as through press coverage, growing to over 300,000 members (O’Shea, 2003).

As Friendster grew, the company began to restrict the actions of its users. Originally, Friendster allowed users to view other profiles within four degrees of their own. In order to view more profiles, users began to add acquaintances and strangers to their accounts in an attempt to use the ‘most popular’ feature, an application which listed those on Friendster with the most acquaintances and friends. Friendster users also began to create fake profiles of famous characters and famous people. The company banished these fake profiles and the ‘most popular’ feature, causing a stir among users:

The active deletion of Fakesters (and genuine users who chose non-realistic photos) signaled to some that the company did not share users' interests. Many early adopters left because of the combination of technical difficulties, social collisions and a rupture of trust between users and the site. (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 216)

*MySpace.* Capitalizing on Friendsters' alienation of its fans, MySpace launched in 2003 as a competing SNS (boyd & Ellison, 2008). One group that quickly migrated to MySpace was indie-rock bands. While bands were not the sites' intended users, the mass band membership encouraged other to join the site, catapulting its membership beyond former Friendsters. MySpace also added new user-generated features and allowed users to personalize their pages (boyd & Ellison, 2008).

In 2004, teenagers began to join MySpace in droves (boyd & Ellison, 2008). MySpace's popularity continued to grow as teenage users invited their friends to join. In just one year (2007), MySpace gained more than 14 million users (Comscore, 2007). The site catered specifically to three major groups: musicians, teenagers, and the post-college crowd (boyd & Ellison, 2008). However, these groups rarely interacted with one another, except through bands on the site.

*Facebook.* Facebook began as a SNS supported by specific niche networks, namely college students (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Facebook was created in 2004 by four Harvard students as a site for Harvard students, though it eventually expanded to other universities and colleges. Within a year, the site had attracted a million users. In 2005, the site's registration was opened to high school networks and international school networks. The following year, Facebook executives added work networks. Four months later, registration

was expanded so anyone could join. Today Facebook boasts more than 400 million active users (Facebook, 2009c) and is considered that global SNS leader (Comscore, 2008).

*SNS Features.* The first step on a SNS is to create a profile. This is the main feature on the site and is more or less visible to others, depending on the user's privacy settings. A profile is often formed based on an individual's answers to a variety of questions. Questions include demographics, interests, favorite things, activities and an "about me" section. Most sites will also encourage users to upload photos. Through the profile, an individual gives "an online textual performance of self" where they create an impression based on the information they give" (Liu, 2008, p. 253). These profiles are then made visible based on the site's regulations and the user's preferences (boyd & Ellison, 2008).

The amount of information a person discloses is up to them. Lange (2008) cites two common types of disclosure present on SNSs: publicly private and privately public. When a person discloses information which is "publicly private," they reveal personal information in a public way. Meanwhile, other users may choose to be "privately public." Individuals in this category make connections with a large amount of people while refusing to divulge any personal information about themselves.

Once a profile has been created, users may begin to establish a network based on others they know on the site. This linking of profiles allows users to articulate their own social networks. The visibilities of friendships on profiles are "tangible mechanisms that reflect existing social networks" (Lange, 2008, p. 362). On SNSs, users gain information on potential friends based on their profiles. For example, on MySpace, only friends are allowed to comment on one another's pages and view otherwise private profiles (Donath,

2008). By browsing through pictures, profile information, and wall posts, a visitor to a SNS can reduce their uncertainty about another individual (Westerman, 2008).

On Facebook, users develop their own social networks by adding others as friends to their profile. On average, Facebook users have 130 friends (Facebook, 2009a). A friend can only be added if a request is sent and the recipient agrees to “friend” the sender. Once a person accepts the friend request, individuals are then able to communicate with each other through Facebook chat as well as through posts on an individual’s “wall.” Friends of any person on Facebook may become visible, making their social networks open.

Facebook also suggests friends for users based on overlaps in their network of current friends. This can lead to a virtual snowball effect, enlarging an individual’s social network through common friends (Tong et al., 2008). Research shows that SNS friends are most often pre-existing relationships. Facebook, for instance, is used to preserve relationships which already exist offline rather than meeting new people online (Ellison et al., 2007; Hargittai, 2008).

“Friendship” on SNSs can be difficult to define since it does not always mean the same thing online as it does in person. Instead of only pertaining to close, meaningful relationships, SNS friends are added for a variety of reasons. People may choose friends based on the impression it gives others (Donath & boyd, 2004). Some people add friends arbitrarily while others only add those with whom they have a personal relationship (boyd, 2006).

Defining friendship on SNSs is important, especially with the addition of corporate social networking. Understanding how users friend one another may give insight into how users go about fanning corporations. boyd (2006) argues that friends on SNSs should be



classified differently from friends in an offline setting. Not all scholars agree. Beer (2008) asserts that as SNSs move into mainstream culture, the everyday sense of the term friend is often the same thing as a friend on SNS. He argues that to separate the terms would be to take away the “recursive nature” of the friendship process on SNS:

So we cannot think of friendship on SNSs as entirely different and disconnected from our actual friends and notions of friendship, particularly as young people grow up and are informed by the connections they make on SNSs ... We can imagine this as a recursive process where SNSs come to challenge and possibly even mutate understandings of friendship. It is conceivable then that understandings and value of friendship may be altered by engagements with SNSs. (p. 520)

No matter how it is defined, the friend network is a key component of SNSs. Users describe themselves using a profile, yet there is no way of knowing if this information is truthful or not. The links to other members, however, gives credit to an individual’s profile (Donath, 2008). It is as if the friends of users are saying they believe the statements about the individual are true, giving credence to who the person says they are. Research has shown that friendship carries both strong and weak ties on SNSs (boyd, 2006; Donath, 2008; Ellison et. al, 2007). Strong ties include those with close, personal relationships, those who one could rely upon in case of an emergency and those which require a large time commitment and a large amount of support. Weak networks are more distant and do not require as much responsibility or time (Donath, 2008).

Further, the friend network gives social context. Berger (1979) argued that an important step in the spread of knowledge was an awareness of one’s own behavior as well

as other's behaviors. On SNSs, this is seen in the friend network, which allows others to view connections as well as information about an individual. Both popular and unpopular Facebook users mention friends as the measurement of popularity on the site (Zywica & Danowski, 2008). Friends on SNSs often serve as "identity markers for the profile owner" (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 220). People may choose friends based on how they fit into a desirable self-presentation (Westerman, 2008). For instance, the size of a friend network may make an impression on site visitors. SNSs encourage users to amass the largest network (boyd, 2006). Tong et al. (2008) also found a significant relationship between the number of Facebook friends and social attractiveness. A person with fewer friends was rated less socially attractive than a person with a higher number of friends on the site.

#### *Corporate use of SNSs*

Aside from the various features of SNSs, there are also several aspects which make them ideal for corporate use. Originally for students only, in 2006 Facebook opened its doors to everyone (Facebook, 2006). Many SNSs have done the same, allowing businesses and non-profits to build their own profiles and advertise on the sites.

This open membership led to a shift in how SNSs are used. No longer are SNSs simply personal profiles. Rather, they are viewed as "commercial spaces" (Beer, 2008, p. 523). Businesses are putting significant time and effort into developing their own Facebook profiles (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The sites are becoming essential business tools for corporations. Facebook, for instance, recently began using "social ads." Guided by information on an individual's profile, the site creates a set of personalized ads, which associate with the user's interests and connections (Beer, 2008; Rosmarin, 2007).

The very act of having a profile on a SNS can be beneficial to a company. boyd (2006) found that a top reason for friendship on the sites is to show that the user is a fan of an organization or person. Further, collecting friends is valuable for a company. Networking is the purpose of many SNSs (Donath & boyd, 2004), allowing companies to connect with large numbers of people at one time. This audience also guides what information is placed on a site. When a corporation knows that there's an audience, they are much more likely to put valuable and helpful information on their site (boyd, 2006).

SNSs work to create dialogue through interaction. The enhancement of interactive qualities on organizational Web sites (Web 1.0 to Web 2.0) has led to more open communication and better relationships with publics (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Jo & Kim, 2003; Park & Reber, 2008). The addition of SNSs to organizational Web presence can further contribute to organizational interactivity online. The ability of an organization to understand and utilize SNSs' dialogical capacity is essential in developing mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.

In order to understand the nature of SNSs, it is important to distinguish SNSs as networked publics. boyd (2007) defines networked publics as "the spaces and audiences that are bound together through technological networks" (p. 8). Networked publics are part of mediated publics. The network arbitrates the interactions between SNS members (boyd, 2007). They are connected through a network, which allows them to communicate with one another through the social network. This can include interaction between fans or fans and organizations.

Networked publics differ from mediated and unmediated publics. Unmediated environments are constrained by the circumstances surrounding the situation. "Access to

visual and auditory information is limited to physics; walls and other obstacles further restrain visibility,” (boyd, 2007, p. 8). Mediated environments allow events to be replicated rather than be constrained by circumstances. No action is immune from public scrutiny (Coates, 1991). boyd (2007) contends that media change the scale of the public. “Rather than considering all of the people who *did* witness me visually, I must all consider all of the people who *might* witness a reproduction” (p. 8).

There are three properties of mediated technologies that can be applied to SNSs: persistence, replicability and invisible audiences (boyd, 2007). Persistence refers to the extended length of time communication exists in a mediated context. Wall posts are archived for several months at a time on SNSs like Facebook, allowing anyone to review the information. Replicability alludes to the duplication power of information accessed through the media, “such that there is no way to distinguish the original from the copy” (boyd, 2007, p. 9). Often, organizations can upload videos or press releases, which can be taken and posted on other people’s walls. Finally, invisible audiences are those who view the content, a number which is nearly impossible to determine when the information is released into a mediated environment. Because companies often have open profiles, anyone can search and view the information on their pages.

Networked publics add an additional property to mediated contexts: searchability. Searchability refers to the ability of media users to find information about any subject at any given time (boyd, 2007). On Facebook, the search engine enables users to search for a person’s profile or a company’s page.

While these four properties are not unique to SNSs, they are important in understanding SNSs as mediated, networked publics. Networked publics magnify all four

properties (boyd, 2007). “While broadcast media take advantage of persistence, it is not as if anyone could go to the television and watch my fall whenever they wish; but if my fall is uploaded to YouTube or MySpace Video, this is possible” (boyd, 2007, p. 9). These properties are essential for communication professionals to understand. When an incident happens, it is no longer left to only those who witnessed the actual event. Now, businesses must deal with all potential angles of communication in confronting and resolving issues which arise.

Understanding customers’ information seeking strategies are essential in determining how companies can best focus their SNS to meet fan needs. Information seeking via CMC follows three assumptions unique to the medium (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002). First, information seeking is goal-driven. Both fans and non-fans visit an organization’s SNS profile in order to fulfill a goal or objective. Second, consumers may use multiple strategies in the information seeking process. Fans of a corporate Facebook profile may post a question on the corporate wall, read about the organization on the info tab or click on the link to the organization’s Web site. Third, CMC users access information in new and creative ways that differ from the traditional face-to-face encounter. A SNS is just one example of this.

There are four different types of information seeking strategies that can be applied to SNSs (Ramirez et al., 2002; Ruble, 2007). Interactive strategies involve direct communication with the other party (Berger, 1979). A SNS user may post a question on a company’s wall, thereby allowing a company representative to respond. H&R Block uses Twitter as a response mechanism for service complaints and Southwest Airlines has used the site to address concerns about aircraft safety (Stewart, 2008). Active strategies involve

eliciting information directly from anyone other than the target individual (Berger, 1979). This occurs when users ask friends about organizations on their social networking profiles. Passive information seeking involves observation of an individual that is unobtrusive (Berger, 1979). Here, a Facebook user reads through an organization's profile in order to gain more information without actually making direct commentary to the profile owner.

Finally, extraction was developed as a strategy unique to CMC (Ruble, 2007). Ramirez et al. (2002) define extraction as the use of search engines to sort through large amounts of information about an individual through electronic search engines and databases. Users can use Facebook's search engine to search for various industries like "food and beverage" or "automotive" in order to find a particular page. Corporate Facebook users can also use extraction techniques. Several companies have hired workers to monitor SNSs. Southwest Airlines, for instance, hires emerging media specialists to search through information on SNSs for mentions of their company (Holson, 2009).

Information-seeking dimensions are important to consider when studying SNSs. The sharing of information with multiple publics can lead to the creation of long-term relationships between an organization and those publics (Park & Reber, 2008). Information dissemination is also essential when placing a company in the context of community. Research has also found open communication by the organization to be essential. The role an organization plays in the community has led to publics' increased interest in that specific organization (Jo & Kim, 2003). Park and Reber (2008) found that the majority of *Fortune 500* corporations analyzed participated in community investment and showed societal concern on their Web site.

While SNSs are becoming increasingly prominent, many organizations are not using them to their fullest potential. The sites may be heralded for their easy utility, yet research has found that they often leave out key elements on their SNSs (Jo & Kim, 2003; Kang & Norton, 2006; Park & Reber, 2008; Waters et al., 2009). *Fortune 500* corporations' Web sites often limit their consumer-oriented information, lessening the customer's potential understanding of their products and services (Park & Reber, 2008). Similarly, Waters et al. (2009) found that while nonprofit organizations wanted to be open and transparent on Facebook, they failed to take advantage of the interactive nature of the sites. For instance, the majority of the nonprofits analyzed only gave an email address as a way of getting more information about the organization rather than engaging their fans on the company's Facebook wall.

One of the areas most neglected is the relational aspect of SNSs. In a study of corporate Web pages, Esrock and Leichty (2000) cited the lack of key elements for building two-way communication with publics. Similarly, Kang and Norton (2006) found that though universities are adept at using Web sites for basic information, such as statistical data or departmental information, they are not fully harnessing the relational communication aspect the Internet has to offer.

One of the only studies to look at relational development in terms of organizational SNSs was Waters et al. (2009), who examined non-profit use of SNSs in terms of relational effectiveness. Through a content analysis of 275 non-profit organizations, Waters et al. (2009) highlighted three strategies which contribute to relational development: disclosure, information dissemination and involvement. The study found that non-profit organizations "have not incorporated the vast majority of the Facebook

applications available to them into their social networking presence” (p. 105). Specifically, the study found that non-profits most often used disclosure strategies, but overall tended to ignore dissemination and involvement strategies.

As can be seen from the reviewed literature, there is a call for corporations to better incorporate the relational and interactive features of SNSs into their use of Facebook. In order to ascertain the nature of these sites and how they are using relational strategies, researchers must study how corporations are currently using these sites.

RQ1: How are corporations incorporating relational development strategies in their Facebook profiles?

RQ1a: How are corporations incorporating disclosure strategies in their Facebook profiles?

RQ1b: How are corporations incorporating information dissemination strategies in their Facebook profiles?

RQ1c: How are corporations incorporating involvement strategies in their Facebook profiles?

The stakeholder perspective of stakeholder theory looks at how stakeholders interact with a corporation. Specifically, the descriptive approach to the stakeholder perspective seeks to answer the question “what do stakeholders expect or claim and how do they actually achieve their claims?” (Steurer, 2006). How stakeholders use SNSs should be one of the first questions companies ask when working social media into their corporate communication practices.

Fan perception is important in understanding the nature of these sites. Esrock and Leichty (1998) contended that “the advent of the Web enables public relations personnel to



provide information that various publics need in a timely fashion” (p. 308). Yet research still remains unclear about what exactly this information need entails. Jenkins (2006) argued that the “circulation of media content – across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders – depends heavily on consumers’ active participation” (p. 3). Without knowing what fans want from these sites, we have no real way of knowing how companies can best develop their SNS in order to have an impact.

RQ2: How are publics currently using corporate Facebook profiles?

RQ3: What additional content would publics like to see on corporations’ Facebook profiles?

Finally, given the call for more research on relational online communication and the need to incorporate stakeholders into organizational decision making:

RQ4: How do publics perceive the relationship development strategies present on Facebook?

## CHAPTER 3. METHOD

### *SNS for Analysis*

While several SNSs exist, global SNS leader Facebook (Comscore, 2008) was chosen for this study. Facebook has been deemed a “rich site for researchers interested in the affordances of social networks due to its heavy usage patterns and technological capacities that bridge online and offline connections” (Ellison et al., 2007). Facebook also has a significant corporate presence on its site.

Facebook works to help people communicate more effectively with those close to them. Facebook develops technology tools that “facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people’s real-world social connections” (Facebook, 2009b). Facebook is organized by a system of networks (Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008). This has the potential to allow for a wide disbursement of information about an organization.

### *Corporations for Analysis*

Originally created for a select audience, in 2006, Facebook opened its doors to the corporate world. Employees of 10 select companies, and one non-profit, were allowed to join the SNS, as long as they had the proper .com or .org address (Barton, 2006). The 11 chosen included companies from several industries: Accenture, Amazon.com, Apple, Electronic Arts (EA), Gap, Intel, Intuit, Microsoft, PepsiCo, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, and Teach for America (Barton, 2006).

The original 10 companies were selected as the sample for this study for two reasons. First, they have been Facebook members longer than any other organization. Second, Facebook saw merit in these particular companies and selected them as necessary

participants in their expansion into the corporate world. Teach for America – the one non-profit site selected – was left out of the analysis as the current study focuses on the effects of SNSs in for-profit organizations. Pricewaterhouse Coopers was also removed from the analysis as they no longer operate a Facebook page. In total, nine companies were used in the analysis.

### *Measures of Assessment*

In order to test RQ1, a content analysis of all nine companies' Facebook pages was conducted. Sites were coded using Waters et al. (2009)'s relational development strategy framework. Profiles were analyzed for the presence and frequency of organizational disclosure, information dissemination and involvement items, as seen in Table 1. In Waters et al. (2009), disclosure was based on descriptions of organizational programs and services, the organizational history, the mission statement, a link to the organization's Web site, the organization's logo, and a listing of profile administrators. Information dissemination was determined by links to news stories, photos, videos or audio files, posted announcements, and links to press releases or other campaign materials. Finally, involvement was measured by use of message or discussion boards, an organizational calendar of events, volunteer opportunities, donate and the existence of an e-commerce store. Donate was changed to deals/sale exclusives under the involvement category as Waters et al.'s (2009) conducted an analysis of non-profits while this analysis was specifically geared toward for-profit companies.

All content present on each of the nine corporate sites on January 21, 2010 was used for coding. The researcher downloaded PDF versions of all nine corporate profiles and printed off paper copies. Sites were coded for the presence or absence of relational

Table 1. Coding Categories from Waters et al. (2009)

Disclosure	Description History Mission statement URL Logo Administrators listed
Information Dissemination	News links Photos posted Video files Audio files Posted items on wall Discussion board topics Press releases Campaign summaries
Involvement	E-mail to the organization Phone number Wall/Discussion board used Calendar of events Volunteer opportunities Deals/Sale exclusives Store

development strategies on each of the nine sites. The researcher also recorded the number of friends, number of files (photo and video) and number of discussion threads.

Two coders independently went through all of the content pulled from each of the nine corporate profiles. Tests for inter-coder reliability were originally planned. However, when the coding from each individual was compared, coders had almost entirely matching answers. The researcher then decided that inter-coder reliability tests did not have to be computed as the coding scheme was straightforward.

For the three remaining research questions, a survey link was posted on all nine organizational Facebook pages. This survey addressed how an organization's Facebook members use the site, how they perceive relational development strategies, and what things they wish were present on the site.

In order to address RQ2, survey questions addressed different aspects of corporate Facebook usage. Open ended questions elicited information regarding a person's choice to become a fan of a company, what items they use on a particular Facebook corporate page and what they find most helpful on these pages. Questions were purposely left open-ended in order to accommodate the variance in information on each corporate Facebook profile. Frequency of access to corporate Facebook profiles was addressed using a 7-point frequency scale (1= less than once a month, 7 = more than once a day).

RQ3 was addressed using an open-ended question that asked for additional content that users would like to see on Facebook corporate pages. This question was left open-ended in order to allow for a wide variety of answers. The researcher chose not to limit respondent answers since little is known about how fans actually use these sites (Zywica & Danowski, 2008).

Finally, RQ4 was answered using 4-point frequency scale. Survey respondents ranked Waters et al.'s (2009) three categories of relational development items on a particular company's Facebook site. Respondents ranked each item on a scale of 1-5 based on how helpful they perceive those features to be (1 = not helpful, 2 = somewhat unhelpful, 3 = somewhat helpful, 4 = very helpful). For a complete copy of the survey, please see Appendix A.

Surveys were posted on December 15 on each company's Facebook wall. Each survey link was accompanied with the following greeting:

“Hey [INSERT COMPANY] Fans! I'm currently writing my thesis on how corporations are using corporate profiles, like this one, to reach their fans. Take my survey and give me your thoughts on this Facebook page.”

Surveys were posted for approximately two months, from December 15, 2009 - February 18, 2010. Every two days, the researcher accessed each of the nine company Facebook profiles and moved the survey message and link to the top of the Facebook wall. This helped to ensure an optimal amount of responses. It was important to consistently move the links so the survey would not get passed aside in the midst of some other incident. For instance, the researcher moved Apple's survey up to the top the day before the release of the iPad. Two days later, the researcher had to sift through 109 posts to find the survey link.

Not all surveys were welcomed on the corporate site. The researcher moved the Gap survey on December 17, 2009 to the top of the wall. Gap then blocked the researcher from the corporate site, taking away her ability to post anything. Similarly, Intel and Intuit periodically deleted the survey link from their wall. However, Gap was the only person to revoke the researcher's right to post or write anything at all.

Other sites were much more welcoming. Duncan Fairley, the administrator for the EA page contacted the researcher twice to show his support for the project and offer any assistance if necessary. In total, 108 surveys were taken, with 53 respondents completing the entire survey. Those that did not answer every question tended to skip the open-ended survey questions and answered only the demographic and close ended survey questions. Survey results reflect any answers to the individual survey questions, regardless of 100% completion of the survey. Two companies, PepsiCo and Accenture, had no Facebook user responses, as seen in Table 2.

Survey answers to open-ended questions were coded using inductive analysis (Patton, 1990). After all of the data was read, the researcher went back through the data

Table 2. Survey Respondents by Company

Company	# of Surveys Started	# of Surveys Completed	Survey Completion (%)
Accenture	0	0	----
Amazon.com	7	3	42.9
Apple	36	18	50.0
EA	12	3	25.0
Gap	21	11	52.4
Intel	9	6	66.7
Intuit	16	9	56.2
Microsoft	7	3	42.9
PepsiCo	0	0	---
Total:	108	53	49%

using sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954). Sensitizing concepts “merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Because each Facebook profile page has a basic set up, the researcher was able to use these sensitizing concepts to help categorize respondents’ answers. Sensitizing concepts for this study included the knowledge of basic Facebook profile elements such as the wall or discussion board as well as Waters et al.’s (2009) coding categories for relational development strategies on SNSs.

The researcher worked to classify the data by first looking for recurring themes, which were then sorted into categories. Once these categories were built, they were re-evaluated for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 1990). Once the

categories were evaluated and solidified, the researcher worked to prioritize these categories and to develop a hierarchy of themes.

The combination of two methods allowed for comparisons between what is present on the Web sites and what fans want to see on these sites. Esrock and Leichty (2000) argue for the inclusion of a multi-method approach in studying corporate use of Web sites.

“Content analyses of corporate Web sites also need to be accompanied by studies of the information needs and expectations of corporate Web sites visitors” (p. 342). Further, using multiple methods allowed researchers to see how organizations are currently using their SNSs as well as how they can expand usage in the future.



## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

Nine corporate profiles were coded for the presence or absence of Waters et al.'s (2009) relational development strategies as well as for basic profile information. The average number of friends for each company was 69,876. Gap had the highest number of friends (509,243) and PepsiCo had the lowest (499). Accenture, Amazon, Microsoft and PepsiCo had friends filters (a program that sets up separate company and fan walls) for their profile while Apple, EA, Gap, Intel, and Intuit allowed everyone to post to the same space. Four of the nine profiles (Accenture, Amazon, Apple, and PepsiCo) utilized the discussion board application on their profile.

### *Research Question 1*

All nine companies utilized disclosure strategies. The most common strategy was the inclusion of a link to the company Web site, which was the only disclosure strategy that all nine companies used. Other disclosure strategies used were description of the organization (used by 6 out of 9 companies analyzed), history of the organization (6 out of 9 companies analyzed), mission statement (used by 5 out of 9 companies analyzed) and company logo (used by 8 out of 9 companies analyzed). The only disclosure strategy not used by at least one company was the listing of the Facebook administrators.

The average organizational description was approximately 70 words long while the average length of the organizational history statement was four words long. Often this was only the founding year. Mission statements varied in length with the shortest being Accenture's three word statement and Microsoft's 360-word mission statement as the longest. All companies except for Gap used their company logo as their profile picture.

All nine companies also used information dissemination strategies. These included news links (used by 5 out of 9 companies analyzed), photos (used by 7 out of 9 companies analyzed), videos (used by 6 out of 9 companies analyzed), corporate wall posts (used by 5 out of 9 companies analyzed), use of the discussion board (used by 4 out of 9 companies analyzed) and press releases (used by 1 out of 9 companies analyzed). The only information dissemination strategy not used by any company was audio files.

While each of the nine had information dissemination strategies present on their profile, it was not always the company that was utilizing these features. Of the four companies that utilized the discussion board feature, only Intel and EA actually started their own discussions. The rest were begun and continued by fans. Similarly, fans were more likely to post photos to the corporate profile. There were 94 photos uploaded by companies across the nine profiles and 185 uploaded by fans. Corporations, however, were more likely to upload videos. Of the six companies with videos, 69 were uploaded by companies and 10 were uploaded by fans (all from Intel).

When corporations did utilize information dissemination strategies on their site, the strategies tended to vary by company. Of the five companies with news links, each company had an average of two news links on their profile while Accenture was the only company to post a press release on their profile page. Five of the nine companies also posted on their own wall, averaging about seven posts per company.

Only four of the nine companies (Apple, Gap, Intel and Intuit) had any type of involvement strategy on their profile. The most commonly included involvement strategy was the calendar of events. The only other involvement strategy companies used was the

presence of a store; Gap featured their jeans, Intuit featured a Small Business Spot and Intel used their Directory.

### *Research Question 2*

A total of 108 surveys were taken. The majority (64%) of survey respondents were male, as seen in Table 3 (n=99). Across companies, 38% of participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 and 14% were 25-30 years old (n=101). Education level ranged throughout the surveys, with 30% of participants holding a four-year degree and 27% having finished at least some college (n=100).

The vast majority of survey participants (64%) had a Facebook account for at least two years with only 23% having had a Facebook account for less than a year. The majority (66%) accessed their Facebook accounts more than once a day (n=88). Interestingly, while the majority of participants logged on to Facebook more than once a day, very few actually accessed company profiles on a consistent basis, with 35% accessing company profiles less than once a month (n=46) as can be seen in Table 4 (n=90).

Participants became fans of the nine companies for a variety of reasons. Individuals who fanned the nine companies surveyed were categorized by employee involvement and fan involvement. Under employee involvement, themes included 1) product support, 2) employment and 3) corporate pride. Fan involvement was broken down into 1) company loyalty and 2) information seeking. More specific findings are discussed below.

#### *Employee Involvement*

Of the companies surveyed, 43% of participants were either currently or had previously been employed at one of the nine companies (n=47) and 32% knew someone close to them who had been employed with one of the companies (n=44). Therefore, it was

Table 3. Gender of Survey Participants by Company

	Male	Female
Amazon	42.9%	57.1%
Apple	78.1%	21.9%
EA	100%	-
Gap	31.6%	68.4%
Intel	85.7%	14.3%
Intuit	43.8%	56.3%
Microsoft	71.4%	28.6%

Table 4. Fan Access of Facebook Corporate Profiles

	Less than once a month	Once a month	Every few weeks	Once a week	More than once a week	Once a day	More than once a day
Amazon	66.7%	33.3%	-	-	-	-	-
Apple	30.8%	15.4%	15.4%	-	23.1%	-	-
EA	100.0%	-	-	-	-	-	-
Gap	27.3%	-	18.2%	36.4%	9.1%	9.1%	-
Intel	16.7%	-	16.7%	33.3%	-	-	33.3%
Intuit	33.3%	22.2%	-	11.1%	22.2%	11.1%	-
Microsoft	33.3%	33.3%	-	-	-	-	33.3%

not surprising that when asked about their reason for fanning a corporate profile, approximately 20% of open ended responses cited their employment in that particular company (n=43).

Some participants wanted to help others with products offered by the company (product support) while other simply stated they were employees: "I work there and have Intel products" (employment). However, the majority of respondents in the employee involvement category cited corporate pride as the reason for choosing to fan a particular company. Employees maintained that many of the companies were "a great place to work in" and they "really enjoy working for the company."

Intuit, especially, was heralded as a great company by employees involved on the corporate profile: "Intuit is not only a great place to work but a company that cares about its products and customers." One fan even felt that it was his/her duty to support the company they loved: "I believe in the power of social networking, as an employee I want to do my part to promote Intuit."

#### *Fan Involvement*

Not all participants were employees of the organizations surveyed. Many were individuals with no employment connection. The majority of survey respondents (57%) had never been employed by these companies (n=47), or knew someone who had been employed by them (68%) (n=44). Rather, these individuals chose to fan the nine companies for other reasons. The survey found that fans used the corporate profile for 1) company loyalty and 2) information seeking.

*Company loyalty.* Individuals chose to fan the company to express loyalty for the company, a specific brand, or a product/service they offered. Often, the act of fanning a

specific company allowed them to show their support for that particular company or product: “I love the products ... and I love my Mac computer ... wanted to show ppl I support mac, etc.” Still others used the corporate profile as a reflection of their current purchasing practices: “I shop at the stores & I like the products.” Others were impressed with the way the company was run or the way products were made: “I respect the company.” Interestingly, the majority of the answers that expressed company loyalty used the word “love” to describe how they felt about the particular company, product or service.

*Information seeking.* Fans also used corporate profiles to fulfill information seeking behaviors. These individuals fanned a company in order to keep up to date with products and promotions. Information seeking was often about general company and product information (“they may have some interesting relevant news/products or deal I’m interested in”) or more specifically about promotions (“I like knowing about sales they are advertising on Facebook”).

After becoming fans of the site, survey respondents reported using different features on the corporate profile. The wall (31%) and news/information (39%) were the most used features according to survey respondents (n=36). These were also the features that respondents (n=30) found most helpful (wall = 37%, news/information = 47%). News/information consisted of information on different topics, most notably promotional and product information. Respondents reported using other basic features of the Facebook page, including status updates, events, photos, videos and links. While they found these features helpful as well, they weren’t as likely to use them as the wall or news/information.

### *Research Question 3*

The survey also looked at ways to improve corporate profiles from a fan perspective. Consumer perception is an important part of developing corporate communication strategies (Freeman et al., 2004; Jenkins, 2006). Survey responses (n=30) were broken down into three categories: no change (n=10), additional content (n=13), and interaction (n=7). The additional content and interaction categories are discussed in more depth below.

#### *Additional Content*

Additional content refers to the need of fans to have access to added content and information that is not currently present on the corporate Facebook site. Specifically, survey responses seemed to fall into two sub-themes: 1) information seeking and 2) extras.

*Information seeking.* Often, fans of corporations on Facebook desired more information about the businesses whose profiles they were frequenting. Fans called for “more news and links” and “different more variety of information on [the profile].” Specifically, fans wanted more information on promotions, products, and the company itself. A consistent theme across all nine surveys was the use of Facebook as a way of getting promotions or extra deals. Facebook was also heralded as a way to get more information about products, especially new ones.

Interestingly, fans wanted to know more than promotions or special deals. Often, fans just wanted to know more about the store they were supporting: “More, not only about products, but about the company itself, how its run, etc.” This call for more general company information also included stories about employees as well as basic information, such as store locations and company events.

*Extras.* While some fans wanted to see additions to already available content, other fans wished for new, extra additions to the corporate Facebook profile. Often, these extras pertained specifically to a product or service of the company. One Gap fan pushed for a “virtual makeover with GAP stuff” while an Apple fan wanted extra information about existing products: “It would be nice if Apple promoted a Tip Of The Week on each product. Something that the customers might not already know.”

### *Interaction*

Another category that emerged concerning additional content that could be added to corporate Facebook profiles was interaction. This category was defined as the need of fans to have open communication with businesses and/or other fans on the corporate profile. These types of suggestions encouraged businesses to find ways to connect fans, to network with other business professionals and keep their fans continuously coming back to the Facebook profile.

Interaction included company-to-fan and fan-to-fan interaction. One Intuit fan saw Facebook as a way to connect and wanted “a special link to other accounting professionals in the area” while an Amazon fan wanted to network with others in similar professional positions: “I want to form a sub group ‘customer reviewer club’ i review a lot of books and music on amazon and i thought it would be neat to see other reviewers.” Fans also wanted the company to connect with them online through “interaction” and new, fresh information such as “daily questions, votes or fun, engaging activities that update/change every day,” that would keep fans coming back to the profile.



#### *Research Question 4*

Finally, fans were asked to rank the helpfulness of the components of the three relational development strategies outlined by Waters et al. (2009) as shown in Table 5. Low frequencies prevented statistical tests from being run on the data. Fans tended to rank a link to the company's Web site as very helpful (56%) overall (n=40). Participants also ranked inclusion of the company logo (46%), links to news stories about the company (45%), posts by the company (48%), links to press releases (48%) and use of the profile wall to respond to comments (45%) as very helpful relational development strategies.

Fans of individual companies tended to find certain strategies particularly helpful. All Apple fans rated the inclusion of a company Web site and links to news stories as either somewhat or very helpful. All Intuit fans found the company Web site very helpful while all Microsoft fans rated the inclusion of news links and press releases very helpful. Amazon.com fans found video files, audio files and volunteer opportunities somewhat helpful and Gap fans tended to rate the company Web site, company logo, calendar of events and the use of the company wall to respond/interact with fans as either somewhat or very helpful.

Table 5. Participant Helpfulness Ranking of Relational Development Strategies

Description	Not helpful	Somewhat unhelpful	Somewhat helpful	Very Helpful	N/A	Total # of responses
Description	17%	10%	35%	25%	13%	40
History	18%	14%	34%	16%	18%	38
Mission Statement	24%	13%	32%	18%	13%	38
Company URL	12%	7%	21%	56%	4%	43
Company Logo	5%	3%	38%	46%	8%	39
Administrators	16%	14%	24%	24%	22%	37
News stories	0	8%	37%	45%	10%	40
Photos	3%	8%	47%	32%	10%	40
Videos	3%	5%	42%	40%	10%	40
Audio	3%	19%	43%	19%	16%	37
Posts	2%	12%	26%	48%	12%	42
Press releases	3%	12%	27%	48%	10%	40
Involvement	3%	20%	37%	27%	13%	40
Company e-mail	14%	17%	29%	23%	17%	42
Phone number	10%	23%	21%	25%	21%	39
Use of profile wall	8%	11%	21%	45%	15%	38
Calendar of events	5%	8%	33%	41%	13%	39
Volunteer	13%	8%	38%	23%	18%	39

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The study was broken down into two parts. The first part looked at how corporations are using Facebook as a corporate communication tool through a content analysis of the nine corporate Facebook profiles. The second part of the study was to see the fan perspective on Facebook corporate profiles through an online survey. This method enables corporate social media to be viewed from the stakeholder perspective. The survey also collected basic information about Facebook users.

While the majority of participants across all surveys were male, three companies (Amazon, Intuit and Gap) had more female respondents. Interestingly, of the seven company profiles where fans participated in the survey, these were the only three companies that did not have products that directly related to technology or technology development. Rather, Intuit, Amazon and Gap specialize in retail, whether it be clothing (Gap), small business resources (Intuit) or “anything they might want to buy online” (Amazon). While anyone can fan a company on Facebook, results indicate that companies may need to pay specific attention to who their fans are and target specific niche populations rather than looking to market to every stakeholder group.

The majority of survey participants fell into two age groups: 18-24 and 25-30. This finding is consistent with previous research that found that the average age of a Facebook user is 26 years (Lenhart, 2009b). Findings regarding the education level of survey participants were also similar to those of previous research. Hargittai (2008) found that students whose parents had higher levels of education, specifically college or even graduate degrees were more likely to use Facebook than students whose parents had only

high school education. Similarly, this study found that the majority of survey participants had at least some college experience, if not a four-year degree.

The average number of fans on the nine corporate profiles analyzed was 69,876. On average, Facebook users have 130 friends on the site (Facebook, 2009a). While personal friends can only be added once a friend request is sent and the recipient agrees to “friend” the sender, anyone can friend a company profile at any time. Hence becoming a fan of a company is easier than friending someone on Facebook. This is an important aspect for businesses to consider as they work to market themselves using Facebook.

### *Research Question 1*

The first research question looked at how corporations are incorporating relational development strategies into their Facebook profiles. All nine companies utilized both disclosure and information dissemination strategies on their Facebook profiles. Only four of the nine used involvement strategies.

It seems that companies are more than willing to give basic information and disseminate product/service information about the company. They are not as aware, however, of involvement and interaction strategies on the Facebook profile. This finding is consistent with Waters et al.’s (2009) finding that while organizations may want to be open and transparent on Facebook, they fail to take full advantage of the interactive nature of the sites.

This finding also seems to indicate that organizations may be more concerned with the appearance of interactivity than actual interactivity. The majority of Waters et al.’s (2009) disclosure strategies are basic features on Facebook. When setting up a profile, administrators are asked to upload a picture, provide a URL to a Web site and even list a

company description. All of these are fairly easy to complete and do not need to be revisited and changed over time. Information dissemination strategies take it one step further, requiring the administrator to upload content to the profile. However, once the photos, videos or news links are on the profile, they do not have to be updated or maintained.

The strategies that Waters et al. (2009) list under involvement, however, require more time and are more consistent with Web 2.0 technology. These features must be updated regularly and are often a collaboration of multiple parties (e.g., interaction on the company wall). For instance, the calendar of events must be constantly changed to have the most current events. The presence of a store requires extra time and set up to add this additional feature to the basic Facebook profile. Possibly the most notable example of the true lack of interactivity is message board usage. While most companies posted things to the wall, none of them used the wall to interact with their fans. It seems that by putting up basic content to the profiles and leaving it there, companies can give the appearance of interactivity without actually being interactive on Facebook.

### *Research Question 2*

RQ2 asked how publics are currently using corporate profiles. Survey respondents tended to use the wall and news/information that was present on the corporate profile. These were used more often than any other feature and were also found to be the most helpful feature on the profile. Under news/information, product and promotional information was the most sought after form of information. Companies should be particularly cautious when developing content for these sites. Knowing what their fans are looking for will help them create a stakeholder centered profile.

Two groups of people emerged as corporate Facebook users: employees of the corporations and general fans. Employees tended to become fans because they were part of the company, to help those who may have issues with their products, or to show their support for their place of employment. General fans tended to become friends with a corporation on Facebook to find out more information about the company or to show their loyalty and support for the company or a product/service they produce.

The fact that fans often friend a company to express loyalty is consistent with previous research. boyd (2006) found that a top reason for friendship on these sites was to show that the user was a fan of an organization or person. Corporate profiles, it seems, may appear to some users as way to express the things they love rather than a place to find information. Corporations, therefore, must learn to not only brand themselves through Facebook, but also work to increase the information seeking desires of their fans.

The statistics on Facebook usage also yielded interesting findings. Facebook (2009a) reports that over half of its 400 million users log on to the site daily. The survey results are consistent with this finding, with over half (66%) of participants logging on more than once a day (n=88). However, only 12% of survey respondents visited a corporate profile they had fanned once or more than once a day (n=46). Facebook users are on the site all the time, but very few seem to make corporate profiles a priority during their visits. This may be because corporations often do not update their corporate profiles on a consistent basis.

Fanning businesses on Facebook may be similar to the act of friending. SNSs encourage users to add as many friends as possible to accumulate the largest network (boyd, 2006). Facebook users may take a similar approach when fanning businesses.

Facebook reports that there are over 1.5 million local businesses with active Pages on Facebook and, on average, users fan four pages a month (Facebook, 2009a). Rather than learn about the company or visit its profile, users simply fan the Page and never go back. Corporate pages are one more way to amass the largest network.

The act of friending can benefit the organization. Friends are often added for a variety of reasons, though research has shown it is often related to the impression it gives others (boyd, 2006; boyd & Ellison, 2008; Donath & boyd, 2004; Tong et al., 2008; Westerman, 2008). From a corporate perspective, the more fans you have, the more successful your business looks. The average number of friends on the nine corporate profiles analyzed was 69,876. Having a large amount of fans may give the appearance of success and interactivity without companies needing to be interactive.

### *Research Question 3*

RQ3 looked at how businesses can improve their corporate communication on Facebook as well as what fans think they should be including. Fans of the nine companies were asked what they would like to see on a businesses' corporate profile that is not currently available. Fans called for additional content and interaction on corporate Facebook profiles.

The request by fans for more interaction on corporate Facebook profiles is consistent with previous research. Interactive features online have led to more open communication and better relationships with publics (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Jo & Kim, 2003; Park & Reber, 2008). Further, it seems that fans are looking to take full advantage of the networking feature that Facebook provides and connect not only with the company, but

with other fans as well. Corporations must work to harness this feature and facilitate communication on their profile.

The finding that fans are calling for additional content is also consistent with past research that found organizations are often not using SNSs to their fullest potential (Kang & Norton, 2006; Waters et al., 2009). In this study, fans called not only for new features, but for more information than the company was currently providing about promotions, products and general company information. This finding is in line with Park and Reber's (2008) notion that corporations often limit their consumer-oriented information online, lessening potential understanding of the company and its products and services.

The need for more interaction coupled with the call for additional information indicates that corporations, much like the non-profit organizations in Waters et al.'s (2009) study, are failing to take advantage of the truly interactive and relational nature of SNSs. The interactive nature of these sites is consistent with Web 2.0 technologies, allowing companies to develop open communication with their fan base. It would seem, however, that fans still do not believe that for-profit companies are using corporate profiles in a way that meets their needs.

#### *Research Question 4*

The final research question asked survey participants to rank the strategies outlined by Waters et al. (2009). The strategies that were marked as most helpful included a Web site link, inclusion of company logo, links to news stories, posts by the company and the use of the profile wall to respond to comments. All but one of these strategies (using the wall to respond) were also present on the majority of corporate profiles analyzed.



The most helpful strategy overall (link to the company Web site) was also the only strategy used by all nine companies. It may be that fans are not getting the information they need from the corporate profile and have to turn elsewhere to find the answers to their questions. This could be exactly what companies want. By driving people back to their Web site, corporations no longer have to maintain multiple mediums of online communication with fans. Future research would benefit from an analysis of the intentions behind corporate social media.

The only strategy ranked “very helpful” by fans that was not present on any of the sites was the use of the wall to respond to fan comments. Fans want more interaction online, yet companies may not be aware of how to participate. There are a few explanations for this finding.

First, companies may be adopting passive information seeking strategies. Fans who use passive information seeking strategies tend to observe without being intrusive (Berger, 1979). Similarly, the nine companies analyzed may simply open a profile and use it to observe fan behavior. Some may view the profile page as a fan environment, where it would be intrusive to post or interact. It could also be that companies don’t know how to truly be interactive on SNSs.

Another reason may be the cost-effectiveness of social media for corporations. In order to be truly interactive, it takes staff time and resources to provide constant attention to the Facebook profile page. By creating a profile and then abandoning it, companies at least provide minimal exposure for their organization. Yet when companies respond to fans online, they are developing one-on-one communication and creating greater awareness of

interactivity on the page. Is it worth the extra time and effort to reach every stakeholder individually?

### *Conclusion*

This study sought to give a descriptive look at corporate social media, specifically corporate Facebook usage by both companies and fans of companies. As social media continues to grow in popularity, it is essential for businesses to understand what their fans look for online and how they can best market themselves in an increasingly online world. This study builds on past research which has concentrated on personal use of social media. Very few studies have looked at how businesses use SNSs like Facebook, let alone how fans of these businesses use SNSs. One of the only studies to look at how organizations utilize Facebook was Waters et al. (2009), which looked at how non-profits used Facebook.

### *Theoretical Applications*

This research project builds on Waters et al. (2009) by applying the relational development strategies of disclosure, information dissemination and involvement to for-profit organizations. Results showed that while companies utilize disclosure and information dissemination strategies, very few tend to use involvement strategies. Waters et al. (2009) found that non-profits are quick to embrace disclosure strategies, yet overall they do not use information dissemination and involvement strategies.

Non-profits failed to take advantage of some of the applications on Facebook such as multimedia files. However, this study found that while organizations are now utilizing applications like multimedia files and other information dissemination strategies, they are still lacking in involvement strategies. Similar to previous findings, it seems businesses

recognize the expansion of SNSs and want to be a part of it, yet they are “not taking advantage of all the options the site had to offer their relationship cultivation efforts” (Waters et al., 2009, p. 4).

Waters et al. (2009) credits this to the overwhelming nature of SNSs like Facebook for organizations:

Since social networking on Facebook is a new phenomenon for organizations, few handbooks exist to guide nonprofits on how to use the sites. Instead, they are learning through active participation on the site – an overwhelming task for organizations without a solid understanding on how to use these sites. (p. 4)

Another explanation could be that companies are fully aware of how to use SNSs, yet they have chosen not to actively participate and interact on these sites. It could be that companies know how to use their resources and are purposefully choosing not to interact at all, or are using selective interaction. If this is true, then companies are making a statement about how they view their stakeholders through their lack of two-way interaction. They have started these sites, but they do not want, or need, to interact with their fans online. This is especially relevant, given the fact that the nine companies used in this study were the original corporate Facebook users. Despite the length of time they have spent on the site, they still have chosen not to participate in an active way with their fans.

This study also looked at stakeholder theory in the culture of Web 2.0. According to Waters et al. (2009), “Social networking sites can be an effective way to reach stakeholder groups if organizations understand how their stakeholders use the sites” (p. 5). However, there seems to be an inconsistent view concerning how corporations should participate on Facebook profiles. From a stakeholder perspective, fans want more

information and more interaction. It would seem from this analysis that corporations are choosing to react very little, if at all, to the numerous stakeholder groups present on their profiles.

The stakeholder perspective of corporate Facebook usage, however, seems to call for more of a broad view of stakeholders, where anyone who can “be vitally affected by, of they can vitally affect, almost anyone” (Mitchell et al., 1997, p. 857). Fans want information about the company all in one place. The survey results indicate that fans find all of the relational development strategies helpful and are calling for more interaction on the profiles. Fans want a relationship with the company, while the corporation may be hesitant to spend time and effort on only a potential relationship.

In the age of Internet technologies, stakeholder salience (Mitchell et al., 1997) is more important than ever. Companies must decide what their stance is on social media and what stakeholder groups are given priority in order to effectively communicate with them in the world of Facebook.

### *Practical Applications*

Facebook and other SNSs are constantly growing. It seems that corporations recognize that and are creating profiles on these sites. However, they are still not using them to their fullest potential, often posting basic information and not interacting with their fans. While this may create basic exposure for the company, it could also make fans turn away from their profile if they are not finding the information or answers they are looking for.

Research has highlighted the importance of knowing stakeholder needs and desires in a corporate context. From this study, it seems fans find all of the relational development

strategies helpful and are asking for more information on SNSs. Companies would be wise to address these fan needs and work to better inform their fans through Facebook corporate profile pages. Rather than gaining minimal exposure through these sites, corporations can work to not only disclose basic information about themselves and their company, but also involve their fans in the company and its events and activities and acknowledge the importance of their fans online. Companies should work to assess the needs of their audience and utilize this information to better meet those needs.

This study looked at how corporations are using relational development strategies on Facebook and how fans respond to these strategies. Future research should look at other popular SNSs, like Twitter or LinkedIn, to see how corporations are utilizing relational development strategies and engaging fans on those particular sites. This will help better establish an overall picture of corporate social media usage.

While SNSs have several features that make them ideal for corporate communication, some organizations are choosing not to use them. Approximately one in five merchants do not have a Facebook presence (Crosby, 2009). One of the reasons for this could be the loss of control and vulnerability of corporations on these sites. For instance, when Best Buy asked “what do you think about offering BestBuy.com in Spanish?,” the result was a slew of racist comments (Crosby, 2009). Future research should study the reverse effects of Web 2.0 technologies in an attempt to see how corporations may counteract this potential threat.

One drawback to this study is that this is simply a snapshot of corporate SNS usage. Only nine companies were used in the analysis. Further, Facebook profiles can change on an almost daily basis. For this reason, future research should conduct

longitudinal studies of corporate SNSs. This approach will enable us to see how these corporate sites develop over time and how they respond to events or new developments.

Another issue with the project is the sample. The nine companies were chosen because they were the original nine companies asked to join Facebook. However, these nine companies represented different types of businesses that specialize in different things. Future research should look at focusing on different branches of business, such as technology or retail companies to see how specific types of companies utilize social media.

Along with the types of companies is the issue of the low survey turn out. Only 108 surveys were taken with only 53 completing every question. This is one of the problems with having online surveys. The sample also only considers survey participants who actually check the Facebook corporate profile on a semi-regular basis. There may be several Facebook users that are fans of the corporate profile yet never actually access the corporate profile. Rather they use the corporate profile as a way to show their approval or loyalty to the company rather than a way to seek information about the corporation.

Finally, this study was conducted at a unique time in the history of corporate Facebook usage. Shortly after completion of the study, on April 21, 2010, Facebook announced that they would be changing the language on their site. No longer are users able to “fan” a company. Rather, they can now “like” a company. Facebook says the change was made to “improve your experience and promote consistency across the site ... We believe this change offers you a more light-weight and standard way to connect with people, things and topics.”

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