CHAPTER 4: CORPORATE ONLINE COMMUNICATION: AN MPR PERSPECTIVE

4.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter conceptualises and contextualises corporate online communication and represents the discourse about corporate online communication from which statements were selected for the Q study that follows.

Corporate online communication from an MPR perspective constitutes the use of appropriate Internet resources as well as integrated corporate online communication techniques to enhance credibility and trust and to establish long-term relationships with the organisation's online customers with regard to the selling of its product(s) and/or service(s).

This chapter first discusses the impact of the Internet on organisational communication. Brief reference is also made to the digital divide because it has an impact on the effectiveness of corporate online communication. Since corporate online communication constitutes both marketing and public relations techniques, online marketing and public relations are also explained. The corporate website is discussed as the most frequently used Internet resource to practise corporate online communication. Various corporate online communication techniques are highlighted. In conclusion corporate online communication is discussed in relation to the identified factors for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective. Reference is also made to the nature of corporate online communication.

4.2   THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ON ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION

The working definition of the Internet for this thesis is as follows (Prescott & Van Slyke 1997:119 & 120):

> The Internet is a communication interface of networked computers with their associated resources, including, but not limited to e-mail, file transfer protocol (FTP)[46], gopher[47] and the World Wide Web. It is not a single technology, but consists of several technologies working in conjunction with one another.

The above definition of the Internet is adopted for the purpose of this thesis because it acknowledges the Internet as a medium to communicate instantly with global mass audiences, providing a forum for unfiltered direct two-way communication. In the process, numerous opportunities in various industries become available.

Since the commercialisation of the Internet in the early 1990s, its development has impacted on all aspects of organisational communication. The Internet has differentiated areas of organisational communication in terms of limitless opportunities to reach the organisation's internal and external publics/target audiences much faster, for instance, areas such as marketing communications and public relations. It has also impacted on the way that marketing communications and public relations are practised today[48]. Especially Internet resources such as the World Wide Web, e-mail, online services and multimedia in particular, pose challenges for these disciplines[49]. In addition, the use of hypermedia navigation for communication has also changed the structure of information presented. Hypermedia refers to a system in which documents, pictures, sound, movie and animation files that are scattered across many sites are directly linked (Janal 1995:437).

Marketers and public relations practitioners now include corporate online communication in their communication strategies. Corporate online communication in an organisational communication context refers to communication by an organisation using a computer and a specific Internet resource to use online actions to attain specific goals. Corporate online communication techniques are thus increasingly becoming

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[46] File transfer protocol. Allows the user to transfer files over the Internet.

[47] A search tool that allows the user to search across the entire Internet for information, as opposed to only one area at a time such as the World Wide Web.

[48] See sections 4.4 & 4.5.

[49] See section 4.6.

integrated online. For instance, corporate websites are used to post testimonials from satisfied buyers, make new product announcements and allow the organisation to respond publicly events (and crises). Press releases are also used as online sales instruments (Steve 2000). Ellsworth and Ellsworth (1997:61) argue that online marketing will only be effective once it is integrated with other communication techniques (for instance, online public relations, traditional advertising and marketing techniques). They argue that an integration of techniques will enhance the organisation's chances of attracting users to its corporate website because it has to compete with millions of websites.

The impact of more information on the marketing communications and public relations industries is perhaps best described by Peattie and Peters (1997:143). They refer to the various ages of computing to explain how computer-mediated technology developed and impacted on the organisation and communication in the organisation. The first two ages of computing resulted in new opportunities in production and product quality as well as in new customer and other databases. This impacted on marketing planning and the development and execution of corporate and marketing strategies because they became more effective. The current third age of computing which resulted in the Internet, acknowledges computers as part of a global communications revolution, since they are central to economic, social, cultural and political environments (the macro environment) and thus organisational planning. Peattie and Peters (1997:145) emphasise that the third age of computing in particular provides organisations with more knowledge and the opportunity and ability to forge more direct customer links.

Besides providing more opportunities for interactive communication, Pavlik (1998:31) explains that the Internet has transformed the way journalists and other communication professionals conduct their work, especially the methods they use to gather and distribute information. The Internet allows communication and marketing professionals to make better use of resources, and to use improved resources and less time to produce a product. In addition, the Internet has also made possible unique research tools resulting in better products for the organisation.

Receivers of online information are, however, more sceptical about message content - hence corporate online communication has become less influential in consumer decision making. In addition, advertising, marketing, public relations and sales promotion professionals can now be held more accountable for the results of their efforts because measurable behavioural responses among organisation's stakeholders will become the sole measure of communicator success (Brody 1990:20).

According to Pavlik's (1998) perspective, online marketing and public relations communication cannot be as effective if practised separately on the organisation's corporate website because this medium allows for convergence of mediated communication, making it more effective and meaningful.

Although many researchers and scholars explain and discuss the nature and application of corporate online communication techniques (Bayne 2000; Holtz 1998; Janal 1995; Marlow 1996, 1997), not much has been said or explained about the integration of corporate online communication techniques on the organisation's corporate website or how they can contribute to communicate more effectively with the organisation's different publics. This is surprising because various studies indicate that these techniques have already been integrated in practice[50].

4.3   THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Corporate online communication still faces many barriers which impede its effectiveness, especially the digital divide. The adage "knowledge is power" has never been truer than in the Information Age. Cullen (2001:311) explains that the term "digital

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[50]See section 4.8.2.

divide" has been applied to the gap in most countries between those with ready access to the tools of information and communication technologies, and the knowledge to which they provide access, and those without such access or skills. The latter may be the result of socioeconomic factors, geographical factors, educational factors, attitudinal and generational factors, or possibly physical disabilities. A further gap is also evident between the developed and underdeveloped world with regard to the implementation of new technologies.

People who are excluded by the digital divide are those on low incomes, people with few educational qualifications or with low literacy levels, the unemployed, elderly people, people in isolated or rural areas, people with disabilities, single parents, women and girls as well as indigenous people and some migrant and minority ethnic groups (Cullen 2001:312).

Cullen (2001:314) argues that the Internet is not in itself an education, does not teach literacy and requires highly developed skills to access and interpret the information. She expects the Internet's contribution to the poorest nations of the world in the foreseeable future to rather be the sharing of global knowledge and expertise to help support their initiatives against poverty and diseases. Regarding developing nations, she argues that the Internet can contribute towards better communication with trading partners through e-commerce and more tourism and trade opportunities.

South Africa is no exception. Expensive telephone and Internet services, illiteracy and the inaccessibility of the Internet, all contribute to the digital divide in South Africa. South Africa is a country where telephone and electricity lines still do not reach most of the approximately 50 million people (Corporate strategies: local companies join Internet revolution … 2001). Besides having expensive telecommunication services, South Africa is a country of diverse communities, where there are 11 languages recognised official. In addition, there is an enormous gap between the poor and the rich. Access to computers and the Internet is still uneven, because most South African children who live in townships and rural areas still do not have Internet access (South Africa's Internet generation … 2001).

4.4   ONLINE MARKETING

Corporate online communication constitutes both online marketing and public relations techniques. Online marketing and online public relations will be explained in the two sections below.

4.4.1   The growing importance of online marketing

Marketers and advertisers today realise the growth and potential of the Internet as an effective marketing tool. Various marketing authors, theorists and scholars consequently argue and explain the merits and magnitude of online marketing. In addition, it is also contended that because marketing on the Internet will definitely add a strategic value to an organisation's overall traditional marketing plan, it is a competitive advantage (Bayne 2000; Herbig & Hale 1997; Hoey 1998; Holtz 1998; Janal 1995; Marlow 1997). However, some theorists also argue that the Internet still only covers a minority of the population and faces many barriers such as computer illiteracy and concerns about the security of online transactions which impact on the effectiveness of online marketing (Ainscough & Luckett 1996; Guth & Marsh 2000; Paul 1996).

Despite opposing points of views, the Internet has been praised as a marketing channel with much potential because it can eliminate problems associated with traditional marketing. Although through the decades, traditional marketing proved to be an effective means of reaching the masses, mass marketing efforts have often been poorly controlled and directed. Peattie and Peters (1997:146) refer to Parkinson (1994) who argues that computer technology now provides for better control of marketing relationships in particular. Zineldin (2000:13), for instance, describes online marketing as "marrying the needs of consumers" and states that organisations mainly adopt an online presence to communicate with their customers, create an awareness of their product and perhaps make a profit.

Another perspective is that of Marlow (1997:32), who describes online marketing as a

"leap forward in communication", because this medium adds another dimension to traditional marketing efforts. This dimension refers to direct marketing and delivering products and services directly to the customer without the intervention of a salesperson.

Because of the interactive nature of hypermedia, online marketing is also interactive and allows for more one-to-one communication. According to Peattie and Peters (1997:144), online marketing allows marketers to bypass the distancing effect from customers created by long supply chains, and an '"overreliance" on one-way forms of marketing communication such as advertising. In addition, it allows organisations to link directly to consumers, thus promoting new relationships and interactions[51].

Adopting an online presence is no longer enough to make an impact on the online customer. Online marketing is a more complex task and requires a far more skilful approach to be successful than is the general belief among marketers. After the initial rush to obtain an online organisational presence, marketers are currently concerned with the effective integration of the Internet into their marketing communication mix (Bayne 2000; Hoey 1998; Holtz 1998; Kitchen 1999). In addition to a concern with the integration of the Internet into organisations' marketing communication mix, Kiani (1998:185) suggests that organisations also realise the potential of the Internet as an interactive medium to better communicate with their customers and should therefore adopt a two-way communication model in which four different communication states can prevail[52].

4.4.2   The nature of online marketing

Online marketing is also referred to as e-marketing, e-tailing and mass customisation, thus proposing that the Internet can be used to develop a marketing strategy for a single customer (Cant et al 2004:21).   Online marketing focuses on personal interaction, interactivity and feedback. To this end, many marketers use different technologies such

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[51]See section 4.8.3.3

[52]The four different communication states are consumers to consumers, company to consumers, consumers to company and company to company (Kiani 1998:185).

as *closed-loop technology* (an intelligent technology-based learning system that delivers personalised web content and targeted one-to-one communication to individual users). Content, people using the site, personalisation and communication are integrated with site analysis and measurement tools. In a closed-loop system, the system observes and learns more every time the same user interacts with the site, becoming more intelligent about the user. Hence, a customer profile is built up and updated with each visit (Koekemoer 2004:538).

The strength of the Internet as a commercial medium is its ability to personalise its offer to match the interests and lifestyles of users, rather than simply providing broad reach to a general audience. Online marketing is more about reaching the right people at the right time in the right context, than reaching as many people as possible. Success on the Web includes anticipating customers' needs and meeting them. Online marketers and advertisers are especially interested in customer retention and long-term loyalty (Koekemoer 2004:536).

4.4.3   The differences between online and traditional marketing

The rules for online marketing remain the same as those for traditional marketing, but require a different approach because of a global target audience and a long-term approach. To complement the traditional marketing plan, Bayne (2000) formulated an online marketing plan which, in many respects, differs from the traditional marketing plan. The principal aspect of an online marketing plan is to achieve synergy with the traditional marketing plan, and to use traditional media to make the publics aware of the organisation's corporate website.

Increasingly more organisations are conducting business online only. However, they still make use of traditional media to advertise their online business objectives (Bayne 2000:7). A case in point is the South African online bookstore, Kalahari.net. It is considered important for the organisation to make itself accessible by bridging its online presence through traditional marketing efforts. Marketers and advertisers realise that they need to create bridges between traditional advertising and online advertising.

Organisations therefore advertise the location of their websites in their advertisements in traditional media. A content analysis of 1 249 advertisements in 20 magazines in the USA by the academics, Pardun and Lamb (1999:93), indicates that 42 percent of these advertisements included Web addresses. By creating an advertisement in traditional media where the organisation also lists its e-mail address or location of its website, the organisation in reality advertises twice. This not only creates greater awareness of the organisation and its products, but also facilitates contact with the consumer.

Online marketing also differs from the traditional marketing plan in other ways. In contrast to the traditional marketing plan which proposes a new programme through its relationship with the organisation, its products, the market, a budget and personnel considerations, the online marketing plan is aimed at complementing the objectives of a traditional marketing plan to a global audience. Because of the importance of an online marketing plan, Bayne (2000) proposes that marketing management should not only allocate a budget to the organisation's online marketing plan but also appoint an Internet task force or team to concentrate on the specialised needs of this marketing medium.

Apart from complementing the traditional marketing plan, Bayne (2000) argues that it is also necessary for marketing management to consider where to fit the Internet into the organisation's traditional marketing communication mix. This has already become a priority for many organisations (Bayne 2000).

Aldridge, Forcht and Pierson (1997:161) cite the market segmentation process as another difference between online and traditional marketing. In traditional marketing, the organisation attempts to reach its target audience through marketing communication messages after it has selected an appropriate target audience through market research (Cant et al 2004:70). In online marketing, online customers find the organisation's website by being attracted to the benefits offered (this is known as pull marketing). Online customers then select the messages they want. By selecting from tailor-made options, they segment themselves on the basis of desired product benefits. The criteria for effective segmentation are different for Internet segments. These criteria are

depicted in table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: Criteria for traditional and Internet market segmentation

Traditional market segmentation	Internet market segmentation
Accessibility. Can the organisation reach the intended market segment?	Consumers initiate contact via website visits.
Measurability. Can the segment's characteristics be assessed?	Measure the number of website visitors who see an advertisement, directly or click-throughs. Ask web visitors for demographic information.
Substantiality. Is the segment large enough with enough spending power?	Upscale, educated, sophisticated, adventuresome users.

Source: Aldridge et al (1997:166)

Differences between traditional and online marketing are depicted in table 4.2 below:

Table 4.2: Differences between online and traditional marketing

Online marketing	Traditional marketing
Supports a one to one promotion.	Supports mass marketing.
Supports a pull[53] marketing environment.	Supports a push[54] marketing environment.
Supports both vertical and horizontal marketing (two-way).	Supports mostly vertical or horizontal marketing (one way).
Environmental scanning on the World Wide Web involves a narrower look, including competitive, technological and cultural scanning. Environmental scanning on the World Wide Web should be very	Environmental scanning involves a broader look, including competitive, technological and cultural scanning.

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[53]Customers find the organisation's website by being attracted to the benefits offered. Online customers then select the messages they want.
[54]The organisation attempts to reach its target audience through marketing communication messages after it has selected an appropriate target audience through market research.

specific.	
Market segmentation and demographic research on the World Wide Web are not yet reliable.	Market segmentation and demographic research are reliable.

Source: Ellsworth & Ellsworth (1997:61)

4.5 ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS

The growing importance of online public relations and the differences between traditional and online public relations are now discussed.

4.5.1 The growing importance of online public relations

Literature does not reflect as much about the practice and merits of online public relations as those of online marketing, even though public relations theorists and scholars describe online public relations as an emerging organisational practice because computer technology has become indispensable for and even revolusionalised the public relations industry (Abel 1997; Epley 1995; Hurme 2001).

According to Shell (1995), by the mid-1990s, an online presence had even become a status symbol for many public relations professionals. This argument is later supported by Hurme (2000:171), who refers to the fifth annual survey in 1999 by North-American communication professionals, Ross and Middleberg, on the adoption and use of new technologies. This survey concludes that public relations practitioners who do not use corporate online communications in their public relations strategies can even cause damage to their clients and employers.

After the commercialisation of the Internet, it was soon realised that the Information Age is not only about technologies such as the Internet, but also about another form of communication in particular (Weber 1995). This contention is supported by Guth and

Marsh (2000:346) who argue in favour of the use of advanced technology in the practice of public relations, but add that people's values play a role in the way these online tools are used. They also suggest that public relations practitioners should first know the online needs, level of knowledge and the best ways to reach their target audience in order to practise effective online public relations.

In earlier literature, online public relations is governed primarily as a means to establish media relations, to issue media releases electronically and to generate publicity through various corporate online communication techniques (Ellsworth & Ellsworth 1997). However, online public relations is no longer only about generating publicity or establishing better media relations. This statement is supported by the findings of a content analysis of Fortune 100 company websites by Perry and Bodkin (2000:88). Their findings indicate that online public relations includes mostly news (for instance, media releases) but also speeches, educational programmes, corporate identity materials, public service activities, investor information and lobbying or cause related information. They also found that the most frequently used components in online public relations were news-related and shareholder information which was the same as for traditional public relations.

According to Perry and Bodkin (2000:88), online public relations can have an impact on consumer brand choice by providing organisational as well as product-specific information, which may play a vital role in influencing customer attitudes and behaviour. To substantiate their arguments they refer to a study by Brown and Dacin 1997 (in Perry & Bodkin 2000), which found that consumers' evaluations of corporate ability had a positive effect on product evaluations for new and unattempted products.

Apart from having an influence on consumer brand choice, public relations scholars increasingly also recognise online public relations as an effective means to establish better relationships with its publics[55] (Janal 1995; Perry & Bodkin 2000).

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[55]See section 4.8.3.3.

4.5.2   The differences between traditional and online public relations

Hurme (2001:71) points out that two kinds of public relations practitioners have emerged, namely those who use traditional tools and those who practise corporate online communication, although both complement the practice of public relations and will be increasingly merged. However, public relations scholars and theorists predict that traditional and online public relations will increasingly be merged, but that the one will never be replaced by the other.   This is an organisational practice which has become quite evident in organisations.

Contradictory arguments exist in the literature regarding whether online public relations will eventually replace traditional public relations tasks such as analysis, planning, action and evaluation or traditional public relations tools such as print media. Various public relations scholars argue that online public relations instead provides new challenges to the public relations industry because an integrated image of an organisation can be projected (Hurme 2001; Janal 1995; Lordan 1999) and online public relations can also build better relationships with the organisation's publics (Bayne 2000; Marlow 1996). However, Weber (1995) points out much earlier that in addition to building essential electronic relationships, public relations will always need some form of old-fashioned human contact. This argument is underscored by Lordan (1999:15 & 17), who states that the foundations of good public relations remain the same: anticipating and meeting the needs of clients and the media, and providing informed and useful counsel. He reiterates arguments that new technologies in public relations must be carefully evaluated and applied but will not necessarily replace traditional public relations methods.

The new communication paradigm in particular provides the public relations industry with new keywords, which Hurme (2001) identifies as interactivity, dialogue, dynamism and involvement. In the early 1990s, Duffy and Palmer (1994:28) are already arguing

in favour of the capabilities of the World Wide Web in terms of multimedia communication and better or added feedback. This is also underscored by Weber's (1995) arguments about more visual impact which the organisation can add to its current communications with its publics.

Technologies such as the World Wide Web have impacted on public relations practice in the sense that communication has become a communication platform because of discussion groups, chat rooms or group decision systems. In addition, communication, like online marketing, has also shifted away from mass communication (one to many) to more interactive communication (one to one or many to many), which Hurme (2001:73) classifies according to two types in the public relations industry[56].

Guth and Marsh (2000:351) point out that the growth in communications technology allows practitioners to reach more people at a lower cost, and in a manner that levels the playing field between the small one-person consultancy and the huge multi-employee agency. They argue that the Internet has assisted in reducing the psychological distance that exists between an organisation and its publics which is important to its success. Lordan (1999:15) argues that one of the main changes in public relations as a result of the Internet is the increase in the speed of information distribution, which he refers to as a new model, referred to as the hyperspeed process. The World Wide Web now allows public relations practitioners to monitor information before it reaches traditional press outlets.

In addition to a change in the traditional communication model, public relations practitioners now also have to cater for an audience that has become used to the speed and global reach of the Internet. Much of the information that reaches the target audience no longer passes through traditional gatekeepers which results in both freedom of speech and distribution of information, but unfortunately also often to inaccurate information. One of the risks of eliminating the gatekeeper is that the

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[56]Hurme (2001) identifies quasi-interactivity (one-way communication such as subscribing to the organisation's news releases and sending feedback to the organisation in some instances) and two-way truly interactive communication (for instance, exchanging e-mail messages).

message may be regarded as less credible (Bayne 2000; Hurme 2001).

However, Janal (1995:288) emphasises the tremendous opportunities which corporate online communication affords for organisations to boost both their image and sales through direct online publicity by eliminating the gatekeeper. Because the media are no longer acting as gatekeepers, the possibility of distorting the message, misinterpreting or twisting it negatively, which often happen in traditional media, is eliminated.

Guth and Marsh (2000:354), however, highlight the dangers of less credible corporate online communication. They contend that the loss of credibility in terms of online messages can be prevented if public relations practitioners deliver upon promises made on the World Wide Web. In addition, they refer to the Uses and Gratification Theory which states that each person has become his or her own information gatekeeper and will therefore choose from a wide variety of information sources. This theory is significant to online public relations in that it allows for *push technology*[57] which affords Internet users the opportunity to decide what categories of information reach them at the exclusion of other information, for instance, by signing up for various push services. Push technology, however, makes it more difficult to gain the attention of Internet users (Guth & Marsh 2000:357).

Online public relations like online marketing, also adopts popular Internet resources to attain specific organisational objectives and build better relationships with the organisation's publics[58]. The corporate website, e-mail and online services in particular can realise various public relations goals.

Despite the numerous online opportunities for public relations practitioners, Guth and Marsh (2000:36) caution that this profession still faces several problems such as the online generation gap, Internet research problems and passive communication (unless

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[57]The organisation attempts to reach its target audience through marketing communication messages after it has selected an appropriate target audience through market research.
[58]See section 4.8.3.

users subscribe to an online service).

Table 4.3 below depicts differences between online and traditional public relations:

Table 4.3: Differences between online and traditional public relations

Online public relations	Traditional public relations
Supports interactive communication (one to one or many to many).	Supports mass communication (one to many).
The gatekeeper is eliminated.	The media act as gatekeeper.
Supports push public relations services	Supports pull public relations services

4.6 INTERNET RESOURCES FOR CORPORATE ONLINE COMMUNICATION

This section contextualises the statements that were selected for the Q study (see annexure A). Internet resources refer to Internet applications such as the World Wide Web, the corporate website, electronic mail, online services and multimedia (Prescott & Van Slyke 1997:119).

Theorists and scholars regard these Internet resources as having the most benefit for corporate online communication (Angell & Heslop 1995; Bayne 2000; Bobbitt 1995; Herbig & Hale 1997; Holtz 1998; Janal 1995; Kitchen 1999).

4.6.1   The World Wide Web

According to the vast array of literature available on the development and uses of the Internet , the World Wide Web is also known by various names such as the Web, World Wide Web or W3. It was originally developed in Switzerland at the CERN research centre to create a way for the CERN physicists to share their work and to use community information. The idea of the World Wide Web expanded rapidly and was soon embraced in the Internet context as a general mechanism for accessing

information and services (Guth & Marsh 2000; Hahn & Stout 1994; Herbig & Hale 1997; Marlow 1996). According to Weiss and Faith (1999:125), the World Wide Web became extremely prominent in 1994 and replaced older technologies such as Gopher and FTP as a communication tool.

The World Wide Web combines the Internet with the concept of hypermedia navigation. It uses the resources of the Internet to offer a convenient and efficient way of presenting information structures. A human browser of the World Wide Web sees a hypertext document containing hypertext links to documents elsewhere on the World Wide Web (Todd 1999:36).

The World Wide Web has various features which make it valuable for corporate online communication. Holtz (1998:9) applauds the World Wide Web's ability to adopt multimedia that render this medium both effective and interactive. Because the World Wide Web constitutes millions of individual pages and websites, an organisation's corporate website can easily be overlooked. What makes the World Wide Web such a powerful communication medium is that a link might lead a user to any type of Internet resource, for instance a text file and a Usenet newsgroup (Ainscough & Luckett 1996:37; Hahn & Stout 1994).

4.6.1.1 The corporate website

This thesis is concerned with the websites of organisations and not private individuals and throughout the thesis such websites will be referred to as corporate websites. A corporate website can be any website of any organisation that employs Internet resources to practise corporate online communication in terms of selling its product(s) and/or service(s). The corporate website is the most frequently used Internet resource to practise corporate online communication.

The corporate website is the result of the World Wide Web and constitutes an organised way in which organisations prefer to provide online information on their products and/or services to a global target audience. It is accessible through the universal resource

locator (URL[59]), which is the address of a resource on the Internet. It consists of hypertext documents, like a paper document (Todd 1999:37).

Apart from hypertext documents, the corporate website may also contain information in a variety of other forms such as still pictures, graphics (for instance, logos), prerecorded music, sequences of moving images (video) and links to other hypertext documents located anywhere on the World Wide Web (Todd 1999:37).

Organisations realise the kind of impact an online presence will have on their success. Sherwin and Avila (1997:170) argue that organisations are consequently investing millions of rands in their online presences. Entire industries ranging from advertising, marketing, commerce, auditing, products and services, publications, television programming and even public relations have developed out of the growth of and investment in the Internet.

Because the corporate website is such a powerful marketing and public relations tool, it should be developed to attain specific goals and be based on market research (Aldridge et al 1997 ; Ellsworth & Ellsworth 1997; Herbig & Hale 1997; Palumbo & Herbig 1998). An online presence has become increasingly important. Breitenbach and Van Doren (1998:558) criticise organisations that do not have an online presence as "living in the past".

A corporate website also has the following advantages:

- It provides opportunities to present information about the organisation, which can be accessed from anywhere in the world (Ainscough & Luckett 1996:39).
- Information about the organisation is available 24 hours a day (Ainscough &

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[59] Universal resource locator. An Internet or website address for a computer or a document comprising of a communications protocol followed by a colon and two slashes (as http://), and identifier of a computer (for instance, unisa.ac.za) and usually a path through a directory to a file.

Luckett 1996:44).

- It can be used as a valuable customer service tool (Ainscough & Luckett 1996:44).

- Organisations can use the feedback on their corporate websites and client databases to target specific customer groups with specific needs[60] (Hamill, in Kitchen 1999:384).

- It is a new and highly efficient way of accessing, organising and sharing information (Ainscough & Luckett 1996:36).

- It is a powerful marketing and public relations tool (Aldridge et al 1997).

Despite the enormous opportunities that a corporate website can offer an organisation, there are still numerous shortcomings and problems that need to be overcome which impact on corporate online communication. The most common shortcomings and problems related to corporate websites are the following:

- They are designed by people who are not experts in marketing or marketing communications (Weiss & Faith 1999:125).

- Some organisations do not know how to make the most of their online presence (Perry & Bodkin 2000).

- Some organisations do not retain their online customers because of poor online customer service (Sterne 2000:8).

- There is still a lack of credibility and trust (Hoffman, Novak & Peralta 1998; Jarvis 2000 & Merrilees & Fry 2003).

- They compete with millions of other corporate websites (Ellsworth & Ellsworth 1997:61).

- Security, international laws, intellectual property, availability of personal computers and poor telecommunication infrastructure are involved (Palumbo & Herbig 1998:253).

- There are frequent language and cultural obstacles (Palumbo & Herbig

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[60]See section 4.8.3.3.

1998:256).

Organisations use e-mail, online services and multimedia on the corporate website to practise corporate online communication. These will be discussed in the sections below.

a   Electronic mail (e-mail)

Electronic mail or e-mail is the oldest feature of the Internet and was first developed in the early 1970s to allow computer users to send messages and share text files with other users on the same network. Networks that are connected to the Internet allow individual users to send messages and share text files with users which are connected to other networks. In industry e-mail has various beneficial applications in an organisational communication context such as immediacy and a paperless office environment (Angell & Hesslop1995; Bobbit 1995; Herbig & Hale 1997; Kitchen 1999).

Herbig and Hale (1997:97) also refer to e-mail as the latest paradigm in communication, while Todd (1999) sees it as one of the most useful aspects of the Internet's ability to send and receive e-mail (text and coded binary data) between users of the Internet. Hoey (1998:32) appreciates the use of e-mail as a powerful marketing medium because of its interactivity and mass media potential.

According to Burke (2001:115), e-mail constitutes an important Internet tool in allowing the organisation to not only interact with its customers, but also to forge long-term relationships with customers. It can therefore impact on the image of the organisation and should preferably be considered by the organisation in the formation of its policies and procedures[61].

E-mail has increasingly been used by marketers for marketing purposes, but various theorists warn that this form of marketing may rather alienate potential customers if the e-mail is unsolicited. Recipients should therefore be able to choose whether or not to

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[61]See section 4.8.3.3.

subscribe to a particular mailing list or not (Holtz 1998:13). According to Nielsen (2000), e-mail should only be sent to users who have opted in to the mailing list. Palumbo and Herbig (1998:253), emphasise that although it can be a powerful marketing tool, e-mail response should be immediate in order to retain customers[62].

According to available literature, public relations practitioners primarily use e-mail to send out media releases and establish relations with the media and the organisation's various publics, which have become a common daily event (Marlow 1996:73).

However, little research has been done on the correct corporate use of e-mail in the organisation. Stevens and McElhill (2000) propose a multidimensional positioning model for practical use by managers to understand their organisation's present use of e-mail on four dimensions, after they have conducted qualitative and quantitative research in this regard[63] .

According to a pertinent Internet article of 2004 (see MFSA launches anti-spam campaign … 2004), organisations should preferably obtain permission to send marketing e-mail messages, especially due to new e-mail software developments. The latest versions of popular e-mail software, for instance, have a "report Spam" feature which blacklists the source of unwanted commercial e-mail messages. Spam e-mail is considered to be one of the most significant threats to the future of online marketing and as a result the Marketing Federation of South Africa (MFSA) released a set of landmark guidelines in April 2004 designed to combat spam e-mail and to boost legitimate e-mail marketing in South Africa. One guideline, for instance, stipulates that marketers should not acquire e-mail addresses secretly through automated mechanisms without the consumer's consent (MFSA launches anti-spam campaign … 2004).

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[62]See section 4.8.3.3.

[63]The four dimensions are information management, people influences, corporate culture and knowledge management.

b   Online services

According to Hoey (1998:36), online forums create an ideal opportunity for an organisation to enhance its marketing communication through a hypermedia environment. Nielsen (2000) argues that mailing lists allow the organisation to provide more services to its website users. More services become possible when an organisation can reach out to users and provide them with time-dependent information.

The following forms of online services exist:

i   Usenet

According to Bobbitt (1995), Usenet is a collection of online forums, which is sometimes referred to as newsgroups, discussion groups or bulletin boards, through which discussion and debates of interests are conducted. The messages posted to a newsgroup are organised by a host computer which determines how long messages remain active before being removed. There are currently thousands of newsgroups and mailing lists on Usenet where users discuss thousands of topics. Some theorists and scholars argue in favour of advertising using newsgroups (Angell & Heslop 1995), while others (Janal 1995; Holtz 1998) are more concerned about netiquette, which requires users not to abuse discussion groups for advertising and marketing purposes.

Hamill and Kitchen (Kitchen 1999:388) expand on this perspective by emphasising that the effective use of newsgroups is very crucial to successful online marketing. This is because proactive use of online discussion groups can be a vital source of primary market research (information) as well as an excellent way of promoting the organisation and its website to specific target audiences.

ii   Listserv

Bobbitt (1995) explains that a Listserv is similar to Usenet, except that instead of

messages being posted to an electronic bulletin board, they are sent directly to users in the form of an e-mail. Topics that are discussed in a Listserv are usually more serious than in a Usenet group, and the dialogue is also of a higher quality. Hamill and Kitchen (Kitchen 1999:388) point out that in a marketing communication context, a Listserv probably has more advantages than a Usenet because the former's subscribers receive messages automatically via their e-mail, while the latter's subscribers only visit occasionally.

iii   Databanks

The development of online information services (or databases) such as CompuServe, Prodigy, America Online, Delphi and Genie, were developed as a result of the Internet. These services connect subscribers who have access to the Internet to thousands of databases with information (Marlow 1996:22). Marlow (1996:23) states that although CompuServe, the world's oldest consumer-oriented online service, originated in the eighties and has millions of subscribers, the world is only in the relatively early stages of this mode of electronic communication. The new Microsoft Network is accessible in more than 35 countries and its client application is accessible in 20 languages.

c Multimedia

According to Marlow (1996:15), multimedia represents a distinct medium even though there are similarities between interactive videodisc and multimedia. Multimedia can be defined as an "interactive database that allows users to access information in multiple forms, including text, graphics, video and audio". Multimedia has evolved from an integration of various digital, electronic, aural and visual technologies into an interactive medium for use in the home and the office. It requires the use of a computer, CD-ROM[64] and a videodisc player (Marlow 1996:17).

Marlow (1996:17) states that the use of interactive multimedia technology, especially

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[64]Compact disk-read only memory. An acronym for a disc used to store digital data.

CD-ROM, is growing in both nonprofit and profit-making organisations. The use of multimedia ensures the impact, immediacy and selectivity of the message.

4.7 TECHNIQUES FOR CORPORATE ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Organisations practise corporate online communication on the corporate website through corporate online communication techniques such as e-commerce, customer service, product-and service-related information, company-related information to enhance its corporate image, promotional information, media relations, investors' relations, customer feedback and as an information source. In addition, it may also include internal communication via an Intranet[65].

4.7.1 Electronic commerce (e-commerce)

Although numerous definitions of the concept of e-commerce exist, there is still a lack of consensus among theorists on a conclusive definition. Typical definitions include the following:

Kao and Decoe (2003:238) refer to the following definition of e-commerce by Chan and Swatman (1999):

Electronic commerce involves the undertaking of normal commercial, government, or personal activities by means of computers and telecommunications networks, and includes a wide variety of activities involving the exchange of information, data or value-based exchanges between two parties.

Roa, Metts and Monge (2003:13) refer to a definition of e-commerce by TechRepublic

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[65] According to Mersham and Skinner (2001b:152), an Intranet is a business-wide system which makes it easy for employees to access corporate information and systems. It is held together by a common browser interface (it therefore looks like the Internet). An Intranet is usually limited to internal use in one business and may vary in sophistication from those supplying basic, general information to those that provide total interactivity. Since the focus of this study is not internal communication, the Intranet will not be discussed as a technique for corporate online communication.

(2000) and Davies and Garcia-Sierra (1999) as follows:

> The business model where transactions and interactions of information and data are primarily conducted between businesses and between customers, using electronic means in order to complete those processes more effectively across the spectrum of a business.

The Web is increasingly regarded as a direct selling medium and online selling hence its dramatic growth (Bickerton, Bickerton & Pardesi 2000:241). E-commerce or online sales is regarded as being a competitive advantage for the organisation because it provides another distribution channel for the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s), and also affords the organisation an opportunity to reach a global target audience. In addition, even small organisations have the opportunity to sell their products to much larger audiences. According to Roa et al (2003:11), small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are flexible, adaptive and innovative organisations which make e-commerce an ideal practice for them.

According to Fraser, Fraser and McDonald (2000:9), e-commerce is concerned with electronic data interchange (EDI). Product decisions can be taken on the basis of information provided by organisations in online catalogues. These catalogues are customised by recognising a sign-on and secure password by the online user. Online customers have access to customised catalogues reflecting their needs and purchasing discounts.

Because of the growth of e-commerce, over the years, various e-commerce models have been proposed by authors, for instance the one by Kao and Decou (2003). They propose a strategy-based e-commerce planning model containing seven dimensions with strategy as its core, in order for organisations to better plan their e-commerce ventures. These models confirm the merits of e-commerce.

According to Treminio (2000-2001), nowadays, organisations sell everything from books, computers, vacations, insurance, real estate to financial services via their corporate websites. However, each visitor to an organisation's corporate website is a unique person with special needs that should be addressed, which makes effective

online customer service crucial. Bickerton et al (2000: 242) regard the three primary motivators for online shopping to be saving money, time, travelling, and a wider choice of products for the customer. However, there are still gaps in terms of online security and completion of online transactions, while numerous users are still wary of using the Internet for their purchases. Research by various organisations indicates that the standard of online customer service is still poor, making it difficult for organisations to retain their online customers (Treminio 2000-2001).

E-commerce can include business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce as well as business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce. B2C-e-commerce involves businesses selling products or services online to consumers, whereas B2B e-commerce entails businesses selling products or services online to other businesses. B2B e-commerce is more refined, active and utilised than B2C e-commerce and is a billion dollar industry (Botha, Bothma & Geldenhuys 2004:319).

E-commerce can assume many forms. Cybermalls are one such example. Palumbo and Herbig (1998:253) refer to cybermalls as valuable Internet tools, even though only in an indirect fashion. Cybermalls are virtual marketplaces which consist of individual websites linked under a general site. Palumbo and Herbig (1998:254) discuss two kinds of cybermalls as identified by Mardenfield (1996). The vertical kind of cybermall consists of cyberstores selling the same type of product. The horizontal kind of cybermalls consists of the bookstore which might be next to the jewellery store, selling different kind of products.

Cybermalls allow small and large organisations to reach a global market in an extremely cost-effective manner, thereby enabling smaller organisations to compete with large international organisations.

4.7.2 Online customer service

Earlier research indicates that the standard of online customer service is still poor making it difficult for organisations to retain their online customers (Treminio 2000-2001). Results of research by Jupiter Media Metrix indicate that during the holiday shopping season in the USA, only 30 percent of online retailers responded to customer service e-mail requests within six hours. This is detrimental to an organisation's online success because 57 percent of respondents indicated that the swiftness of a response from a retailer to a customer service e-mail would affect their future purchasing decisions. Fifty-three percent indicated that they would be less likely to buy from the traditional store if they had had a bad experience with the same retailer's online service (Jupiter Media Matrix. Online customer service remains poor … 2002).   Since the Internet is a medium in which users expect instant satisfaction, delays could immediately alienate customers or potential customers (LaMonica 1999).   This is underscored by Records (2000:22B), who argues that an organisation's online success can be vastly improved when customers are assisted to obtain the products they want at the best available price. This should be followed-up with a strong customer support system.

Realising the importance of good customer service, organisations adopt and investigate various online technology tools to help them provide better online customer service, for instance, customer relationship management (CRM) software (Dilger 2000). CRM software allows an organisation to track individual people and to have access to information and people which can lead to faster service, higher customer satisfaction, improved customer retention and loyalty. Providing the highest level of customer access to internal information is a vital part of CRM (Sterne 2000:292-294). However, Burke (2001:30) argues that CRM software assists in building long-term online relationships rather than retaining online customers because a corporate website that provides customers with online tools to simplify transactions and resources to assist them,

cultivates lasting relationships.

Sterne (2000:108) describes the online (or e-mail) newsletter as proactive customer service by the organisation. She explains that this Internet tool is used to stay in touch with and keep customers informed, and consists mostly of industry news, product promotions and helpful hints. In some cases, the online newsletter includes stories told by other customers which project favourably on the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s). Sterne (2000:109), however, warns that customers or users should never be annoyed by unsolicited newsletters and should preferably choose to sign up before they receive them.

According to Brink and Berndt (2004:59), customers perceive services in terms of the quality of service provided and the satisfaction level attained. They refer to five dimensions that will influence customers' perceived service quality:

- *Reliability*: The organisation must deliver what it promised within the anticipated time frame.
- *Responsiveness.* The organisation's employees must respond immediately to requests and indicate when the service will be delivered.
- *Assurance.* The employees' behaviour must enhance confidence in the organisation.
- *Empathy.* The organisation must attempt to understand the customer's problems and act accordingly.
- *Tangibles.* This refers to facilities, equipment and material used which must reflect positively on the organisation.

4.7.3 Product-and service-related information

The corporate website provides an ideal platform for the organisation to provide in-depth information about all the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s). Burke (2001:56) contends that this information should be useful and easy to access. This is reiterated

by Nielsen (2001), who states that basic information must be easy to find and not be written in a difficult style. Hurme (2001:74) further maintains that website content needs to be continually updated for nothing is older than information that is both outdated and online.

4.7.4   Company-related information

According to Karayanni and Baltas (2003:108), company-related information includes details of the organisation's history and culture, its financial health, employees' profile and affiliation ties. They argue that this type of information on the corporate website enhances the organisation's corporate image. They also contend that the organisation's corporate identity should be reflected on its corporate website in order to create a feeling of familiarity. A study by Karayanni and Baltas (2003:108) on website characteristics using factor analysis, supports their hypothesis that the above company-related information on a corporate website can be related to higher industrial sales achieved through the Internet.

Arguments by Breitenbach and Van Doren (1998:562) support information on the corporate website about the organisation's charitable activities, community efforts and details about the environmental projects in which it is involved. They maintain that online customers may be more inclined to purchase products and services from socially responsible organisations.

4.7.5   Online media relations

Marlow (1996:147) explains that online media relations constitutes electronic distribution of news releases and e-mail responses to reporters' inquiries.

New technology also allows for electronic media kits[66].   According to Hurme (2001:74), new technology can assist the public relations practitioner in establishing better relations with the media. A corporate website, for instance, should have a media kit or media room, providing the media with immediate access to press releases, biographical information, photos and questions and answers (Hurme 2001:74).

Mersham and Skinner (2001a:202) reiterate that organisations should attempt to have reporters use their websites for up-to-date information about the organisation and its latest media releases.

4.7.6   Investors' relations

Newsom et al (2004:8) explain that investors' relations include the organisation's annual report with detailed information about its financial position. This information has great value for stockholders.   Mersham et al (1995:120) list investor publics as the organisation's stakeholders and potential stakeholders, security analysts and investment counsellors, financial media, major wire services, major business magazines and newspapers. Karayanni and Baltas (2003:108) argue that online information about corporate financial health may act as a "control mechanism" for online customers with regard to ensure future business transactions.

4.7.7   Customer feedback

Organisations realise that customer feedback is vital for their success because it allows them to improve both their product(s) and/or service(s). The corporate website is increasingly used to build up a customer profile and customer databank in order to target the right customers and for future marketing purposes. This type of information can indicate who is visiting the website and for what reasons (Forrest 1999:23). Hence various resources can be used to gather information on website visitors to build up a

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[66] An electronic media kit refers to linear or multimedia video material included in the traditional media kit (Marlow 1996:66).

customer profile. According to Sterne (2000:231), storing information on each customer leads to a stronger relationship with the online customer because the online customer's experience will be far more personal.

Since website visitors often do not have the time to complete lengthy questionnaires, marketers use various tactics such as the following to capture their data (Janal 1995:98-99):

- Marketers ask for feedback on the website.
- A zip code is requested when information on the user is completed to establish in which city and province he or she lives.
- A contest or free product is offered in order to obtain addresses.
- Registration is required to access deeper levels of the web page.
- A survey or opinion poll is conducted on the website and the "yes" or "no" buttons are in fact mailto (*e-mail address*) buttons that send the participant's e-mail address to the organisation. Spam e-mail is regarded as one of the most significant threats to the future of online marketing - hence the Marketing Federation of South Africa's (MFSA) release of a set of landmark guidelines in April 2004 designed to combat spam e-mail and to boost legitimate e-mail marketing in South Africa. One guideline, for instance, stipulates that marketers should not acquire e-mail addresses secretly through automated mechanisms without the consumer's consent (MFSA launches anti-spam campaign … 2004).
- Online visits are monitored through software programs that can track online usage by visitors and customers.
- E-mail surveys can be used when the organisation has developed an e-mail list of customers.

4.7.8   Information source

The organisation's corporate website can be a valuable instrument to serve as a source of information to the online customer. According to Burke (2001:131), a virtual library with training and educational materials and an inventory of what the organisation has in print, will establish the organisation as a valuable resource for the online customer. Breitenbach and Van Doren (1998:562-565) propose that an organisation could devote a section of its website to daily news on a particular industry. This section could also include press releases about new product innovations and discoveries made by the organisation. Interestingly, Burke (2001:131) argues in favour of a community bulletin board in which charities and other nonprofit organisations will have free space on the organisation's corporate website to publicise their events. This will not only enhance the organisation's credibility in terms of corporate online communication but also generate more traffic to its corporate website.

4.7.9   Online promotions

Janal (1995:282) is in favour of online promotions, not only to assist the organisation to strategically reach its target audiences, but also to reach and retain customers who are really interested in online promotions in a dynamic way. He cites free product samples, contests and online information about the organisation and its product(s) and/or service(s) as examples of online promotional tactics.

4.8 CORPORATE ONLINE COMMUNICATION: AN MPR PERSPECTIVE

Corporate online communication from an MPR perspective constitutes the use of appropriate Internet resources as well as integrated corporate online communication techniques to enhance credibility and trust and to establish long-term relationships with the organisation's online customers with regard to the selling of its product(s) and/or service(s).

This section first discusses the nature of corporate online communication and then indicates the current integration of corporate online communication techniques on the corporate website. In conclusion it explains corporate online communication in relation to the identified factors for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective.

Corporate online communication is usually integrated in the sense that it comprises various forms of marketing communications such as advertising, public relations and sales promotion. This study concentrates on marketing and public relations techniques because they are regarded as the two main communication functions (Ranchhod et al 2002:6).

Theorists realise the benefits of online integration. Ellsworth and Ellsworth (1997:61), for instance, contend that online marketing will only be effective once it is integrated with other techniques such as online public relations and the use of various Internet resources such as discussion groups, e-mail or Usenet newsgroups. They argue that the integration of corporate online communication techniques will enhance the organisation's chances to attract users to its corporate website because it has to compete with millions of other websites.

4.8.1 The nature of corporate online communication

Corporate online communication is interactive[67], immediate, receivers have more control, it is flexible, allows more freedom and uses hypermedia. Interactivity, for instance, allows receivers to create their own messages, publish their own content or

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[67]Interactivity refers to the interaction between the site and a user of that site and is the basis of a computer-mediated communication environment (Hoffman & Novak 1996, in Merrilees & Fry 2003:123).

engage in online transactions (Pavlik 1998:137). Peters (1998:23) describes the concept of interactivity as a key distinguishing feature of corporate online communication because it facilitates interaction between the message's communicator(s) and receiver(s). The Internet also allows for a mass interactive dialogue between exchange parties as a result of commercial online services and the introduction of the World Wide Web.

Wells et al (2003:474) refer to comments by Paul Holmes, the editor of *Inside PR* that "the Internet is about those things public relations does well: dialogue, rather than monologue, education rather than promotion, relationship-building rather than transaction, all a company's audiences, rather than its customers only".

Ranchhod et al (2002:8) suggest four "basic pillars" for general effective communication and value generation, namely dialogue, borderless communication, inclusive communication and continuous communication, which should especially be practised in the corporate online communication environment and be pursued concurrently. These "pillars" are elucidated as follows:

- *Dialogue.* The whole process of corporate online communication starts with a dialogue because communication should fundamentally be a process of exchange. The online environment allows for the exchange of communication messages between the organisation and its customers. Hence direct feedback from customers is possible and this enables the organisation to adapt its online messages to comply with the needs of its target audiences. The old models of one-way communication are thus no longer valid for corporate online communication, but should be replaced by many-to-many communication models.

- *Borderless communication.* By strategically planning messages, communication can be borderless and thus consistently delivered across cultures and time

zones. The Internet enables the organisation to deliver similar online messages to customers from different cultures in different time zones at the same time. Hence, the organisation needs to develop online messages that will be understood and will persuade customers from diverse cultures.

Borderless communication also entails that communication messages should be consistent across any organisation's advertising, marketing and public relations (marketing communication) activities.

- *Inclusive communication.* Inclusive communication should reach both internal and external audiences. Organisational communication messages should be integrated and communicated to all stakeholders in the same manner. Inclusive communication includes employees, customers and any other stakeholders. The integrated manner in which messages are communicated to different stakeholders creates synergy in any organisational communication strategy.

- *Continuous communication.* The organisation should ensure that online messages are communicated to different stakeholders on a continuous basis. All stakeholders should be updated and informed of any new developments in products and/or services, as well as organisational decisions that could influence them.

4.8.2 Current integration of corporate online communication techniques on the corporate website

Ashcroft and Hoey's (2001:69) arguments not only support integrated corporate online communication techniques, but also consider the benefits of traditional media. They contend that corporate online communication techniques should preferably be part of an overall plan which should also accommodate traditional media. They also argue

in favour of the integration of traditional marketing and public relations evaluation techniques as the key to an effective marketing mix to reach all the targeted market segments[68].

Newsom et al (2004:58) and Steve (2000) explain the nature of integrated corporate online communication techniques. In an integrated corporate online communication environment, the organisation's advertising, promotions, media relations, employee communications, investors communications and its Internet presence are all coordinated and based on its mission and positioning statements to provide consistency to all the organisations' messages and actions. According to Steve (2000), nowadays corporate websites are used by public relations professionals to post testimonials from satisfied buyers, to make new product announcements and to allow the organisation to respond publicly to events. Public relations professionals do not rely on publicity only to enhance credibility, but also use the corporate website, and in the process employ online marketing and public relations techniques.

Ranchhod et al (2002:6) maintain that the distinction between marketing and public relations messages in an online environment have become more "blurred", especially on the corporate website. They regard these disciplines as the two main communication functions, which are beginning to overlap and support each other.

Research[69] by Ranchhod et al (2002) indicates that corporate online communication includes both marketing and public relations messages, but that one will be predominant and the other secondary. The predominance will depend upon the communication objectives and the target audiences of a specific organisation. Their study investigates

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[68]See chapter 2, section 2.2.3.

[69]The Internet presence of 600 organisations with a well-developed biotechnology sector was investigated and analysed by a research team during March to April 1999 (Ranchhod et al 2002:6).

- the main types of messages that organisations use on the Internet
- the balance between marketing communication and public relations in the Internet communication strategy
- the main categories of target audiences for the Internet messages
- the degree to which organisations take advantage of the high interactivity of the World Wide Web (ie the level of interaction allowed by the organisation's corporate website)
- the relationship between the corporate online communication strategies and the level of interaction allowed by the organisation's corporate website

It was also established that marketing communication messages provided information pertaining to the commercial activities of organisations, whereas public relations messages were aimed at increasing the audience's understanding of the organisation and its activities (Ranchhod et al 2002:13).

Janal's earlier arguments (1995:31) reiterate the above points of view that the "lines of distinction blur" in online environments. He thus suggests that new communication forms need to be created online.

Spataro (1998:16) introduces an interesting perspective when he refers to the integration of online marketing and public relations techniques as a new marketing communications discipline. He refers to this discipline as "Net Relations", a combination of direct online marketing and public relations. He regards Net Relations to be significant in focusing the attention of target audiences on the information, products and services on an organisation's corporate website. He argues that all "smart" organisations implement an online direct marketing and public relations strategy.

Spataro (1998:17-18) consequently identifies six steps organisations should take to implement a successful Net Relations programme[70].

Earlier research by Perry and Bodkin (2000:88) confirms the practice of online marketing communications which is still in its "infancy". The study[71] identifies the components of the online marketing communication mix as advertising, sales promotions, public relations and direct marketing. They specifically performed a content analysis of websites, which use a variety of the following marketing communication tools:

- communicating product, pricing and dealer/retail location information
- related and unrelated advertisements
- sales promotion
- direct marketing
- basic company information
- public relations

They found considerable inconsistency in the way members of the *Fortune 100* used their websites which ranged from simple sites focusing on basic company information to more complex ones incorporating a mix of promotional elements such as media releases, advertisements, games, free gifts and pricing information. Based on their findings, Perry and Bodkin (2000:88) argue that

- the major sales promotion tools relevant to corporate websites include coupons, refunds/rebates, premium and speciality offers, sampling offers, online demonstrations and contests, sweepstakes and games

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[70] Spataro (1998:17-18) identifies the following steps: learn the language of the Web, research your target audience on the web, understand the services available, create a focused plan, hire Web-savvy professionals and prepare for the future.
[71] Perry and Bodkin (2000) conducted a content analysis of Fortune 100 company websites. The sample consisted of the top 100 revenue-producing organisations as identified by *Fortune* magazine's website during the period mid-October to mid-December 1998 across a variety of industries.

- public relations on the website includes news (for instance, press releases), speeches, educational programmes, corporate identity materials, public service activities, investor information and lobbying or cause-related information
- direct marketing on the corporate website includes e-commerce by providing site visitors the ability to purchase products online; the second form, customer service, includes any direct marketing activity involving auxiliary services such as post-sales communications regarding tracking purchases/account activity and product use, delivery or problems
- advertising has the same function online as in the physical marketplace; the goals of advertising are to create awareness, communicate benefits, promote and urge consumers into action

Kitchen (1999:319) offers a more exhaustive list of the elements that a corporate website should contain to achieve various marketing communication tasks:

- advertising
- corporate visibility
- brand name recognition
- public relations
- press releases
- corporate sponsorship
- direct sales
- customer support
- technical assistance
- online sales (e-commerce)

Arguments by Breitenbach and Van Doren (1998:562) differ from earlier arguments because they refer to various MPR activities[72] which can be used on the organisation's corporate website to enable the consumer to better identify himself or herself with the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s), for instance, making customers or the publics aware of any charitable activities, community efforts and environmental projects in which the organisation is involved. These theorists argue that users may be more inclined to purchase products and services from socially responsible organisations, one of the principles of the MPR theory.

An Italian research study concludes that nonintegration of online marketing and public relations techniques on the corporate website can lead to fragmentation and inconsistency in communication. An Italian university business school (CUOA) collaborated with a group of 10 Italian small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to develop corporate online communication strategies and at the same time addressing difficulties and problems. The research group identified six natural problems in introducing corporate online communication into the organisation's marketing strategy, which includes a passive relationship with the customer because of an unclear marketing and communication strategy and nonintegrated marketing communication (a lack of consistency in communication and fragmentation) (Vescovi 2000:108-111).

4.8.3   Corporate online communication in relation to the identified factors for effective corporate online communication

In the first part of this chapter, corporate online communication is contextualised and conceptualised. In this section, corporate online communication is discussed in relation to the identified factors for effective corporate online communication. In chapter 2, three factors are identified for effective corporate online communication, namely credibility, trust and long-term relationships which are explained in more detail in chapter 3. This section indicates how these three factors can be applied on the organisation's corporate

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[72]See chapter 2, section 2.5.2.

website regarding the selling of the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s) to make corporate online communication effective. It is also indicated how these factors are currently applied.

4.8.3.1 Credibility

Besides the fact that some organisations do not know how to make the best of their online presence, some online information and communication do not establish enough credibility in terms of selling the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s). Since the Internet now also affords smaller organisations the opportunity to establish a global presence, these organisations are often unknown or not as well known as, say the larger and well-established ones. According to Swift (2001:22), an organisation's credibility, which is earned on the basis of its trustworthy behaviour will also enhance its online credibility. However, a subsequent study by Merrilees and Fry (2002)[73] indicates that the trust and credibility built up from an organisation's operations do not necessarily carry over to its online operations (Merrilees & Fry 2003:127).

Lack of credibility can be the result of a technical environment. Weiss and Faith (1999:125) point out that one of the main problems with the corporate website is that it is often created by technical people who also act as webmasters and who could have different goals and objectives from those responsible for its contents. A technical environment can have an impact on the way web content is developed and published. Beard and Olsen (1999: 208) conducted a qualitative exploratory study on webmasters as mass media gatekeepers and concluded that their personal characteristics and attitudes influence their media content decisions and that they share common values used to determine the content and design of corporate websites.

Research by Middleberg and Ross at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism in New York indicates that journalists also regard web content as

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[73]This study tests whether the connection between interactivity and online trust applies to both the traditional and online operations of an organisation and uses survey research.

noncredible. They conducted a study entitled "Media in Cyberspace" in 1999 and found that most journalists remain sceptical of most sites. In the survey of newspaper and magazine editors in the USA, they rated only trade association sites as credible (Jarvis 2000).

In order to be perceived as credible, the content on a website should be underscored by the way in which the organisation is perceived. A study[74] by Eastin (2001) indicates that the expertise of the source and knowledge of content affect online users' perception of the credibility of corporate online communication. It also underscores the fact that the dynamism[75] of the organisation plays a vital role in how credible the organisation's corporate online communication is perceived to be.

The above findings focus attention on the need to provide on its corporate website consistent corporate online communication about the organisation such as its history, profile of activities and participation in special events, its corporate culture[76], and the fact that it cares about its customers. The organisation should also provide educational, easily accessible and comprehensible information about its product(s) and/or service(s) (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565). In this way the organisation could also establish itself as a valuable resource for its online customers (Burke 2001:131). To effectively accommodate the media, a corporate website should have a media kit or media room, providing the media with immediate access to press releases, biographical information, photos and questions and answers (Hurme 2001:74).

Organisations are becoming more involved in corporate social responsibility[77] to enhance their credibility. According to Rowley (1998:199), organisations are now also using the Internet to present themselves as being socially responsible. He refers to Esrock and Leichty (1998) who discuss an analysis of a random sample of Fortune 500

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[74] Eastin (2001) conducted experimental research among 125 students at a large Mid-western university (name unknown) about their perception of online health information.
[75] See discussion in chapter 3, section 3.2.1.
[76] Corporate culture includes the values, ideals and aspirations integral to the organisation's activities (Mersham et al 1995: 82).
[77] See discussion in chapter 2, section 2.3.5.

companies which revealed that 90 percent had web pages and 82 percent of the sites addressed at least one corporate social responsibility issue. More than half of the websites had items addressing community involvement, environmental concerns and education (Rowley 1998:199).

Based on the literature review and from an MPR perspective, the following corporate online communication elements are desirable on the organisation's corporate website to enhance online credibility in the selling of the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s):

- An organisation could make users aware of any charitable activities, community efforts, and environmental projects in which the organisation is involved because users may be more inclined to purchase products and services from socially responsible organisations (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565).

- An organisation may also choose to share its history and its culture on its corporate website since consumers are more likely to buy products from a organisation they know and with which they can identify (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565).

- An organisation's corporate website should provide the most in-depth, current product or service information available, using multimedia to get the information across to users by making it more captivating (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562 - 565).

- A corporate website should include information about the organisation which aims at building its corporate image (Karayanni & Baltas 2003:108).

- The organisation's central message or selling proposition should be clearly communicated on its corporate website and be consistent with other media (Geissler 2001:496).

- A virtual library with training and educational materials (with an inventory of what the organisation has in print), will establish the organisation as a valuable resource for the online customer (Burke 2001:131).

- A community bulletin board on which charities and other nonprofit organisations

have free space on the organisation's corporate website to publicise their events, will enhance the organisation's credibility in terms of corporate online communication and generate more traffic to the corporate website (Burke 2001:131).

- An organisation should provide useful and easy-to-access information about the organisation and its product(s) and/or service(s) on its corporate website (Burke 2001:56).

- A corporate website should have a media kit or media room, providing the media with immediate access to press releases, biographical information, photos and questions and answers (Hurme 2001:74).

- An organisation could dedicate a section of its website to daily news in a particular industry. This section could also include press releases on new product innovations and discoveries made by the organisation (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565).

- Basic information must be easy to find on the corporate website and not be written in a difficult style (Nielsen 2001).

4.8.3.2 Trust

According to Ratnasingham (1998:162), the importance of trust between an organisation and its online customers is based on the potential use of technology to increase information sharing. Trust has become even more essential in global e-commerce because it eliminates face-to-face interaction. He explains that "virtuality" or an organisation that sells its product(s) and/or service(s) online requires trust to make e-commerce successful. Technology alone cannot generate trust.

Research by Hoffman et al (1998) indicates that lack of trust in e-commerce is a result of online consumers' perceived lack of control over the access others have to their personal information during the online navigation process. Their research indicates that nearly 63 percent of consumers decline to provide personal information to websites because they do not trust who is collecting the data. Online consumers also do not trust

most organisations enough to engage in online relationship exchanges with them. They suggest that trust will be best achieved by allowing the balance of power to shift towards a more cooperative interaction between the online business and its customers.

Online customers still have concerns about the following issues (Boyd 2002):

- Can websites be trusted?
- Can other people on the web be trusted?
- Can information be safely transmitted?

In the experience of one of world's most successful online auction sites, e-bay.com, corporate online communication messages are created to communicate the safety and security of online transactions. This website is extremely successful, even though online customers do not see or inspect the goods on auction. A case study by Boyd (2002) indicates that e-bay.com communicates safe online transactions within "an e-bay community" and also provides online customers with control over their online experience.

The above case study illustrates that online messages should be communicated in terms of customer privacy, secure transactions, error-free billing, and availability of merchandise. Online customers should also be able to monitor the status of their orders and online account details. Sterne (2000:30) supports the question of control to online consumers but argues that consumers need greater access to order status and account information in order for them to feel more comfortable with their purchase and to trust the organisation more. New technology facilitates customer participation and feedback. However, a study by Karayanni and Baltas (2003:108) on website characteristics using factor analysis only partially supports their hypothesis that transferring control of information flows towards the user of information can be related to higher industrial sales achieved through the Internet.

A feeling of familiarity also makes the online customer feel more at ease in his or her dealings with the organisation. Karayanni and Baltas (2003:108) argue that defining and illustrating the organisation's corporate identity reinforces customers' trust in the organisation by "acting as the counterbalance of risk". Breytenbach and Van Doren (1998) also contend that online customers are more likely to buy products from a organisation with which they can identify. A study by Karayanni and Baltas (2003:108) on website characteristics using factor analysis supports their hypothesis that an organisation's corporate identity on its corporate website can be related to higher industrial sales achieved through the Internet.

An interactive website increases online trust. In their study on website capabilities using factor analysis, Karayanni and Baltas (2003:108) established that the use of multimedia, which is built into a corporate website can be related to higher industrial sales achieved through the Internet.

Apart from the above, the organisation also needs to be visible and open to the online consumer by providing contact details and truthful information, for instance its financial standing (Karayanni & Baltas 2003:108). Burke (2001:93) even contends that an organisation's failure to post prices on its website will result in a lack of trust, and constitutes questionable online business.

Based on the literature review and from an MPR perspective, the following corporate online communication elements are desirable on the organisation's corporate website to enhance online trust in the selling of the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s):

- Providing real security, and making sure an organisation's customers know of its existence, is an essential aspect of Internet selling (Bickerton et al 2000:249).
- The corporate website should build trust in the specific website, thus reassuring customers of the security of transactions and customer privacy of the data collected (Merrilees & Fry 2003:124).
- The corporate website should provide unbiased and complete information on

availability of stock, competitive prices, delivery time and reliability (Merrilees & Fry 2003:124).

- When users have information on availability, costs and product positions, they can better plan their online experience (Dilger 2000:60).

- An organisation's failure to post prices on its corporate website will result in a lack of trust (Burke 2001:93).

- The use of multimedia (use of frames, animation, banners and audio video elements) which are built into a corporate website, will increase its interactivity and consequently online trust (Karayanni & Baltas 2003:108).

- The reflection of the organisation's corporate identity on its corporate website creates a feeling of familiarity (Karayanni & Baltas 2003:108).

- Users should be able to order and pay for items online. The payment process should provide online security to the online customer   (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565).

- Products should be delivered immediately after an online purchase so that consumers will find it much more convenient to buy from an online store (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565).

- Users could be allowed to communicate with an organisational representative while online through electronic media and text chats. This is a value-added feature that is seldom used by organisations   (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565). Treminio (2000-2001) explains that text chat can be used by customers who need a question answered at a crucial point of sale. They can click on a text chat button and a screen pops up requesting the customer's name to help personalise the communication. A customer service representative greets the customer and the two-way text-chat dialogue begins over a secure connection. When using a voice-over-Internet protocol (VOIP)[78], a visitor to a website clicks on an Internet voice button. A customer can then communicate with a customer service representative. This service connects customers

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[78] When using a voice-over-Internet protocol, a visitor to a website clicks on an Internet voice button. A customer can then communicate with a customer service representative. This service connects computers to a customer service representative's office telephone instantly and directly.

instantly and directly from their computers to a customer service representative's office telephone. According to Markette (2001), the more complex the buying decision, the higher the need is for in-depth online sales and service support. He suggests that online customer service tools such as text chat, VOIP or toll-free numbers, provide their own set of strengths and weaknesses for organisations and their customers.

- Online consumers need greater access to order status and account information to make them feel more comfortable about their purchase and increase their trust in the organisation (Sterne 2000:30). According to Dilger (2000:52), the order-management process plays an integral role in the way a business interacts with its customers. Every step of the order-management process (order entry, validation, allocation and fulfillment) should be viewed as a possible means for enhancing the company/customer relationship. LaMonica (1999) underscores the above statement by arguing that organisations should focus on small wins such as providing order status checking, which can be significant to customers.

- Information about corporate financial health, employees' profile and affiliation ties may act as a control mechanism which may guarantee stability in future business transactions (Karayanni & Baltas 2003:108).

4.8.3.3 Long-term relationships

More emphasis is placed in the literature on establishing long-term online relationships than on enhancing online credibility and trust. This is because many organisations still struggle to retain their online customers by not engaging in a long-term relationship with them. Sterne (2000:3) explains that the corporate website evolved from a new marketing medium into a valuable online customer service tool. It is also evident that online customer service is still relatively poor. Theorists therefore increasingly argue in favour of corporate websites that facilitate meaningful business and interaction with the organisation. The online user should consider his or her online visit as meaningful and worthwhile, because he or she is involved in the communication experience (Sterne

2000:8). According to Geissler (2001:489), interactive communication is the primary integrative element in building and managing brand relationships. Burke (2001:96) points out that the Internet can achieve the above because it has wonderful tools for both customer development and relationship building.

According to O'Toole (2003:115), the establishment of online relationships is not "technology specific" but "partner-based" because a successful online relationship depends on the level of support in the relationship. Online relationships refer to a trading relationship that uses both computer and telecommunication technologies. He argues that information technology has a huge impact on the nature of the way in which partners interact. The creation of online communities, for instance, enables the organisation to respond to consumer or customer groups (O'Toole 2003:115).

Online customers have high expectations of new technology. According to Johannessen, Olaissen and Olsen (1999:15), customers expect organisations to use information technology (IT) to enhance service quality and in turn, to become more satisfied with the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s). The Mortgage Servicing News (2001) adds to the above argument by stating that customers go online in the hope of finding transaction history, secure e-mail, document images, year-end and escrow statements.

Recent marketing theory such as the relationship marketing paradigm[79] recognises the importance of building improved long-term relationships with a variety of publics as opposed to the former hard sell approach, initially followed by marketers. Scholars and theorists are increasingly recognising the fact that the corporate website is central to this paradigm shift in both marketing (in terms of two-way communication and better customer relationships) and public relations practice to retain customers. Organisations can establish customised dialogues with consumers who become active participants in the corporate online communication process. The corporate website in particular allows

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[79]See chapter 2, section 2.2.2.6.

organisations to better manage this relationship (Kiani 1998; Zineldin 2000).

Zineldin (2000:14) maintains that relationship marketing cannot be successful without effective use of technology and that on the basis of technological advances, can be regarded as a new paradigm which he refers to as "technologicalship marketing".

Although it is recognised and appreciated that the corporate website can play an integral role in establishing long-term relationships with customers, the research firm Datamonitor reasons that online retailers in the USA would have lost USD13,5 billion in 2001 because of the poor standard of online service. According to Datamonitor, 69,4 percent of online transactions were abandoned in 2001 and the reasons given by consumers were the slow processing speed of orders, concerns over security and high shipping and handling costs. However, the number of online transactions that were not abandoned rose from 25,4 percent in 2000 to 30,6 in 2002 because of the increasing use of personalised marketing messages by online retailers (Datamonitor 2001).

LaMonica (1999) explains how easily an online customer can be lost to the organisation. He states that the Internet is a medium of "instant gratification" and that delays could easily turn customers or potential customers away. To prevent his, the travel website *Travelocity*, for instance, can send out a page with details of an updated gate and new departure information if an online customer's flight is delayed.

Realising the importance and value of good online customer service, various online technology tools to provide sales support and service to online visitors are adopted or have been tested by organisations (Dilger 2000; Lenius 2001; Markette 2001; Records 2000). A corporate website that provides customers with online tools to simplify transactions and resources to assist them, cultivates lasting relationships (Burke 2001:19). According to Records (2000:22B), assisting customers and organisations to obtain the products they want at the best available price and then following up with a strong customer support system, is vital for an organisation's online success. However, organisations should offer customer service tools that are unique to the Internet along

with efficient, optimum service. When an organisation establishes an online presence, it needs to be equipped to interact with its customers in every way, including the handling of volume e-mail.

Based on the literature review and from an MPR perspective, the following corporate online communication elements are desirable on the organisation's corporate website to enhance long-term relationships with online customers in the selling of the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s):

- Online users should be able to browse through a catalogue of offerings while online. This catalogue should be regularly updated and provide accurate information about the organisation's unique products and services (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562 - 565). A well-design online catalogue will make it easier for the organisation to offer customers maximum choice from its own stock (Bickerton et al 2000:252).

- A corporate website should offer a tailored response form which will assist the customers to identify their area of interest and the information they need (Bickerton et al 2000: 232).

- The corporate website could afford users the opportunity to receive free information via e-mail regarding an organisation's offerings such as brochures, catalogues, or CD-ROMs containing information in multimedia format (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565).

- A corporate website should allow users to offer comments, suggestions and complaints via e-mail to the website as this technique allows users to communicate with the organisation directly (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562 - 565). According to Bayne (2000:240), many organisations include a link at the bottom of their web pages to a contact form and/or list of offices.

- Corporate websites should provide links to other sites in which their target audience would be interested (Bickerton et al 2000: 235). Corporate websites could provide hot links to sites containing information pertinent to the organisation's products or services. These links need to be updated regularly

and provide useful information to the consumer (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565).

- Each corporate website could dedicate a section of its site for questions and problems (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565). Internet users enjoy frequently asked questions (FAQs) (Bickerton et al 2000:236).

- The corporate website could also provide users with tools to enable them to search for information on an aspect of a particular product and/or service (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565). Proper navigation tools will make the underlying information architecture transparent for users and to help them to work through the website in a logical way (Nielsen 1999, in Clyde 2000:103). Links should be put on the first screen of the corporate website so that the online customer knows where to find specific information (Bickerton et al 2000: 234). A clear link to the site map should also be provided on every page to help customers find information. A site map's main benefit is to provide users with an overview of the site's areas at a single glance (Nielsen 2002). In addition, Hoey (1998:33) points out that promotion in the site is largely facilitated by its navigability, which includes the combination of benefit statements and hyperlinks, together with a customer-focused structure, which provides cues or pointers (together with instant accessibility), to the most relevant products in the customer's area of interest. However, organisations should provide a keyword search on the front of their websites only when their customers will be able to identify the precise product name (Bickerton et al 2000:195). Bayne (2000:273) argues that a search engine on the corporate website will also simplify the use of an online library.

- Another way to help customers find information on a corporate website, is by providing them with a visual clue. Sifting through masses of textual information is hard work but when customers recognise patterns of colour, this will make it easier for them to find the online information (Sterne 2000:71).

- Each corporate website could have an area dedicated to real-time discussions among users visiting the website. This will engage the user with the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s) allow for feedback from the

organisation as well as other users (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562 - 565).

- Corporate websites should also allow users to provide their e-mail addresses as well as other information so that users can receive electronic updates from the organisation   (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565).

- To assist customers online an organisation needs tools for e-mail management, for database access, for web-based order processing or for web page personalisation (Sterne 2000:34).

- Website content needs to be continually updated for nothing is older than information that is both outdated and online (Hurme 2001:74).

- When creating each page on a corporate website, organisations need to create some meta data (subject, date, author, product category, information on who is allowed to see the page, and who can modify it). This will facilitate the customer's online experience (Sterne 2000:69).

- Answerbots on a corporate website are extremely useful in delivering the right answers to an organisation's online customers. Answerbots are autodata that answer customer questions in real time and proactively gather key marketing data (Sterne 2000:72).

- An autoresponder on an organisation's corporate website provides a standard reply to every incoming message and is reassuring to the customer that his or her enquiry will receive attention in due course (Sterne 2000:92).

- Customers generally enjoy receiving industry news, product promotions, helpful hints and anything that will assist them in making better use of an organisation's products via the e-mail newsletter (Sterne 2000:108).

- Early on in the life of the Internet, the Usenet newsgroups became a vast resource of technical hints and assistance (Sterne 2000:127).

- Organisations could also provide some support products and services free of charge. Support products are those products or services that enhance or complement another offering of the organisation (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562- 565).

- There is tremendous value in an organisation allowing its clients to talk to each other on the organisation's corporate website via a newsgroup because

information about the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s) will be beneficial to the organisation's customer service (Sterne 2000:137).

- A Listserver will make an organisation's customers feel special because the post is delivered directly to their e-mail in-box, which means that they do not have to log onto a newsgroup (Sterne 2000:150).

- An online video makes customer contact more personal or intimate because it allows a customer service representative to react to visual clues (Sterne 2000:179).

- Storing information on each customer leads to customer bonding on the web because it tends to make the online customer's experience much more personal (Sterne 2000:231).

- Tracking tools will read the organisation's server log files and watch what people do on its site (Sterne 2000:252).

- Customer relationship management (CRM) software will lead to faster service, greater customer satisfaction, improved retention and loyalty. CRM software allows an organisation to track individual people and to have access to information and people. Providing the highest level of customer access to internal information is an important part of CRM (Sterne 2000:292-294). However, Burke (2001:30) maintains that CRM software is not the absolute answer in retaining online customers but rather a tool that can help the organisation to build long-term online relationships.

- A corporate website should have customer contacts in order to facilitate the online experience for online customers (Ainscough & Luckett 1996:45).

- Internet resources for corporate online communication such as Usenet, Listserv, Internet Relay Chat, videoconferencing, e-mail and interactive corporate websites are essential in building electronic relationships and effective online marketing communication (Hamill & Kitchen, in Kitchen 1999:387).

- The organisation should be linked to or integrated with other relevant parties in order to manage online relationships with its customers (Law, Lau & Wong 2003:51).

- An aftersales service will show the organisation's commitment to its customers and forge a stronger bond (Burke 2001:27). Heinen (1996:11) argues that relationships with customers in particular can be elongated after an online sale was made and after the product and/or service were experienced by the customer.

- The corporate website is also an excellent medium to gather customer feedback which the organisation can use to improve on its customer service and to build an extensive customer database for future marketing purposes. According to Sampson (1998:71), an organisation can gather better customer feedback via the Internet than through traditional methods such as comment cards or toll-free telephone numbers, although his qualitative research indicates that HTML[80] customer feedback forms are not yet as sophisticated as their traditional counterparts. Cunliffe (2000:295) argues that an online questionnaire can capture information about user behaviour, which can be used to capture technical, demographic, user satisfaction and/or visit information (Cunliffe 2000: 295). However, Burke (2001:124) contends that organisations should take care in online surveys to obtain the correct and required information and for online customers to understand the questions.

- An organisation should have an exclusive website and services for loyal customers (Gilbert 1996:579).

- An organisation should have an online members' magazine (Gilbert 1996:579).

- An organisation should have online members only customer services (Gilbert 1996:579).

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[80] Hypertext Markup Language (HTML). An acronym commonly used for the coding and sets of commands used to format an interactive document for the Internet.

4.9 SUMMARY

This chapter conceptualised and contextualised corporate online communication and represents the discourse about corporate online communication from which statements were selected for the Q study that follows.

The impact of the Internet on organisational communication was also discussed. Brief reference was made to the digital divide because it has an impact on the effectiveness of corporate online communication. The corporate website was discussed as the most frequently used Internet resource to practise corporate online communication. Various corporate online communication techniques were highlighted. In conclusion corporate online communication was discussed in relation to the identified factors for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective.

Chapter 5 deals with Q methodology which is the research methodology used in this study.