

CHAPTER 8: SUMMARY, ASSESSMENT, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis has identified attributers that communicators and receivers subjectively perceive to make corporate online communication more effective. This chapter summarises and assesses the findings of the research. It concludes with recommendations and also highlights the limitations of the study.

8.2 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS WITHIN FACTORS

The findings within factors are first summarised, then related to the overall theory of the study in section 8.3 and critically assessed in section 8.4. These findings are summarised as follows:

8.2.1 Findings within factors: communicators of corporate online communication

The researcher analysed the correlation matrix that emerged after she had performed judgmental rotation and not the individual responses of the participants. The three factors thus represent the subjective perceptions of the separate groups, but not as members of the specific group, because of the possibility that the participants do not necessarily feel the same as the factor indicates. Each factor is thus an abstraction of different perceptions.

The findings within factors provide a better understanding of the meaning of each factor identified for effective corporate online communication.

8.2.1.1 Trust

The following aspects of trust are deemed significant by communicators of corporate online communication for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective:

Accountability. Corporate online communication poses no risk, is predictable, is

responsible, the intentions and motives of the communication are clear and the communication is honest and consistent and indicative of the organisation's character.

Concreteness. Corporate online communication induces confidence, respect and faith, is truthful, shows integrity, and communicates security and messages about the management of the organisation. It is accepted by the receiver.

Association. Corporate online communication communicates the ability, expertise, competence, congruence, humanity and fairness of the organisation and the fact that it can be depended upon. It portrays the kindness and compassion of the organisation and induces a feeling of loyalty.

The communicators of corporate online communication embrace all the levels of the category of trust, but all the factors reject a specific statement which is the following:

Communicating the employees' details in a contact directory

The subjective perception of the different groups is that corporate online communication does not need to communicate the organisation's employees' details in a contact directory on the organisation's corporate website.

8.2.1.2 Credibility

The following aspects of credibility are deemed significant by communicators of corporate online communication for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective:

History. Corporate online communication includes information about past actions, is trustworthy and portrays behavioural integrity.

Perception. Corporate online communication creates a favourable perception of the organisation's level of expertise, sociability and similarity to the audience. It provides for favourable information about the organisation for the media and contributes favourably to the organisation's brand.

Social responsibility. Corporate online communication communicates the believability of the organisation's intentions through information about its social responsibility. However, this level is rejected by factors 1 and 2, and only accepted by factor 3.

The following aspect of credibility is deemed insignificant by communicators of

corporate online communication for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective:

- *Social responsibility.* Corporate online communication does not communicate believability of intentions by providing for a bulletin board where nonprofit organisations can publicise their events free of charge.

All three factors reject the above statement on communicating the organisation's social responsibility.

8.2.1.3 Long-term relationships

The following aspects of long-term relationships are deemed significant by communicators of corporate online communication for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective.

Personal interaction. Corporate online communication provides for effective customer service and ample opportunities for interaction with the organisation. Communication is also personalised according to the receiver's needs.

Expectation. Corporate online communication fulfils the needs of the receiver, shows commitment and communicates differentiated products and/or services to the receiver.

The communicators of corporate online communication embrace all the levels of the category of long-term relationships but all the factors reject the following specific statements:

- Free products that can be ordered online retain customers.
- An online sales video personalises customer contact.
- Software that automatically manages customer relationships improves customer service.
- A guestbook is an effective means of building a customer database.

The subjective perception of the different groups is that corporate online communication does not provide good customer service through automated customer software. It does not build a customer database through a guestbook.

An online sales video also does not allow for better interaction, while differentiated products and/or services are not communicated by offering to order free products

online.

8.2.2 Findings within factors: receivers of corporate online communication

The researcher analysed the correlation matrix that emerged after she had performed judgmental rotation and not the individual responses of the participants. The three factors thus represent the subjective perceptions of the separate groups, but not as members of the specific group, because of the possibility that the participants do not necessarily feel the same as the factor indicates. Each factor is thus an abstraction of different perceptions.

The findings within factors provide a better understanding of the meaning of each factor identified for effective corporate online communication.

8.2.2.1 Trust

The following aspects of trust are deemed significant by the receivers of corporate online communication for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective:

Accountability. Corporate online communication poses no risk, is honest, predictable, consistent, responsible, its intentions and motives are clear, and it is also indicative of the organisation's character.

Concreteness. Corporate online communication generates confidence, respect and faith. It is truthful, displays integrity and is accepted by the receiver. It communicates openly about the management of the organisation and about security.

Association. Corporate online communication communicates the ability, expertise, competence, compassion, humanity, congruence and fairness of the organisation and communicates the fact that the organisation can be depended upon. It also induces a feeling of loyalty towards the organisation.

The receivers of corporate online communication consider all aspects of trust as significant for corporate online communication.

8.2.2.2 Credibility

The following aspects of credibility are deemed significant by the receivers of corporate

online communication for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective:

History. Corporate online communication includes past actions of the organisation, is trustworthy and displays behavioural integrity.

Perception. Corporate online communication communicates the level of expertise, composure, dynamism, sociability and extroversion of the organisation and its similarity to the receiver. It communicates favourably about the organisation's brand and provides favourable information about the organisation to the media.

Social responsibility. Corporate online communication communicates the organisation's believability of intentions through information about its social responsibility. This level is rejected by factor 1 and accepted by factor 2.

The receivers of corporate online communication embrace all the levels of the category of credibility but both factors reject the following specific statements:

- An organisation's website must provide for a community bulletin board where nonprofit organisations can publicise their events free of charge.
- The corporate website must contain information about any environmental projects in which the organisation is involved.

The subjective perception of the different groups is that corporate online communication does not include communicating social responsibility, information about environmental projects in which the organisation is involved or provides for a community bulletin board where nonprofit organisations can publicise their events free of charge. This framework is appropriate to the shortcomings in corporate online communication in terms of credibility.

8.2.2.3 Long-term relationships

The following aspects of long-term relationships are deemed significant by receivers of corporate online communication for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective:

Personal interaction. Corporate online communication provides for effective customer

service and ample opportunities for interaction with the organisation. Communication is also personalised according to the receiver's needs. Communication develops customer networks.

Expectation. Corporate online communication fulfils the needs of the receiver, shows commitment and communicates differentiated products to the receiver.

The receivers of corporate online communication embrace all the levels of the category of long-term relationships but both factors reject the following specific statements:

- A corporate website must have exclusive website services for regular customers.
- An online *members-only* magazine attracts potential customers.
- Free product samples that can be ordered retain customers.

The subjective perception of the different groups is that personalisation of corporate online communication does not include exclusive website services for regular customers or an online *members-only* magazine. Corporate online communication also does not communicate differentiated products by offering free products online.

8.3 FINDINGS RELATING TO THE OVERALL THEORY OF THE STUDY

The findings relating to the overall theory of the study are the following:

8.3.1 Trust

In an MPR perspective, trust is perceived as an absolute significant factor for effective corporate online communication. The findings correspond with the overall theory of the study because they indicate that the perception is that trust makes corporate online communication effective in the context of selling the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s) in that it creates familiarity, accessibility and visibility. The theory points out that people purchase from organisations with which they are familiar and with which they can associate and that through trust, the organisation minimises its customers' sense of risk. In particular consumer trust is built through expertise and accessibility to consumers (Harris 1991:109). It is further argued that trust requires direct involvement with consumers, both as individuals and as members of their communities. To gain trust, organisations must be visible to consumers to build confidence and reassurance

in the safety and value of their products. Consumers need to feel that the organisation is honest and concerned about them (Harris 1998:304).

The findings further correspond with the overall theory because they indicate that receivers would like communication about security, safety, privacy, prices and availability of stock (Bickerton et al 2000: 249; Burke 2001:93; Merrilees & Fry 2003:124). Receivers also would like to have control, for instance, information about the status of their orders and online account details (Sterne 2000:30). In addition, they would like information about the organisation's financial health and physical contact details. Communication needs to be interactive through the use of multimedia (Karayanni & Baltas 2003:108). The communicators of corporate online communication realise the importance of trust in an online environment and thus also perceive it as an essential component of their corporate online communication. They are, however, reluctant to communicate employees' details in a contact directory, which is deemed important for receivers.

The findings correspond with the overall theory of the study because all aspects of trust are deemed significant for corporate online communication with regard to the levels of accountability, concreteness and association as discussed in detail in section 8.2.

8.3.2 Credibility

In an MPR perspective, credibility is not perceived as an absolute factor for effective corporate online communication, but rather as two different factors. The findings do not entirely correspond with the overall theory of the study. The findings indicate that responsible communication and efficient online information are perceived to make corporate online communication effective in terms of selling the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s). These findings only correspond with the arguments in the literature that public relations builds credibility through responsible action, useful information and media endorsement (Guth & Marsh 2000:423; Marks 2002). Credibility is built when an organisation is responsive to consumer concerns and provides assistance in terms of information and service. The organisation should therefore

provide educational, easily accessible and comprehensible information about its product(s) and/or service(s) (Burke 2001:56; Nielsen, 2001). In addition 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).

The findings do not correspond with arguments in the literature that a profile of activities, participation in special events and the organisation's corporate culture will add credibility to the selling of its product(s) and/or service(s) (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562-565; Karayanni & Baltas 2003:108). Communication about the organisation's social responsibility is also discarded in the findings by both the receivers and communicators of corporate online communication. Although the organisation's history is regarded as significant by receivers for effective corporate online communication, it is incorporated into a totally different factor (meaningful relationships) and not into either of the above two factors. The findings indicate that communicators of corporate online communication fail to pay attention to responsible communication and to efficient online information which are important to receivers of corporate online communication.

Aspects of credibility deemed significant for corporate online communication with regard to the overall theory are related to the level of perception as discussed in detail in section 8.2.

8.3.3 Long-term relationships

In an MPR perspective, long-term relationships are not perceived as an absolute factor for effective corporate online communication, but rather as a blend of the factors of credibility, trust and long-term relationships. Credibility includes a perception of the organisation such as its history and brand, trust includes accountability and visibility, while long-term relationships include customer service, feedback and interaction. The emphasis is on creating meaningful relationships rather than on establishing long-term relationships. A relationship is regarded as meaningful when it is perceived to be sincere.

The findings indicate that corporate online communication is perceived to be effective when it allows for customer service, interaction, feedback and a favourable perception

of the organisation, which will enhance security and confidence. The findings support the overall theory about the importance of effective customer service, interaction and feedback (Breitenbach & Van Doren 1998:562–565; Geissler 2001:489; Records 2000:22B; Sterne 2000:8), but do not support the theory that differentiated products and/or services and personalisation make corporate online communication effective with regard to the selling of the organisation's products and/or services (Bickerton et al 2000:252).

The findings point out that corporate online communication needs to allow for ample opportunities for interaction and feedback, effective customer service and a favourable perception of, for instance, the organisation's history and brand. A favourable perception of the organisation corresponds with the theory of online credibility. To be perceived as credible, the content on a website should be underscored by the way in which the organisation is perceived (Eastin 2001).

Aspects of long-term relationships deemed significant for corporate online communication with regard to the overall theory are only related to personal interaction as discussed in detail in section 8.2, but do not include personalisation. This also includes the level of history of the factor of credibility and the levels of accountability and concreteness in the factor trust.

8.4 CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE FINDINGS

The findings within factors in section 8.2 provide a better understanding of the meaning and significance of each factor. These findings indicate which aspects of each of the identified factors are deemed significant for effective corporate online communication with regard to the selling of the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s). When these findings are related to the overall theory of the study, they indicate which of the identified factors are regarded as significant by the communicators and receivers of corporate online communication.

The findings do not totally support the overall theory of the study, except for the factor of trust. Trust is the only factor that is perceived to be an absolute significant factor for effective corporate online communication because it creates familiarity, accessibility and visibility. Harris's (1991) arguments that consumer trust is built primarily through

expertise and accessibility to consumers and that it requires direct involvement with consumers, both as individuals and as members of their communities, are proved correct in the findings. The findings of this study also confirm earlier research by Hoffman et al (1998) 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. The findings indicate that control over their online experience is extremely significant to receivers of corporate online communication. This control is impeded by the communicators of corporate online communication's reluctance to reveal employees' contact details.

Breitenbach and Van Doren's (1998) and Treminio's (2000-2001) arguments that users could be allowed to communicate with an organisational representative while online through electronic media and text chats, which is a value-added feature that is seldom used by organisations, also proved to be correct. The findings indicate that communicators of corporate online communication are not concerned about making an online representative available, while receivers also do not show a need for such an online facility.

However, the findings also contradict the overall theory in various ways. Credibility and long-term relationships are not perceived as absolute factors for effective corporate online communication, which necessitate modification of these two factors (see section 8.5).

According to Harris (1991:105), in order to achieve credibility, it is imperative for organisations to give something back to the community and to proactively participate in programmes that benefit the community. This is reiterated by other authors who, for instance, state that by also identifying the brand with causes that consumers care about or by sponsoring high-visibility events, MPR adds credibility to organisations and their products (Kitchen & Papasolomou, in Kitchen 1999:357; Wells et al 2003:461).

The literature indicates that social responsibility has also become important in an online environment. Rowley (1998:199), for instance, states that in an effort to earn credibility, organisations are now also using the Internet to present themselves as socially responsible. He refers to Esrock and Leichty (1998) who discuss an analysis of a random sample of Fortune 500 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 contained items addressing community involvement, environmental concerns and education. However, the findings of this study indicate that neither the communicators nor receivers of corporate online communication are concerned about information about community involvement, charitable events, or environmental projects in which the organisation is involved. Communication about social responsibility is not perceived as significant for effective corporate online communication. Burke's (2001) arguments 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, are also not supported in the findings.

Regarding the overall theory of long-term relationships, Harris (1998:301) argues that managers also realise that because of uniformity in products, services and prices, advertising necessitates new "differentiations", some of which can be effected by MPR. MPR can be used to communicate new product benefits and uses and in the process retain customers. However, the findings indicate that this is not necessarily true in an online environment and that communication about differentiated products and/or services is not perceived to be significant for effective corporate online communication. Sterne's (2000) arguments in favour of customised and automated software to improve online customer service are discarded in the findings. Receivers of corporate online communication do not appreciate automated customer software, but rather experience it as a hindrance. Arguments by Sterne (2000:34) in favour of web page personalisation are also not supported in the findings. The findings indicate that both the receivers and communicators of corporate online communication are more concerned about other aspects of corporate online communication such as trust. Arguments by Breitenbach and Van Doren (1998:562-565) that free product samples that can be ordered online, is important to retain customers are also rejected by the findings. Receivers of corporate online communication are more concerned about interaction and effective customer service.

A need for effective customer service corresponds with the overall theory of the study in that poor customer service is still acknowledged as one of the major difficulties of selling products and/or services online (Burke 2001:27; Heinen 1996:11). However, arguments that an online sales video personalises customer contact is rejected as a means to improve customer service (Sterne 2000:179). Findings also support that 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).

More emphasis is placed in literature on the establishment of long-term online relationships than on 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. The findings relating to the overall theory, however, indicate that both the communicators and receivers of corporate online communication perceive trust as the principal component of effective corporate online communication. Realising this, communicators of corporate online communication put more effort into communicating safety and security to enhance confidence than in establishing long-term relationships or earning credibility.

8.5 REVISED CATEGORISATION

Because the factors of credibility and long-term relationships are not perceived as absolute factors for effective corporate online communication, they require modification. As a result three new factors are identified in addition to the factor of trust.

Based on the findings, the following four factors are now identified for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective:

- *Trust*. In the context of selling the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s), corporate online communication enhances trust by communicating assurance, safety and security in order to create a feeling of confidence. This factor uses an MPR perspective in terms of creating familiarity, accessibility and visibility (see chapter 2, section 2.5.3.2). Trust is not a new factor and is one of the factors identified for effective corporate online communication in this study. It includes all aspects of trust as discussed in the theory in chapters 2, 3 and 4.
- *Responsibility*. In the context of selling the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s), corporate online communication is responsible in the sense that it communicates messages that provide the receivers with a sense of control over

their online experience. This factor uses an MPR perspective in terms of responsible action (see chapter 2, section 2.5.3.1). Responsibility is a new factor derived from the factor of credibility. It is new because it does not include elements of useful information, media endorsement or social responsibility as the original factor of credibility which was identified for effective corporate online communication.

- *Efficiency.* In the context of selling the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s), corporate online communication is efficient because it provides well-presented and effective online information to the receiver. This factor uses an MPR perspective in terms of useful information and media endorsement (see chapter 2, section 2.5.3.1). Efficiency is a new factor derived from the factor of credibility. It is new in the sense that it does not include responsible action or social responsibility as does the original factor of credibility which was identified for effective corporate online communication.
- *Meaningful relationships.* Within the context of selling the organisation's product(s) and/ or service(s), corporate online communication allows for interaction, customer service and a favourable perception of the organisation to form a meaningful relationship that generates confidence. This new factor is a blend of the factors of credibility, trust and long-term relationships. This factor uses an MPR perspective in terms of feedback, one-to-one interaction, customer service and a favourable perception of the organisation (see chapter 2, sections 2.5.3.1 & 2.5.3.3). Meaningful relationships is a new factor because it does not include differentiated products and/or services or personalisation as the original factor of long-term relationships. It also includes a favourable perception of the organisation and its history, as the original factor of credibility, as well as accountability and visibility, as the original factor of trust.

8.6 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the preceding discussions and in the context of selling the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s), the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Only one of the three identified factors, trust, is perceived as an absolute factor for effective corporate online communication and corresponds with the overall theory of the study.
2. The two other identified factors, credibility and long-term relationships, are

modified in accordance with the perspectives of both the communicators and receivers of corporate online communication. The findings here do not correspond with the overall theory of the study.

3. Three new factors are identified for effective corporate online communication in addition to the factor of trust, namely responsibility, efficiency and meaningful relationships.
4. The findings indicate that four factors are perceived to make corporate online communication more effective, namely trust, responsibility, efficiency and meaningful relationships.
5. The factor of trust makes corporate online communication effective because it enhances trust by communicating assurance, safety and security which creates a feeling of confidence.
6. The new factor, responsibility, makes corporate online communication effective because it communicates messages that provide the receivers with a sense of control over their online experience.
7. The new factor, efficiency, makes corporate online communication effective because it provides well-presented and effective online information to the receivers.
8. The new factor, meaningful relationships, makes corporate online communication effective because it allows for interaction, customer service and a favourable perception of the organisation to form a meaningful relationship that generates confidence.

8.7 RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the title of this study, “A theoretical framework of corporate online communication: a marketing public relations (MPR) perspective”, and on the basis of the above findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

8.7.1 Four factors for effective corporate online communication

It is recommended that the four factors identified by this study for effective corporate online communication using an MPR perspective should be tested in practice. Organisations should use this theoretical framework to make their corporate online communication more effective and to take advantage of the opportunities the Internet affords them in selling the organisation's product(s) and/or service(s). By testing these

four factors in practice, they can be refined and improved.

8.7.2 Further studies

It is recommended that further studies be conducted using a more representative sample so that the findings can be generalised to the entire population of South Africa.

The findings in this study only indicate trends in the discourse on corporate online communication – hence the need for more representative studies.

8.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has limitations, which are acknowledged as follows:

1. Generalisation of the findings can only be related to a factor (perspective) and not to the entire population of South Africa. The findings only indicate trends in the discourse on corporate online communication.
2. Q methodology is a small sample research method and subject to criticism.
3. The Q sorting process is time-consuming and might have affected participants' responses.