





In some cases, appearance is everything. Randall Waller, Baylor Information Systems senior lecturer, definitely agrees.

BY KRISTIN TODD

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rhetoric

Waller, who teaches business communication classes, is currently researching how leading global corporations use their Web sites to project an image of solid corporate responsibility. Through incorporating rhetorical and sociological analysis, he reveals what Web sites are really saying to consumers, government regulators and the investment community.

“I started out dealing with crisis communication, but that interest soon evolved into a broader interest in issues management,” he said. “In the last four years or so, Web sites have become the ‘PR voice’ of nearly every major corporation. Each organization has a unique image with a personality that comes through on its Web site.”

Waller said he first became interested in Web site analysis after Nike and Coca-Cola came under fire in the late ‘90s. Both companies conducted sophisticated, in-depth campaigns for reputation damage control. Nike enforced crisis management in 1998, after being targeted for its heavy reliance on Asian factories, many of which were portrayed as sweatshops. Unfortunately, the sweatshop scandal case exploded into an international dilemma.

“More and more research shows that today’s public puts a big emphasis on how companies treat employees and the environment,” he said.

Waller said companies keep a close eye on their own reputation for corporate social responsibility, or CSR. In his Nike presentation for the 2005 Association of Business Communication Conference (ABC), Waller cited four contributing factors to CSR. Sustainability movement includes environmental issues and protecting it through conservation. The second factor is economic globalization of corporations through management, marketing and design functions. Corporate campaigns and information technology are the final factors. The discrimination case filed against Coca-Cola in 1999 by a high-profile activist lawyer also captured Waller’s

curiosity for how the company would respond, mainly through its Web site. He discussed the company’s communication techniques used in the case in a paper he co-wrote entitled, “The Corporate Website as an Image Restoration Tool,” which was presented at the 2004 ABC International Conference.

“The accusations involved racial discrimination and women’s rights,” he said. “Coke had to respond carefully, or they could’ve inflicted permanent damage on the brand. They had to focus really hard on image restoration, and they made superb use of their website.”

Corporations use Web sites as portals to reduce the transmission of mixed messages through properly addressing issues at stake and generally presenting the company on the positive side of an issue. Big companies mean big bucks, which makes industry leaders more susceptible to public scrutiny.

“I read the *Wall Street Journal* and come across articles on continuing controversies affecting corporations in my area of interest almost weekly,” Waller said. “High-profile companies are easy targets and surprisingly vulnerable.”

Although the art of rhetoric originated with the Greeks, Waller deems this practice of persuasion applicable to today’s high-tech world. He uses several strategies of translating corporate Web site content into perceivable public ideas.

“I analyze the sites from a number of angles, which brings about different perspectives and valuable insights,” he said. “For instance, impression management focuses on image building, while a technique from sociology called ‘framing’ looks at how a message is specifically positioned for its audience.”

As Waller dissects Web sites, he accumulates similarities among them such as establishing a connection with the audience.

“These company Web sites are social constructs,” he said. “The messages created for them are always tailored to fit our basic values and public perceptions.”

Waller points to the role of media in the dissemination of news that holds the ability to sway public opinion, which in turn affects the companies. Through this snowball effect, companies can collect dissenters who create “anti-Web sites” exposing the negative side of companies’ involvement in controversial issues and making sensational allegations against them.

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“These Web sites rely, for the most part, on old media sources such as articles from the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* to support their case against a corporation,” he said. “They’re nearly always backed by labor unions or activist groups.”

Waller said company and counter Web sites are more influential than we may realize.

“You can see the impact of these Web sites if you read closely enough because both sides are tapping into grassroots sentiments,” he said. “People who are opinion leaders and are computer literate have the power to shift the politics of these debates. These people are courted by both sides.”

Issues management by company Web sites proves to be an ongoing process that demands constant regulation to support public policy debates.

"The people running these sites are technically and rhetorically savvy," Waller said. "These sites give us political theater. Each one uses some form of storytelling to make its message vivid and compelling."

The analytical process for the Web sites is anything but simple, demanding a wide array of skills.

"I think this is one of the most multidisciplinary things a researcher in my field can do," he said. "It requires knowledge of the business world, communication theory, ancient and modern rhetoric, sociology, political science and computer technology. But, I think we're dealing with something in its infancy. Web site communication has the potential to be bigger than TV someday when it comes to public policy debates."

The man has a point. Internet access is available internationally around the clock. Web sites are flexible as they can be quickly updated to address morphing issues. They are also more cost-effective than printed brochures, which can quickly become outdated.

"Web sites have the technology to reflect the two faces of a corporation: internal and external," he said. "When you look at a corporation, it's either legitimate or illegitimate. Without a legitimate reputation, you're in trouble."

Waller has also co-authored a paper on ExxonMobil and BP Web sites, which he presented in Oslo, Norway. As for the future, he has Wal-Mart on his analytical radar and intentions of studying food processing and pharmaceutical corporations.

"It seems likely now that obesity/diabetes issues and prescription

drugs with dangerous side effects will be targeted just like tobacco in the 1990s," he said.

So why should society care about what company Web sites have to say?

"These company Web sites are dealing with issues that touch nearly every one of us as consumers," he said. "The messages communicated on the Web sites often indicate the direction of important policy debates on everything from health to pollution concerns."

Waller plans to continue his research and eventually compile analyzed Web site cases into a book.

"The Web puts everyone into the loop of dialogue on business decision-making and public policy debates," he said. "Each site has a story to tell, and they're sticking to it."

# culture

BY KRISTIN TODD

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information technology





Dorothy Leidner and Timothy Kayworth are immersing themselves in culture – information technology culture, that is. Leidner is the Randall W. and Sandra Ferguson Professor of Information Systems and the director of the Center for Knowledge Management at Baylor. Kayworth is an associate professor of MIS and recently collaborated with Leidner on a paper, which was published in the June 2006 issue of *MIS Quarterly*. The paper, “A Review of Culture on Information Systems,” also includes research toward a theory of information technology (IT) culture conflict.

The paper discusses the relationships of IT and culture and offers six themes of IT-culture research, theories of cultural conflict and research challenges. They examine and clarify previous IT-culture research to provide direction and guidance for future research. Based on their analysis, Leidner and Kayworth propose their own theory.

“The theory, which we label the ‘Theory of IT-Culture Conflict,’ provides a new perspective of culture and IT by focusing on the potential conflicts that may emerge in the context of IT development, adoption, use and management,” they wrote.

In order to propose their theory of IT and culture, Leidner and Kayworth first had to start at the root of the cause: defining culture. According to Leidner and Kayworth, past research identified 164 definitions of culture. These definitions included foundations of everything from norms and practices to ideologies, core values, and basic assumptions representing cognitive structures. Leidner and Kayworth decided to use a values-based approach of culture for their research.

All of the professors’ research stemmed from an extensive literature review of journals related to their field. From these journals, Leidner and Kayworth developed the six themes linking IT and culture together.

The first theme is Culture and Information Systems Development, which deals with the question of culture influencing the design of information systems including national and organizational cultures.

The second theme is Culture and IT Adoption and Diffusion. This theme reveals the usage of uncertainty avoidance, power distance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity to describe the relationship between IT and culture.

These factors are cultural values proposed by Geert Hofstede, an Emeritus Professor of Organizational Anthropology and International Management of Maastricht University.

The third theme is Culture, IT Use and Outcomes, where their research showed different views of culture from organizational and national levels. For example, Leidner and Kayworth used supporting evidence from a past study that showed the variance of Internet usage in the United States versus that of Hong Kong. The study showed Hong Kong used the Internet mostly for social communication, where the U.S. focused on information search. The findings bolster the theory that cultural values shape how people use technology.

The fourth theme entitled, Culture, IT Management and Strategy, shows the impact of culture on IT management and strategy. The fifth and sixth themes look at the impact of IT culture, and IT as a culture itself. Leidner and Kayworth

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found the last two themes to be the least discussed in past literature they analyzed.

“What has received the least amount of attention in the literature on IT and culture is the very notion of IT culture; by IT culture we mean the values attributed to IT by a group,” they wrote.

Leidner and Kayworth draw two inferences from developing the fifth and sixth themes.

“IT has the potential for use in organizational culture reengineering efforts,” they wrote. “Second, different types of technology artifacts may influence certain types of values.”

The professors also address the causes of cultural conflicts and possible resolutions. Leidner and Kayworth hope to expose the importance of IT and culture on society today.

“To date, the idea of IT values has been largely ignored in the empirical literature,” they wrote. “We provide a framework that explains the inherent conflicts among values that may accompany the introduction of IT. We argue that through the reconciliation of these conflicts, IT subtly exerts pressures on the values inherent in the conflict resulting in a reorientation of values. It is via this reorientation of values that IT, over time, influences culture.”