**Playing by the Rules:**
**Relationships with Online Users**

*RATES (Rules-Appropriate Testing Evaluation Scale)*
*and Implications for E-Commerce and Portal Web sites*

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## I. Executive Summary

Two online surveys were conducted to test the reliability and validity of using a Rules-Appropriate Testing Evaluation Scale (RATES) for diagnosing the health and strength of online organization-public relationships.

The reliability of RATES was high and offered rich data for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Use of statistical correlation indicated that use of ratings for rules can represent *relationship strength* as theorized.

Findings also suggest that two-way dialogic communication may not be necessary for relationship maintenance via the Web with online users or customers. This may be partly due to the reported goal-oriented nature of user online behavior. Data supported that adherence to *obligatory* communication rules and *preferred* communication rules is an important part of relationship maintenance online, and that the RATES scale can be used to identify these rules.

## II. Introduction

How do corporate-sponsored Web sites serve to enhance and maintain the corporation's relationships with customers or Web site users? How do Web sites build a sense of "community" (or "family") so that users become involved online on the organization's behalf?

Today, more organizations are investing in Web sites, as the number of people with online access in the population grows. A study by the Strategies Group (Sefton, 2000) showed that 52 percent of Americans are online – almost double the number in mid-1997. Another survey by Cahners In-Stat Group (Yovovich, 2000) reported that 70 percent of the U.S. workforce has access to the Web at the office. Esrock & Leichty (2000) found that 88 percent of corporations, from a sample of Fortune 500 companies, had developed Web sites. The addition of a new communication channel, the Internet, to the public relations practitioner's tool kit, and the "push and pull" nature of online information has significant implications for how practitioners communicate and maintain the best and most productive relationships with their publics.

Practitioners know they cannot ignore the Web. A 1999 survey of Public Relations Society of America members (N=70), revealed that 94 percent believed their organization's Web site was "very important" or "important" in their public relations efforts (Ryan, 1999; p.30). Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested that the World Wide Web offers practitioners immense opportunities for building two-way relationships. And according to Cooley, "Building relationships through an interactive web [sic.] site will ultimately serve to improve the corporate image and align corporate policy with public opinion (1999, p. 41)." The question is – how will practitioners integrate Web site communication in a model of organization – public relationship maintenance? And how will the relationship maintenance be measured?

The purpose of this paper is to propose a new research methodology, based on established theory and tested scale techniques, for evaluating organization-public relationships, and particularly those conducted in an online environment. Corporate or organizational Web sites are defined and their would-be users explored. Next, an outline is presented of research done thus far on organization-public relationship measurement tools. This is followed by an explanation of the rules-based theory used here for relationship measurement. The research method is then provided with illustrations of how it was adapted to two different types of Web sites. Lastly, findings are introduced and discussed.

<u>Types of Organizational Web Sites</u>

Different types of Web sites can pop up on the Internet literally overnight. And although definitions will certainly change in the future, scholars and industry experts have developed categories to define sites by market penetration and type of audience reached. These categorizations are presented here because relational rules will differ for different sites.

Esrock & Leichty (2000) validated the notion that there are different types of corporate Web sites addressing multiple publics. Their findings, centered on a sample of Fortune 500 Web sites, showed that organizational efforts concentrated on corporate *signature sites* (par. 7), which the authors describe as presenting "the identities that a corporation claims for itself as a unit or a corporate entity."

Black (2000) noted two types of online sites – *e-commerce* sites and *content sites*. According to Black (par. 1) the goal of e-commerce sites is to increase traffic to generate sales, and that content sites "depend on banners and other advertising for their revenue."

Another type of Web site is the portal Web site. Research by Jupiter Communications showed that portals can be defined by the portion of the Internet population that uses an organization's site as their "hub" on the Internet and also by user interests. To define reach, Jupiter Communications uses the terms *first-tier portal*, and *second-tier portal*. A *first-tier portal* (e.g., www.aol.com, www.yahoo.com, and www.msn.com) is defined as a general use portal with audience reach that extends to 50 percent of the Internet population (Card, 2000; p. 1). *Second-tier portals*, according to Jupiter Communications, are defined as those with 30 percent or less reach (e.g., www.excite.com, www.go.com, www.snap.com, etc.). *Affinity* and *genre portals* relate to the relationship the user has with the portal. According to Jupiter (Sinnreich, et al., 2000) *affinity portals* can be distinguished by appealing to part of the audience's self-identity (e.g., veteran, teacher, etc.), while g*enre portals* concentrate on reaching many people with the same general interests or tastes (e.g., sports, travel, animals, etc.).

Organizational Web sites can be primarily identified as corporate signature sites, e-commerce sites, content sites, first-tier portals, second-tier portals, affinity portals and genre portals. As Esrock & Leichty (2000) suggest, *corporate signature sites* focus on the corporate image (e.g., www.cocacola.com). *E-commerce sites* are Web sites that focus primarily on selling merchandise or services. *Content sites*, defined by Black (2000), provide information and financially depend on ad revenue or sponsorships (e.g., www.nytimes.com). A content site may also match one of the definitions of a particular portal site – *first-tier* or *second-tier*, and even more specifically, as a *genre* or an *affinity* portal.

Types of Online Users/Customers

Web sites attract multiple publics. Corporate signature sites may primarily address investors (Esrock & Leichty, 2000) while e-commerce sites focus on selling products to customers.

Young (2000, par. 6) observed that companies viewed the introduction of online communication with customers as a cost-cutting mechanism. She also noted "customer service on the Internet is trickier than companies originally thought" because few attempts have been made to integrate a customer call-center, e-mail customer service and Web site material. In the article it is suggested that this may require companies to prioritize interaction and responses to "high-value customer(s)" versus "low-value customer(s)."

It may not seem appropriate to categorize customers, but as Hon and Grunig (1999, p. 8) acknowledged, "organizations generally encounter multiple publics with multiple goals." In other words, organizations need to identify a means by which to prioritize customers based on what will be most beneficial or least detrimental to all parties involved.

In this study, three Web sites were examined and findings from two Web sites are presented. The first site is a *content* or *genre site* (a city newspaper-affiliated portal) and the audience is a priority public consisting of *registered site users*. The second site is an *e-commerce site* (a national retail company) and the audience is a priority public consisting of *registered site users*. Findings for the third organization, an *affinity site/portal* (city sport community-affiliated portal), is not included because the response rate was too low—even after three e-mail invitations to 1,300 member addresses—indicating the site's users may not have great affinity[1] for the Web site.

[1] Affinity, as used here, refers to attraction to the site based on positive feelings.

## III. Statement of the Problem

The literature on relational public relations provides exiguous research on the development and maintenance of relationships online. This is because it is a developing area of inquiry in both online research and relational public relations.

Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) pointed out that little research has focused on explicating and measuring the concept of organization-public relationships. They asserted that without an explication of the term "relationship," theory building in this area will continue to be most difficult. They advanced the following definition (p. 18):

> Organization-public relationships are represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics. These relationships have properties that are distinct from the identities, attributes, and perceptions of the individuals and social collectivities in the relationships. Though dynamic in nature, organization-public relationships can be described at a single point in time and tracked over time.

Note, the definition pointed out that the relationship is distinct from the publics' or the organization's perceptions of the relationship. Broom et al. suggested that an objective unit of analysis be used to assess relationships independent of perception. The majority of research proffered thus far, however, focuses on perceptions and recommends scales for relationship measurement based on perceptions.

Brunig and Ledingham (1999) put forth a scale to measure three dimensions of organization-public relationships: the professional, the personal, and the community-related. This research, based on concepts of *trust*, *openness*, *involvement*, *investment*, *commitment*, *reciprocity*, *mutual legitimacy* and *mutual understanding*, extends research on relationships by demonstrating that relationships are multidimensional. Bruning and Ledingham (2000) widened the scale's application showing that customer perceptions of their *professional*, *personal* and *community* relationships with a bank influenced the customers' overall evaluations of satisfaction with the bank. The personal relationship dimension was particularly salient, accounting for 75 percent of the variance in the overall satisfaction evaluation. In other words three-quarters of a person's evaluation of satisfaction with the bank depended on respondents' assessments of their personal relationship with the bank.

Hon & Grunig (1999) introduced the PR Relationship Measurement Scale to measure primary public perceptions of an organization. The scale is based on six relational components (*control mutuality*, *trust*, *satisfaction*, *commitment*, *exchange relationship*, and *communal relationship*) derived from the social science literature. Preliminary presentation of the data showed the scales had high reliability.

In an effort to offer a way to analyze relationships in cross-cultural contexts, Huang (2001) introduced a cross-cultural Organization-Public Relationship Assessment scale (OPRA), partly based on Hon & Grunig (1999), to measure relationship health based on the five factors of *trust*, *relationship commitment*, *control mutuality*, *relationship satisfaction*, and *face and favor*.

Although several scales exist that measure organization-public relationships, there are no studies that particularly focus on incorporating dimensions that also evaluate online relationships or the relational contexts for actual publics. A study in advertising by Chen and Wells (1999) offered an attitude toward the site scale to measure a user's overall evaluation of a Web site. Based on literature from advertising and marketing, the scale of six items includes "This Web site makes it easy for me to build a relationship with this company." The scale is augmented with measurement of three explanatory ratings factors of *entertainment*, *informativeness*, and *organization*. Although the scale has shown high reliability, and is built on the theoretical premise of the semantic differential of "good" and "bad" sites, for the purposes of measuring public relations efforts, the scale does not take into consideration specific communication strategies for relationship maintenance and has not accounted for whether the populations tested have a relationship with the organization or are priority publics the organization wants to reach.

The scale presented here is based on previous efforts in this area, borrowing particularly from Hon & Grunig (1999) and relying on four of the recurrent concepts of *commitment*, *trust*, *satisfaction*, and *control mutuality*. In addition to measuring these relational concepts, the scale is also built on relational rules pertaining to communication in an online environment. Although user and customer perceptions are measured, the hypothetical contexts contain rules for interaction, and ratings of the rules help provide a picture of the relationship. Rules are used to define the relationship.

## IV. Theoretical Basis

Current models of public relations recognize communication patterns as essential components that define public relations practice. They also center on the types of relationships organizations establish with their publics. The most effective form of communication has been suggested to be the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig & Hunt, 1994) and is often referred to as a normative model for public relations. Research models also portray an organization's communication as a continuum between pure advocacy and pure accommodation (Cancel, Mitrook & Cameron, 1999). The type of communication and the level of communication are used in these models to help define relationships and public relations practice.

As noted previously, researchers are now working on integrating concepts from these different models to produce a relational model of public relations. This study adds to the discussion by proposing the incorporation of rules theory to a relational model of public relations.

Rules theory, a core concept in research on interpersonal relationship formation and dissolution, is particularly suited to measuring relationships. The fundamental assertion of rules theory is that there are rules that govern relationships and guide communicator behavior. According to rules theory, one can measure the types of rules people use in their goal-oriented communication behavior with others in particular contexts. The perception of appropriateness of the communication behavior is evaluative of the type and strength of the relationship that exists between the two parties. By examining relational rules, the relationship, measured by the ratings of the rules, is made the unit of analysis.

Rules imply expectations for behavior in particular contexts and sanctions for violation of the prescribed behaviors (Shimanoff, 1980). Shimanoff (p. 57) defines rules as a "followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts." Cushman and Kovacic (1994, p. 274) define rules as, "prescriptions as to the appropriate communication behaviors which have social force." According to Shimanoff, the social force behind preferred rules is avoiding negative judgments from others while gaining positive evaluations. Some rules are *prohibitive*—defining what one *must not* do, or *obligatory*—defining what one *must* do. Violating a prohibitive or obligatory rule, in a relational context, could lead to termination of the relationship.

Rules for communication can be applied in numerous contexts, but in this study, rules for online communication are examined. Online rules that relate to relationship strength and depth can be related to views on customer/user e-mail contacts, the type of information provided on Web sites, and timeliness of responses in communication exchanges. Rules for communication online can differ from phone or postal mail communication. For example, what are users' perceptions if an organization takes three days to respond to an online inquiry? What is the user's rule for online response time? Should it be shorter than three days? Will users be patient with an organization if it communicates that it made a mistake in its Web site pricing information? What is the rule for acceptable errors in an electronic environment?

Rules theory is especially useful because it can produce practical guidelines for relationship maintenance and get at the subtleties that define relationships. Rules can be implied or inferred from a situation, as well as clearly stated. Rules are worded according to what should or should not be done and can be *preferred* or *prohibitive*.

Shimanoff (1980) has suggested that when rules can hold for all similar situations and communication contexts it leads to the development of "general rule" guidelines for communication. This particular study examines rules implied in specific communication situations.

## V. Research Methodology and Design

Research Questions

The main purpose of this study is to develop a measurement scale that furthers organization-public relationship research, which allows for evaluation of relationships in distinct communication contexts—and specifically in the online environment. The first research question examines the strength and breadth of application of the method.

**RQ1:** In what ways can rules theory and scenario techniques measure the health, nature, and depth of relationships to maintain and strengthen relationships with key publics?

The following two research questions posed for this study explore user expectations of communication with organizations online.

**RQ2:** What are the general rules of behavior that users believe govern relationships between organizations and Web users?

**RQ3:** What organizational behaviors are necessary to build a two-way or dialogic relationship with Web users?

The second set of relational questions focuses on how the organization is sanctioned for breaking expectations for general rules.

**RQ4:** When are sanctions imposed for violating general rules? How do likeability, time, context, reciprocity, and communicator goals affect sanctions?

**RQ5:** What different relational contexts call for different sets of rules?

Research question 5 is meant to examine specific rules rather than the general rules examined by RQ2. The final research question explores the factors that relate to relationship maintenance and will be addressed by examining overall finding from both surveys.

**RQ6:** How do organizations maintain long-term relationships via their Web sites?

To begin addressing these research questions, RQ1 needed to be investigated. This required the development of a survey technique based on rules. The scenario question format was deemed appropriate for providing the context necessary for evaluation of rules. Use of a seven-item semantic differential scale allowed for use of evaluatory, bipolar descriptors gleaned from rules theory.

Exploratory Questionnaire

The purpose of the exploratory survey was to determine whether the semantic differential scale was reliable, the scenario format understandable, and the scenarios representative of a concept and of rules. It was not the intention to provide generalizable results, but rather to test this novel approach to questionnaire design.

Preliminary semantic differential scale items were constructed from the literature on rules theory and self-disclosure (Derelega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Shimanoff, 1980). According to Oppenheim (1966, p. 204) the semantic differential scale "consists essentially of a number of seven-point rating scales that are bipolar, with each extreme defined by an adjective." The bipolar scales constructed for this study represent evaluatory measures based on the rules literature. The adjectives chosen for the scale were *appropriate/inappropriate*, *good/bad*, *responsible/irresponsible*, *positive/negative*, *wrong/right*, *unfavorable/favorable*, and *insincere/sincere* (the last three were reverse coded in analysis).

The scenario question format was used to provide context for the relational rule. Scenarios were constructed for each of the concepts defined by Hon and Grunig (1999), *commitment*, *trust*, *satisfaction*, and *control mutuality* – each with a rule embedded within the concept/scenario. For example, in a scenario related to *commitment*, the implied relational rule was, "In crisis situations a company should/should not use its Web site as the primary channel for communicating with its publics."

Each scenario was also centered on a particular industry. The commitment scenario related to an airline company, the trust scenario related to a soft drink company, the third scenario a community Web site, and the fourth scenario related to a newspaper-affiliated portal. Different industries were chosen to make sure that the scale could be applied in a variety of professional contexts because the survey in its final form would be administered to three different organizations.

The first two scenarios were followed by an open-ended question "Does this situation seem appropriate to measure the company's

commitment or trust to the customer. If not, please explain."
Respondents were not asked to rate satisfaction because the question had face validity. Control mutuality was excluded from this validity check because respondents were not thought to be familiar with the concept.

In addition, all four scenarios were followed by open-ended questions that explored the rules aspect of the scenarios "Please write a sentence or two and explain how this might affect how you would feel about the Web portal/site." This was done to learn more about why the respondents answered the way they did, and also as a method for generating more rules for future online scenarios.

The final portion of the survey contained questions as to whether the four scenarios were "easy to understand" (rated by *Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree*). In addition, participants rated the seven paired adjectives for each of the four scenarios as easy or difficult to apply to the situation (rated by *Easy, Moderately Easy, Moderately Difficult, Difficult*).

The complete questionnaire was 8 pages in length and was reviewed by two professional researchers before distribution.

Sample. A sample of 47 students drawn from one upper-level and one lower-level communication arts course at Georgia Southern University, and 6 students from a broadcast news course at the Missouri

School of Journalism participated in the exploratory analysis.[2] Of the 53 questionnaires, one was missing responses to the scenarios, and several were missing information to the open-ended questions. Due to the exploratory nature of this questionnaire, all partially completed questionnaires were included. The sample was not for purposes of generalization, but to analyze the survey instrument, so combination of samples was deemed adequate.

Validity. Descriptive statistics indicated that 56 percent (N=45) of the students who read the *commitment* scenario agreed that it measured the "company's commitment to the customer." Seventy percent (N=43) of respondents agreed the *trust* scenario measured "the trust you would have in an organization."

Difficulty. Participants rated scenarios according to whether they were "easy to understand." The airline scenario (*commitment*) was rated by 16 percent of respondents as *somewhat difficult*, and by 6 percent as *difficult* to understand. The soft drink company scenario (*trust*) was rated by 22 percent as *somewhat difficult*, and by 3 percent and *difficult*. In comparison, only 8 percent rated the community Web site scenario (*mutuality*) as *somewhat difficult* or *difficult*, and only 8 percent rated the newspaper-affiliated scenario as *somewhat difficult* (no respondent rated it as difficult).

[2] Although the function of the survey is not to generalize the results, but evaluate the scale, a student sample served our purposes in that all had access to the World Wide Web and the final surveys

Each bipolar scale item was also rated for the difficulty respondents had in applying the item to each scenario. Table 1 contains the percentages of respondents who rated the adjectives *easy* or *moderately easy* to apply.

Table 1 Percentage of respondents' ratings of easy or moderately easy in applying bipolar adjectives to scenarios

| N=49 | **Airline Co. (*Commitment*)** | **Soft Drink Co. (*Trust*)** | **Community Web site *(Con. Mutuality)*** | **Newspaper-Affiliated site *(Satisfaction)*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Appropriate/ Inappropriate*** | 90% | 88% | 88% | 86% |
| ***Good/Bad*** | 84% | 90% | 90% | 84% |
| ***Irresponsible/ Responsible*** | 86% | 84% | 84% | 78% |
| ***Negative/ Positive*** | 86% | 76% | 76% | 76% |
| ***Right/Wrong*** | 77% | 76% | 84% | 65% |
| ***Unfavorable/ Favorable*** | 86% | 84% | 84% | 80% |
| ***Sincere/ Insincere*** | 71% | 71% | 78% | 80% |

The bipolar opposites that were most difficult to apply were *sincere/insincere*, *negative/positive,* and *right/wrong*. However, the percentages were still quite high for those who found the words *easy* or *somewhat easy* to apply to the scenarios. To determine whether all seven should be retained or if the three lower scoring should be removed, coefficient alpha reliability estimates were computed. Coefficient alpha is

were intended solely for Web publics.

a statistical test used to determine the internal consistency of the scale (Hatcher & Stepanski, 1994).

Reliability. Scale reliability for each scenario was assessed by calculating Chronbach's coefficient alpha, which results in a score between zero and one. According to Hatcher & Stephanski (1994, p. 513), reliability below .70 is inadequate. Reliability estimates for the seven bipolar adjectives for the *commitment*, *trust*, *control mutuality*, and *satisfaction* scenarios were respectively .92, .94, .98, and .98.

Principle components analysis was run for each scenario to ensure that the seven bipolar opposites in the scales represented only one concept. For all four scenarios, the scale of seven items suggested a one-factor solution with only one eigenvalue over the value of one for each. This confirmed results from the coefficient alpha reliability test.

In addition to running principle components analysis for each scale in each of the four scenarios, principle components analysis was run across all four scenarios to determine if it were probable that the measurement was capturing four underlying concepts (*commitment, trust, control mutuality,* and *satisfaction*). Initial extraction resulted in four eigenvalues greater than one, accounting for 80 percent of the variance. Varimax rotation confirmed a four-factor solution (See Table 2).

Table 2 Varimax rotation across four scenarios for exploratory questionnaire

| Scale | Item | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 | Factor 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Scenario 1*** *Commitment* | ***Appropriate/ Inappropriate*** | | | | .84 |
| | ***Good/Bad*** | | | | .86 |
| | ***Irresponsible/ Responsible*** | | | | .73 |
| | ***Neg./Positive*** | | | | .80 |
| | ***Right/Wrong*** | | | | .88 |
| | ***Unfavorable/Favorable*** | | | | .90 |
| | ***Sincere/Insincere*** | | | | .71 |
| ***Scenario 2*** *Trust* | ***Appropriate/ Inappropriate*** | | | .86 | |
| | ***Good/Bad*** | | | .88 | |
| | ***Irresponsible/ Responsible*** | | | .86 | |
| | ***Neg./Positive*** | | | .91 | |
| | ***Right/Wrong*** | | | .82 | |
| | ***Unfavorable/Favorable*** | | | .90 | |
| | ***Sincere/Insincere*** | | | .63 | |
| ***Scenario 3*** *Mutuality* | ***Appropriate/ Inappropriate*** | .95 | | | |
| | ***Good/Bad*** | .95 | | | |
| | ***Irresponsible/ Responsible*** | .97 | | | |
| | ***Neg./Positive*** | .97 | | | |
| | ***Right/Wrong*** | .91 | | | |
| | ***Unfavorable/Favorable*** | .97 | | | |
| | ***Sincere/Insincere*** | .91 | | | |
| ***Scenario 4*** *Satisfaction* | ***Appropriate/ Inappropriate*** | | .96 | | |
| | ***Good/Bad*** | | .95 | | |
| | ***Irresponsible/ Responsible*** | | .95 | | |
| | ***Neg./Positive*** | | .95 | | |
| | ***Right/Wrong*** | | .88 | | |
| | ***Unfavorable/Favorable*** | | .90 | | |
| | ***Sincere/Insincere*** | | .71 | | |

The factor loadings suggested that the scale is indeed measuring four distinct underlying variables consisting of rules related to the underlying theoretical concepts.

To summarize, use of scenario questions with embedded rules appeared to measure rules well with the semantic differential adjectives. Scale reliability for the 7-item scale was high. To assess relationship strength, however, it is necessary to apply the rules to a context where there is an established organization-public relationship. To further extend analysis of the instrument, this survey methodology was developed for three online surveys and adapted specifically for one content (genre) site, one e-commerce site, and one affinity site. The first two are examined here.

Online Survey Methodology

Although online survey methodology is often targeted for producing nonrandom, unrepresentative samples, the online research methodology was chosen as the best method for this study. Online survey techniques were deemed an appropriate method because (1) the organizations had lists of registered users, which could be used to generate random samples; (2) the study is concerned with online users and organizations that have an online presence.[3] Because registered users must have signed up with the organizations over the World Wide Web, e-mail invitations containing the survey URL link were sent to the registered users asking them to participate in the survey. Although sampling was

[3] In two cases, the e-mails were sent out by the organizations to conform to their user agreements not to release e-mail addresses. In the third case, the researchers signed a confidentiality agreement to use the addresses for the purposes of this research project only. The characteristics of the two samples explored here will be discussed separately.

not a problem, previous literature suggests that response rates may be a problem as the surveys were self-administered.

Smith (1997) found that responses from e-mails with the surveys attached to the e-mail were generally low. In her study she found that direct e-mail led to an 8 percent response rate, and that an e-mail query for permission to send the survey resulted in a 13.3 percent response rate.

Schaefer and Dillman (1998, p. 380) reviewed 13 studies using e-mail surveys and reported that with a single contact, e-mail surveys typically generate about a 29 percent response rate, “compared with 41 percent for two contacts, and 57 percent for three or more contacts.” In their experimental study of Washington State University faculty, they found that response rates were comparable for e-mail surveys and pencil and pen surveys. They also found that participants completed more of the survey items online, and that responses were faster via e-mail.

Witmer, Colman, and Katzman’s (2000) e-mail surveys on graphic accents revealed response rates between 18-24 percent. They also noted that the length of the survey did not seem to significantly affect the response rates.

Although survey response rates were expected to be lower than traditional phone surveys, use of repeat contact was considered a good option for boosting response rates.

All three surveys were customized to each organization and the communication contexts available through their Web sites. Computer professionals at the University of Missouri constructed online versions of the surveys. DreamWeaver software was used to create the survey Web pages and pico software was used for file editing. Each scenario was presented on its own screen with the evaluation scale. For each survey, the 8-12 scenario questions were programmed to rotate randomly, so participants did not receive them consistently in the same order. This was done to control for order effects. Respondents were required to complete all items on one screen before moving on to the following screen. If an item was omitted, a warning flashed on the top of the screen with the number of the question missing highlighted. Demographic items allowed the respondents to choose “Don’t know/Not sure.” Also, respondents were not allowed to enter the survey multiple times from the same opened browser. Responses to the surveys were anonymous.

Jserv, java servlet engine, was used as the programming environment to collect and store the survey data in an Oracle database. Programmers also developed a Perl script to produce final output of results in an Excel file format. In addition, e-mail distribution was facilitated by a java application created to mail survey invitations.

Research Design – Study A: City Newspaper-Affiliated Portal (CNAP).

The first study examined the organization-public relationship between a city newspaper-affiliated portal (CNAP) and its registered users. In order to assess the relationship, scenarios with rules embedded were constructed that related to the CNAP's communication contexts. Questionnaire construction was developed in cooperation with the organization so it also was designed to meet the needs of the participating organization.

Instrument Development.

The survey developed for the CNAP comprised three sections that were estimated to take 15-20 minutes to complete. The first section contained the 12 scenario questions (three items each for *commitment, trust, control mutuality,* and *satisfaction* with 12 different rules embedded in each), a second section was about search capabilities, Web site areas, and a final section contained six demographic questions. In addition, each scenario question was followed by an open-ended question, "Please write a sentence or two and explain how this might affect how you feel about 'CNAP' in this situation," which probed into the "why." This allowed for additional qualitative analysis. One question also measured user affinity, "How strongly do you identify yourself as a CNAP user? (0=Not at all; 10=Very strongly)." This measure was posited to be associated with relationship strength.

The questionnaire was pretested online for functionality and validity with student volunteers from an upper-level research course at the University of Missouri. Adjustments were made to the wording of several questions to improve clarity. Also, a warning was added to the e-mail cautioning respondents that if they exited the survey, they would need to close their browser and re-open it again if they wanted to re-enter the survey.

Sample. A sample of 1,775 e-mail addresses was generated by the CNAP by drawing random samples from each county in the city weighting the sample based on county population size. The survey invitation e-mail with the URL link to the survey Web site was sent out by the CNAP's customer service center on Nov. 27, 2000. A reminder e-mail with the survey URL link was sent on Dec. 5, 2000. It is not known how many of the e-mail addresses may have been bad addresses.

Of those who received the survey, 193 clicked to the survey link. Data cleanup required elimination of duplicate entries for the same day and time, and blank entries, which left 119 complete and partial responses. Eliminating partial completions for principle components analysis left 80 cases. This yielded a 41% completion rate (80/193). To reduce kurtosis to an acceptable level, outliers were removed leaving a final sample size of 66 appropriate for multivariate analysis.

Reliability. Calculation of Chronbach's alpha reliability coefficient across all 12 scenarios (84 items) yielded a reliability of .94. For the items grouped by concept (21 items each; c*ommitment*, *trust*, *control mutuality*, *satisfaction*), the reliability scores were .92, .90, .94, and .91. For each individual scenario (7 items), reliability scores of .97, .98, .98, .96, .98, .99, .98, .98, .92, .98, .96, and .98 were achieved. Scale reliability across concepts indicated that the scale was indeed measuring the rules in each scenario, and that it related to a relational concept.

Principle components analysis (PCA). Initial PCA analysis was run on the 12 scenario items. Scores for each of the bipolar pairs were summed for each scenario item (min.=7, max.=49) yielding one score per question. Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2$<.001) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin sampling adequacy (.62) indicated the data were appropriate for meeting the sampling distribution assumptions for PCA (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996).

Initial PCA analysis of eigenvalues and examination of the scree plot indicated a four-factor solution. Interpretation of the factors revealed that the factor loadings did not create factors related to the four underlying conceptual assumptions as expected, but grouped factors according to communication patterns (See Table 3).

Table 3 Factor loadings for CNAP scenarios after Varimax rotation

Factor 1

- When you register on CNAP to participate in a forum, you select some interests, including sports, and consent to receiving e-mails from CNAP. A week later, you start receiving weekly e-mails with CNAP top local sports stories and information on games to take place the following weekend. Would you find these e-mails:
- You notice that CNAP frequently posts interactive polls on the Web site to spur discussion and involvement concerning current issues in the "City". Do you find CNAP's use of interactive polls:

- You register on CNAP to sign up for some personalized features. On the form, you select some interests, including cooking, and leave a check-mark in a box that says you consent to e-mails from CNAP that contain advertiser messages. A month later, you receive an e-mail from CNAP about a local grocery store urging you to sign up for an upcoming cooking class that is being held close to your home. Would you find the receipt of grocery store e-mail:
- Urban sprawl and city infrastructure are large issues in your community. CNAP has posted several related stories and provided you with contact information for your local representatives. Would you find CNAP's actions:

ORGANIZATION USER
PUSH--------------------------------------------------------------------------------□CHOICE TO
ACCEPT/ACT
ONE-WAY COMMUNICATION

<u>Factor 2</u>

- You were unable to watch Sunday afternoon football, but want to check the game scores for the "City" NFL team. You log onto the site an hour after the game. Along with the game score statistics, you also find a feature story. However, you notice there is no update or story for the "non-City" NFL game. Would you find this:
- You visit the Arts and Entertainment section of the CNAP and are looking at a movie review. To the right of the review is a link to buy tickets to the movie online. Would you find this link to buy tickets:
- After reviewing some online information, you would like to speak with someone about placing a classified ad on the CNAP. You access the Contact Us area of the Help section and see a general email address and phone number for questions/comments about Classifieds. Would you consider this contact information:
- You belong to an organization that will hold an event for the "City" community. You notice that the event is not listed in the Arts & Entertainment section. You know community events can be submitted for inclusion in the site's calendar listings, so you submit the event to the CNAP. Do you consider your submission of the event:

ORGANIZATION USER
PASSIVE PROVIDER□-----------------------------------------------------ACTIVE/INFO.
SEEKING
DEFINED COMMUNICATION CONTEXT

<u>Factor 3</u>

- You log on to the CNAP at 10 a.m. You notice that the news section was last updated during the previous evening. Would you find this:
- You're looking for a story about a local sports figure who was arrested. You go to the Sports section and can't find the story. After some searching, you find it in the News section. Would you find the placement of the story:
- You visit the CNAP to find out about some organizations in your area. You see that there is one community site for an organization that has been accused of discriminatory actions. However, you see no outward signs of such action on their site. Would you find the organization's presence on CNAP:

ORGANIZATION USER
PASSIVE ◄----------------------------------------------------------------------ACTIVE/PASSIVE VIEWING
(AMBIGUOUS) AMBIGUOUS COMMUNICATION CONTEXT (UNCERTAIN)

Factor 4

- You visit a CNAP forum (chat group) to ask a columnist a question about a local band. You check back for a response. The columnist responds in three days and provides you with the information you had requested. Would you find the response:

ORGANIZATION USER
ACTIVE ------------------------------------------------------------------------------ ACTIVE
TWO-WAY EXCHANGE

To examine whether the factors associated with communication patterns might also be associated with *affinity* (or identifying as a customer or portal user), bivariate correlations were analyzed. Factors were created by adding scores for scenario rule ratings for each question that loaded on the factor. Correlations were significant for Factor 1 ($r=.243$, $p<.05$), and Factor 2, ($r=.285$, $p<.05$). Correlation with Factor 3 was negative, and not significantly correlated ($r=-.052$, $p=.681$). Factor 4 was not significantly correlated. It may be that communication to "push" the user or customer by the organization, and serving as a passive provider of information for an information-seeking customer can be sufficient for those who say they identify with the organization.

Research Design – Study B: National Retail Company (NRC).

The second study explored the organization-public relationship between a national retail company (NRC) and its customers. Again, scenarios were constructed with rules customized to contexts unique to the NRC. The organization was also involved in the survey design.

Instrument Development.

The survey developed for the NRC also contained three sections; however, there were variations. The first section contained eight scenario questions (two items each for *commitment, trust, control mutuality,* and *satisfaction* with 8 different rules embedded in each) instead of 12. The number of scenarios was reduced with the hope of increasing response rates. In addition to reduction in number of scenarios, five pairs of bipolar items were added to the semantic differential scale [results not discussed here] at the request of the NRC. The survey took about 15-20 minutes to complete.

The remaining sections of the survey contained questions about online behavior, Web site preferences, and demographic questions. Similar to the CNAP survey, each scenario question was followed by an open-ended question asking the respondent to explain their reaction to the scenario. User affinity was also measured by the question "How strongly do you identify yourself as a NRC customer? (0=Not at all; 10=Very strongly)."

The questionnaire was pretested online for functionality and validity with students from an undergraduate introductory journalism course at the University of Missouri. No adjustments for functionality were needed.

Sample. A list of 1,000 e-mail addresses of registered users who had signed up in the last six months was supplied by the national retail company (NRC). The initial survey was sent on Dec. 21, 2000. Of the list, 32 addresses generated error messages indicating the e-mail addresses were no longer valid. Five personal e-mail responses were received. These addresses were removed from the follow-up survey. The follow-up reminder survey was sent Jan. 8, 2001, to a sample of 963 registered users. Of the 968 who may have received the survey, 27%, or 260 participants clicked to the survey. Of those, there were 118 (12%) full and partial completions. Listwise deletion, or elimination of cases with missing data, and removal of outliers to run PCA left 66 cases.

Validity. In addition to pretesting for functionality, each of the eight scenarios was also pretested to determine whether they appeared to measure the concepts they were intended to represent (*commitment, trust, control mutuality, satisfaction*). Students in an undergraduate advertising class participated for extra credit. The students were asked to match each scenario with a concept and its definition (based on Hon & Grunig, 1999). There were no requirements for how many times they could choose a concept. For four of the eight scenarios, a majority of the respondents indicated the scenario matched its concept. In one case, a scenario developed to measure *satisfaction* was identified by respondents as *commitment*, and another intended to measure *commitment* was identified as *satisfaction*. These conceptual labels were flipped. Respondents had a difficult time rating the concept of *mutuality*. Most rated these as *commitment*. Because this concept is more theoretical and less familiar to respondents, it was decided to retain the scenarios as *control mutuality* concepts.

Reliability. Calculation of Chronbach's alpha reliability coefficient across all 8 scenarios (56 items) yielded a reliability of .96. For the items grouped by concept (14 items each; c*ommitment*, *trust*, *control mutuality*, *satisfaction*), the reliability scores were .94, .94, .95, and .93. For each individual scenario (7 items), reliability scores of .93, .97, .97, .97, .96, .96, .96, and .97, were attained.

Principle components analysis (PCA). Scores for each of the bipolar pairs were summed for each scenario item (min.=7, max.=49) yielding one score per question. Initial PCA analysis was run on the eight scenario items. Bartlett's test ($\chi^2 < .001$) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin sampling adequacy (.74) suggested the data were appropriate for PCA (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996).

Initial PCA analysis of eigenvalues and examination of the scree plot indicated a two-factor solution. Interpretation of the factors showed that the factor loadings did not group together like those for the CNAP. The factors appeared to load according to the level of personalization of communication, expectations and whether the communication seemed to be a base service or a value-added service (See Table 4).

Table 4 List of rules associated with factor loadings for NRC after Varimax rotation

Factor 1 Personal – Directed at specific individual – rules regarding interaction with Web site. Value-added services. Push & pull (exchange).

- NRC should provide informational tools to assist customers in purchasing decisions.
- NRC should send correction notices about pricing errors via e-mail.
- NRC should have customer service at the brick & mortar store.
- If customers sign up for NRC promotional e-mail, customers should be expected to receive e-mails twice a month.
- NRC's writers should provide information about products. (Personalizes writers at NRC)

Factor 2 Impersonal-Provided en masse - rules regarding expectation of Web environment. Base expectations.

- NRC should regularly change featured items on its Web site.
- NRC should use an entertaining writing style to describe its products.
- NRC should provide pricing correction information on the site.

## VI. Research Findings

Research Question 1. RQ1 addressed how and in what ways rules theory and scenario techniques measure the health, nature, and depth of relationships to maintain and strengthen relationships with key publics.

Relationship strength was measured as an index of the rating scores for the rule scenarios. The more favorable the respondents rated the scenarios (higher scores on seven 1-7 point scales), the more favorably they evaluated the organization and the communication behavior. For the CNAP survey, variability for *relationship strength* ranged from 84-588. For the NRC survey, scores ranged from 56-422. If the ratings of the scenarios and rules are associated with relationship strength as theorized, then respondents' scores on whether they identify with the company (*affinity*) should be statistically significant in the positive direction.

Use of Pearson's bivariate correlation analysis showed that *relationship strength* was positively correlated in both cases. For the CNAP, the correlation between *relationship strength*, based on positive ratings of the rules, and the measure of *affinity* was .267 ($p<.05$; N=66). For the NRC, the correlation between *relationship strength*, or positive evaluation of the rules, and identifying as an NRC customer was .400 ($p<.01$; N=65). These correlations indicate that there is a positive correlation between relationship strength, measured by evaluation of rule-generated behavior, and the user or customer's affinity with an organization. The associations suggest that when communicating with online publics, publics have rules for expected organizational behaviors. Data support the idea that evaluations of rule-based behaviors affect self-identification, or *affinity*, with the organization.

<u>Research Question 2.</u> The second research question was to explore whether there are general rules of behavior that users believe govern relationships between organizations and Web users. Here some rules are offered as examples of how this research tool can identify how rules may develop across contexts in the online environment. Examples based on responses to open-ended questions from both the CNAP and

NRC surveys are provided. The rules discussed here, however, do need further testing to see if consistent support to label the rules "general rules" can be achieved.

*Tentative Obligatory Rule 1: E-mail solicitations, whether solicited or unsolicited, should provide the receiver the opportunity to unsubscribe or "opt off" the list.* This rule developed from open-ended responses to a scenario for the CNAP that examined user responses where the user had agreed to receive advertiser e-mails.

One respondent noted, "Again, if I sign up for email service, there's nothing wrong with getting the e-mails, as long as there's an easy way for unsubscribing."

Another respondent wrote, "Appropriate if message includes a trailer telling how to 'unsubscribe'."

A third respondent added, "…as long as I have the option to un-check it, I'm not bothered so much. Also, I should also have the ability to opt-out."

Respondents from the NRC survey responded similarly to questions about promotional e-mail.

One NRC customer wrote, "I asked for the information, thanks for sending it. If I didn't want it I would unsubscribe."

"If you have requested these notifications, then you should expect to receive the e-mail," said another NRC customer. "You always have the option to opt out of the service."

Further examination of these responses demonstrates another implicit rule: *Tentative Obligatory Rule 2: If a person signs up to receive e-mails from an organization, the organization should send the e-mails.* This sounds rather obvious, but there seem to be implications for not receiving requested e-mails, and not being able to unsubscribe to promotional e-mails. Failing to send solicited e-mail may be perceived as reluctance or ambivalence on the part of the organization for continuing the relationship. In addition, a person may forget about the company if the relationship is in the initial stage and the user or customer in the meantime may form a relationship with a competitor.

*Tentative Preferred Rule 3: Web sites should contain referral pages for outdated links.*

This rule was generated by open-ended responses to a scenario about whether the customer would expect to find a featured product item on the *same page* (which the customer bookmarked) of the NRC site after three weeks.

One respondent wrote, “A link to a previously featured items (sic.) would be helpful in this scenario.”

“I think that the customer should be able to locate ‘previously featured items’ through a link at the site,” said another.

“It would be better to have the bookmark not link to a different page,” commented still another customer. “Just have a note that the page is no longer available.”

Yet another suggested, "A MESSAGE SHOULD COME UP ON THE SCREEN TELLING THE CUSTOMER THE PAGE IS NOW OUT DATED [sic.]."

Similarly, a CNAP scenario asked users how they'd rate the CNAP if users could not find a story where they expected it. One respondent wrote, "I think a note should be included in the section that is not chosen when the subject matter fits in more than one section."

"Should be a small section in the sports section and a link to the main story that is in the news section," replied another.

Relational implications for not providing referral pages could harm the relationship in the short-term or the long-term. Not providing a referral page may give the user the impression that the organization has not thought ahead about its customers' needs. This may not anger all customers, but may weigh as one factor in a cumulative effect on relationship strength.

*Tentative Preferred Rule 4: If a customer buys an item online, the customer should be able to return the item via a mail carrier.* The impetus for this rule sprang from responses to a scenario in which the NRC customer had to return a gift, but had to do so at the brick and mortar location. This rule may generalize across e-commerce sites that have both online and physical locations.

One respondent wrote, "If someone purchases on-line, there should be an alternative short of going to the nearest store."

Another voiced, "If ordered online, it should be sent back not taken in. I don't live near 'an NRC' store."

Still another said, "I would expect that if I bought it online that I should be able to return it online as well. NRC should send out an ARS so that I can send it back."

*Tentative Obligatory Rule 5: If a Web site offers news, the news must be up-to-date.* This was demonstrated in a CNAP scenario that asked users what they would do if they visited the portal and the news hadn't been updated since the previous evening.

One user responded, "I like updated info. I think that I'd keep looking for updates elsewhere."

"Even if the city was hit with a power outage, I'd expect CNAP to a) have its own server power backups; b) report news in a timely manner," said another.

Yet one user wrote, "Unless there were extremely unforeseen circumstances, CNAP has always provided the latest updates. I would think that some major problem had occurred to prevent the update sooner."

These comments illustrate assumptions for this rule. It also shows that the last user has a different kind—deeper—relationship with the CNAP than the first two. The relationship strength the last user has with the CNAP appears to temper the violation of an obligatory rule (a rule that *must* be complied with).

Assuredly there are more general rules to online behavior, and surely more will develop as a greater proportion of people join the online environment. The rules above, however, appear to be general rules that could apply across similar contexts.

Research Question 3. This next question was meant to examine what organizational behaviors are necessary to build a two-way or dialogic relationship with Web users.

The factor analysis from the CNAP survey indicated that in only one scenario was there a communication exchange between the company and a site user. Examination of whether the rating for this rule was associated with affinity for the site revealed no significant association ($r=.214$; $p=.084$, $n=66$). This nonsignificant correlation could be a result of the low power ($1-\beta=.70$) resulting from a small sample size. According to Cohen and Cohen (1975, p. 54), power, or "the probability of failing to reject the null hypothesis when it is false," should typically be at the .80 level for bivariate correlation. It is also quite possible that the lack of statistical significance is because the rule related to more of an exchange interaction rather than a dialogic interaction. This will be discussed more fully in relation to research question six.

Research Question 4. What can forecast when an organization will be sanctioned? How do likeability, time, context, reciprocity and communicator goals affect sanctions? Responses found to the open-ended questions related to Tentative Preferred Rule 4*: If a customer buys* *an item online, the customer should be able to return the item via a mail carrier* help to answer this question. Open-ended responses indicate that likeability can mediate responses and adherence to the general rule. For example, one respondent wrote, "I just had a huge problem with the 'NRC' store. I swore I never set foot in one again. I was however pleased with my 'online NRC' experience and would take it to the store reluctantly." It appears that because the customer had had a positive experience online, the customer would take the product to the store even when he or she preferred not to. This is another indicator of the organization-customer relationship. Interestingly enough, this example also shows how likeability towards the brick and mortar store may be affected by likeability towards the online store and vice versa.

Another customer noted, "I have brought products in for service previously and have had a favorable experience." This response, like the previous one, shows that previous experience and likeability could affect a preferred rule.

Examination to open-ended responses to a scenario about an online pricing error revealed that sanctions also depend on the size of the company. One person wrote, "A company as big as NRC should insure [sic.] that their prices are right before pricing them to the public."

This suggests that relationships with organizations also may depend on whether the online user or customer perceives the company to be David or Goliath. Customers may allow a company more “wiggle room” if it is not perceived as a faceless organization or a large monopoly.

Time and goals can also vary sanctions. For example, in response to the CNAP scenario describing a situation in which a columnist responded to a user in a chat forum in three days, one user said, “DEPENDING ON THE URGENCY, I WOULD FIND THIS IRRITATING.”

“If CNAP could indicate the approximate response time, then I would feel the response was adequate,” said another.

One respondent noted, “The reason for CNAP is to access information in real time. By the time I got this reply, the band may have broken up and gone back to Liverpool and renamed themselves the Cock Roaches.”

In summary, open-ended responses revealed that sanctions may be mediated by likeability, previous experience, by perception of the size and “personability” of the organization, and by the importance placed on the value and urgency of the interaction.

Research Question 5. This next section explores how different relational contexts call for different sets of rules. Marketing e-mail is a good example of when contexts call for different rules. For example, if a pricing correction is sent via e-mail regarding an item a customer put on the “wish list,” customers seem more accepting of unsolicited e-mail. One respondent said “It would please me that a company would go out of its way to correct an error. I would consider shopping there more often.”

However, even if a customer registers to receive promotional e-mail, it appears that there is a limit to how many a customer will take before terminating the relationship. One respondent wrote, "My experience has been that I receive so many notices from some sites, that I just have to discontinue service. It becomes annoying quite quickly." Another wrote, "Two e-mails a month would give me a good impression of NRC. More would be an intrusion, fewer would show a lack of responsiveness." This is the customer's personal rule for marketing e-mail.

Another example is the scenario of the CNAP and the grocery store e-mail. One respondent wrote, "It is appropriate for CNAP (not the local grocery store) to send an e-mail…" This shows that when the promotional e-mail is from a site advertiser, the user feels this is a privacy violation and still expects to receive promotional e-mail from only the organization the user registered with.

<u>Research Question 6.</u> The last research question more generally addresses how organizations maintain long-term relationships via their Web sites. The data collected here relate to e-commerce sites, and to content (news portal) sites.

For e-commerce sites, responses indicate that customer service and value added services are important to maintaining customer relationships. According to rules theory, this may be interpreted as the organization being rewarded for surpassing expectation associated with general rules. In addition, several respondents noted that when they go online to purchase an item, they've already researched what they want, and they just want to purchase an item. It appears that many customers who go online to shop are goal-oriented and want to be able to find their preferred product quickly and make the purchase. Some of these customers would view a company more favorably if it included value-added services to facilitate goal attainment, compensated customers for any errors or inconveniences, and provided the convenience of not having to visit the store for customer service. Several respondents also noted that incentives (e.g., coupons, sales) could be used.

For the online city newspaper-affiliated portal, news accuracy, timeliness and balance in coverage appeared to be highly valued as factors for relationship maintenance.

Overall, it did not appear that dialogic communication online was necessary for positive relationships to be reported. Web sites do not seem to necessarily provide contexts that support coordinated two-way communication. The scenarios, although hypothetical, were based on interaction patterns available at the participating sites. Communication via the organization's Web site, or via e-mail can be characterized more by the organization's push and the site users' pull of information or service--and with a goal-oriented user, one-way communication or exchange may be sufficient. The Web as a channel may also be serving users in different stages in the relationship (relationship formation, maintenance, dissolution), and be augmented by interactions via other channels (as evidenced with examples of a brick and mortar store).

## VII. Application and Implications

Application of RATES as a research tool

The use of scenario questions and the semantic differential scale, in a Rules-Appropriate Testing Evaluation Scale (RATES), appears to be a highly reliable and a valid measure of relationship strength. The combination of a quantitative approach, which helps to understand the associations between variables, and the open-ended portion, which allows for interpretation of why or how rules are perceived by respondents, provides a variety and wealth of data. This data could lead to other types of data exploration. For example, a formal content analysis of the open-ended responses could be conducted to develop response categories and identify user types. Also, use of variables from the short answer section can be used in multiple regression equations to predict which rules more closely predict user affinity, taking demographic variables into account.

Use of the measurement instrument online appears to generate substantial written responses, and allows for rotation of scenarios to control for order effects in surveying. Modifications could be made to administer the RATES instrument in pencil-and-paper format as well.

A drawback to administering the measurement tool online is that some users are not yet comfortable with using online instruments. The samples here were of users that had registered with the organizations, which required that the user be able to fill out a form online. If one does not want to target online users or customers, an online instrument may not be as effective.

One problem of all survey research is non-response bias, e.g., Are those who do not respond to the survey different from those who did? With a small return rate, non-response bias may affect the results even if one is working with statistically normal populations. It makes it difficult to generalize results. This can be controlled a bit if demographics can be used to match responses to their population's percentages and weight them.

However, despite these potential drawbacks, the technique here allows for organizations to reach a random sample of users, and results in a large amount of data with greater amounts of variance in measurement. To attain more generalizable results, increasing the sampling frame, offering valuable incentives, and sending respondents reminder e-mails may help to increase response rates.

Results from pretesting the survey and from some survey comments suggest that a seven-item scale is preferable to a longer scale because it takes less time, and items are less redundant. Development of scenarios requires knowledge and research about a company and its Web site, which can be quite time consuming. Also, because respondents are not as familiar with the scenario format as a Likert-type questionnaire, some respondents may be hesitant to respond to the scenarios. Respondents who did reply spent time writing optional written responses. Also, few remarked on the novelty of the survey format and only one replied that the survey took too long.

In addition, use of the rules scenarios, in concert with other measures of non-perception based questions that objectively measure relationships (frequency of contact with the company, number of purchases, number of times the respondent has recommended the site to friends) could add a more objective measure of the relationship.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to offer a measurement tool based on rules theory to measure online relationships. Findings from the two surveys here indicate that relationships online are governed by rules specific to the online environment. Data indicate that relationship strength has an effect on customer affect towards an organization, and can also be modified based on whether the organization has violated a rule. Previous experience with the company, likeability, perceived size and personability of the company, and value placed on the interaction mediate interpretations of an organization's violation (positive or negative) of rule-governed behavior.

As mentioned, all online users or customers may not be equal when an organization has a limited budget. An organization must discern what types of online customers can be retained for relationship development, and at what cost. Organizations must also identify obligatory rules they are expected to comply with in order to prevent sanctions from potential users and registered users. Examining open-ended responses allows for this and can also serve the purpose of environmental scanning—identifying potential rules the organization may not realize users or customers may hold them to. The RATES survey instrument, administered at different points in time with different scenarios to reflect the changing environment, could also be used as a relational diagnostic tool to track relationships over time. In sum, this tool could aid organizations identify "priority" publics, identify potential crisis situations by identifying behavioral rules, and track relationship strength with users or customers over time.

# VIII. TAKE AWAY POINTS

- **Whether an organization meets, surpasses or violates online rules, the violation affects the affinity and relationship the customer or site user has with the organization.**
  - o Some examples of rules for the online environment are:

1. *E-mail solicitations, whether solicited or unsolicited, should provide the receiver the opportunity to unsubscribe or "opt off" the list.* (Obligatory)
2. *If a Web site offers news, the news must be up-to-date.* (Obligatory)
3. *If a person signs up to receive e-mails from an organization, the organization should send the e-mails.* (Obligatory)
4. *Web sites should contain referral pages for outdated links.* (Preferred)
5. *If a customer buys an item online, the customer should be able to return the item via a mail carrier.* (Preferred)

- **Communication patterns are different online.** The type of communication pattern may be associated with affinity. In fact, the first two communication patterns were significantly correlated with affinity, while the last two were not.

  - This appears to be a function of the goal-directedness of online users, and also the result of a lack of interactivity. Some sites, however, are not meant to be interactive, or would have not practical use for providing extensive interactivity (e.g., some business-to-business e-commerce sites).

ORGANIZATION USER<br>
PUSH--------------------------------------------------------------------------------□CHOICE TO<br>
ACCEPT/ACT<br>
ONE-WAY COMMUNICATION

ORGANIZATION USER<br>
PASSIVE PROVIDER□---------------------------------------------------ACTIVE/INFO.<br>
SEEKING<br>
DEFINED COMMUNICATION CONTEXT

ORGANIZATION USER<br>
PASSIVE ◄-----------------------------------------------------------------------ACTIVE/PASSIVE VIEWING<br>
(AMBIGUOUS) AMBIGUOUS COMMUNICATION CONTEXT (UNCERTAIN)

ORGANIZATION USER<br>
ACTIVE □---------------------------------------------------------------------------□ACTIVE<br>
TWO-WAY EXCHANGE

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