Leveraging Organizational Innovation for Strategic Reputation Management

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A paper presented at the 11th International Conference on Reputation, Brand, Identity and Competitiveness, May 31—June 2, 2007, Oslo, Norway.

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Courtright and Smudde are co-editors of the book, *Power and Public Relations* [Hampton Press, 2007]. The present essay includes ideas central to their next book now under contract with Hampton, *Public Relations as Genre: Creating Powerful Messages* (publication slated for early 2009).

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ABSTRACT

Writing conventions and genres are the stuff of corporate message creation. Yet their role in reputation management has been ignored. Using 'innovation' to illustrate the importance of understanding genre theory in reputation management, the paper proposes a process model of identity, image, and reputation that situates message design in the context of diffusion of innovations theory. To demonstrate the model's utility and apply genre principles, we analyze recent strategic communications of Fortune 500 companies known for innovation. Results suggest common themes, stylistic choices, and discourse patterns used to frame companies' identities, produce favorable stakeholder images, and build an 'innovative' reputation.

KEYWORDS: genre; discourse conventions; corporate reputation; innovation; organizational *persona*; management processes; organizational culture; organizational identity; image; corporate identity

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INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that effective crisis communication is tied not just to what is said in an organization's defense but *how* it is said. Numerous studies of corporate *apologia* attest to the fact that genre considerations—concerns for the interaction of form and content with the situation (and/or purpose of the message)—are important to immediate image repair and a long-term focus on corporate reputation. Yet neither the corporate reputation literature nor that of organizational rhetoric have focused on the prospective (i.e., future) possibilities that genre theory holds for message design's role in the promotion of favorable images among stakeholders and positive corporate reputation. Genre theory and message design play a vital, combined role in building corporate reputation, and the communication of organizational innovation illustrates this role as companies, especially Fortune 500 companies, use it as a means to build reputations as innovative organizations.

Our essay proceeds through several subjects. The paper begins with a brief theoretical discussion of innovation, the reputation process, and message design's place within it. Of particular note is *a revised model of corporate identity, image, and reputation that situates a role for message design* in the context of diffusion of innovations theory. The paper also explicates genre theory, writing conventions, and their roles in the formation and maintenance of discourse communities, using a brief review of genre theory and its application to organizational discourse. Then the analysis section focuses on specific Fortune 500 companies known for innovation and a sample of their recent strategic communication efforts to communicate innovation. The results suggest common themes, stylistic choices, and discourse patterns that a Fortune 500 company typically may use to frame expressions of its corporate identity, to produce favorable images in the minds of stakeholders, and to build and sustain corporate reputation as an innovator. The paper's final section presents implications and questions for future research.

Innovation as Rhetorical Situation

Every organization, whether it's for-profit, not-for-profit, government-sponsored, or nongovernment-sponsored, constantly addresses to publics and stakeholders what makes them different and better than other, perhaps competing organizations. These matters concern the reputation process and message design's place within it. In a broader way, however, these matters reflect to publics and stakeholders ideas about an organization's innovativeness. In this way innovation comprises a rhetorical situation (i.e., an attempt to shape the environment, not just respond to it) and a response to an exigence (i.e., something is provided for the market to meet what's lacking in it).

Innovation as Rhetorical Situation

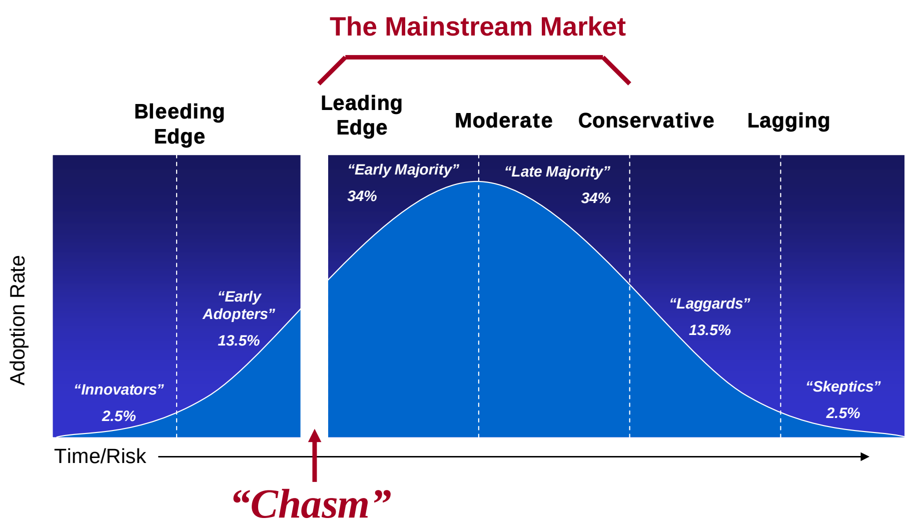
The communication of innovations illustrates the duality of situations as viewed in rhetorical theory. From an objective standpoint, messages are rhetorical responses to situations [Bitzer, 1968]. On the other hand, such messages also serve as efforts to make the environment more conducive to the introduction and promotion of the innovation into the marketplace. Bitzer's [1968] original article posited that a situation is not rhetorical unless it presents an exigence—'a flaw or imperfection'—that must be addressed with a fitting response. Surrounding this exigence are various constraints and an audience to be addressed. This view was met with criticism that it objectified the situation, since it implied that situation is the cause and rhetorical messages the effect [e.g., Consigny, 1974; Vatz, 1973].

Clearly a completely objectivist view of situations cannot withstand scrutiny when we consider the complexity of organizational rhetoric. Organizations address multiple audiences in their response to often competing interpretations of their environments. Likewise, they are not limited in the options about how to respond. What has become clear since the initial controversy over the 'rhetorical situation' is that messages are instrumental both reactively and proactively. Benoit [1994], in pointing out that the objectivist treatment of situation has persisted in the rhetorical literature, observes that situations may be framed in a variety of ways. Benoit's position is based on Kenneth Burke's [1969, p.xiii] argument that all rhetoric is framed using one of five emphases: Agent (Who did it?), Act (What was done?), Scene (Where and/or when was it done?), Agency (How was it done?), or Purpose (Why was it done?).

Innovation as Rhetorical Exigence

How the communication of organizational innovation is framed is important to that innovation's success. Rogers [2001] advanced the idea of the 'adoption curve', which accounts for the genesis of products or services as they make it to the mass market. The curve (see Figure 1) is made up of several components that account for the introduction, growth, maturity, and decline of a market. The adoption curve progresses from ‘innovators’, who are the few geniuses that come up with unique ideas; to ‘early adopters’, who have the vision for the unique products’/services’ value toward creating competitive advantage for themselves; to the ‘early majority’, which comprises the first mainstream-market organizations to apply the technology as the early adopters did and try to obtain similar advantages but on a larger scale. This first half of the curve accounts for the development and growth of a market to maturity. The second half of the adoption curve accounts for a market’s decline, even as people continue to obtain a technology but to decreasing degrees.

Figure 1. The chasm in the product adoption curve [adapted from Moore, 2002, p.17]

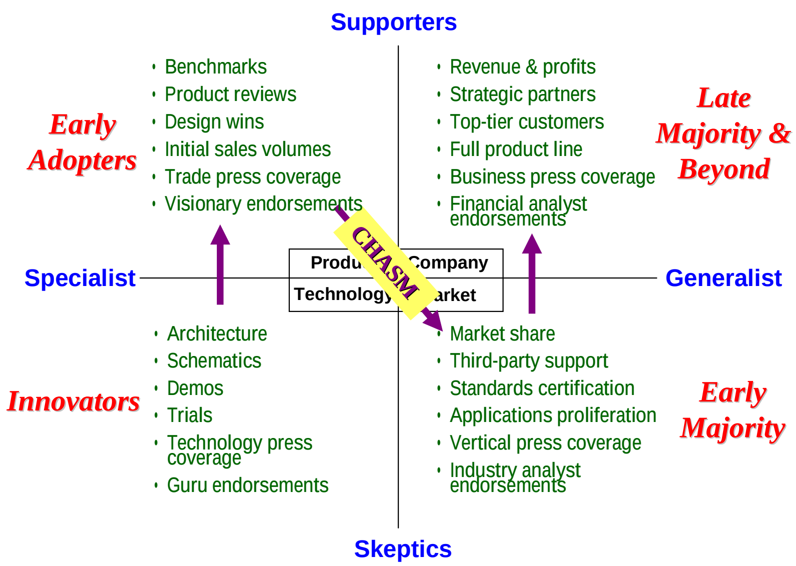


The curve in Figure 1 moves from the early majority to the ‘late majority’, which comprises organizations that have waited to see how well-proven the unique technology is and decide whether or not to acquire it; and finally to the ‘laggards’ and ‘skeptics’ who obtain the innovation near the end of its life cycle because they put off the decision to acquire it so long that they have little other choice but to adopt it. By then the next innovation has already taken off and the cycle begins anew. But, note in Figure 1 that the curve from the early adopters to the early majority is not continuous. This discontinuity Moore [2002] calls the ‘chasm’ because it is difficult for most innovators to cross. The reason: Innovators have really only worked with like-minded people and organizations among early adopters. So it takes a major perspective change and a large amount of effective, successful symbolic action to demonstrate an innovation’s value to a mainstream audience that operates by very different values and expectations than those who’ve enjoyed the innovation almost like a new toy that boosts business.

The critical symbolic action needed to cross the chasm involves an intimate understanding of audiences, the environment, and other factors. This dimension calls for insightful analysis about message design for innovations that has not been done in the relevant organizational communication, public relations, and similar literature. We must turn to Moore [2002], who presents a vital approach to message design, although he does not seem address its vital implications for reputation management. He explains how it is that innovators have a new burden of proof they’ve not experienced before. The innovators and early adopters have a natural, ‘visionary’ interest in an innovation itself. But those in the mainstream market are ‘pragmatists’ who ‘are more interested in the market’s response to a product than in the product itself’ [p.156]. The result is very different degrees of evidential support for arguments to audiences about innovations and the organizations that offer them.

Figure 2 shows Moore’s [2002, p.157] ‘Competitive-Positioning Compass’. The single most-important point in the figure is that it shows precisely the kind of thinking needed to design an effective message platform for any innovation based on what audiences need and expect—from their perspectives. Note that the move from the upper left quadrant to the lower right quadrant is the realm of argument needed to successfully cross the chasm in the product adoption curve. The substance of the arguments change significantly from visionary to pragmatic because of the mainstream market’s pressures on organizations considering an innovation. The crossing of the chasm should make attention to message making an imperative for the organization that wishes to create and maintain a reputation for innovation. While this likely occurs in practice, the models found within the image and reputation literature fail to make the communication process itself central to the process of reputation building, which is the very ‘stuff’ of all reputation management.

Figure 2. Moore's Competitive-Positioning Compass [2002, p.157].



Modeling the Message Design Process into Reputation Management

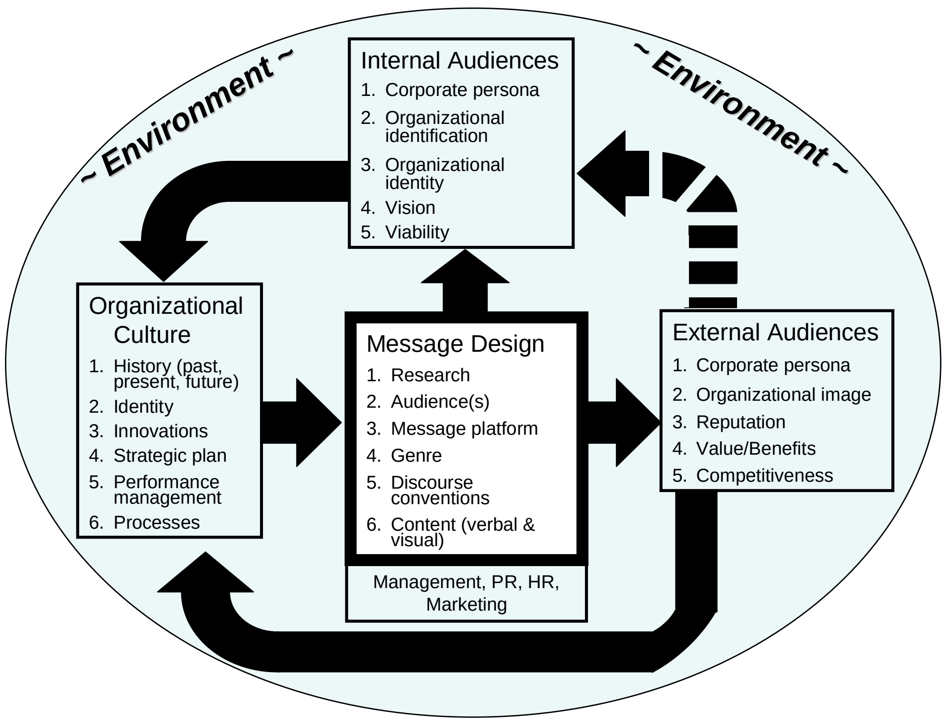
Perhaps the failure of scholars heretofore to place communication at the heart of reputation management is not surprising because this literature of necessity has focused on defining and demarcating the key terms of identity, image, and reputation. Consider the following theorists' efforts to model the interrelationships among these three concepts. First, Hatch and Schultz [1997, 2002] have focused primarily on how corporate identity is central to the two-way relationship between organizational culture and corporate image. An organization's cultural understandings are expressed through its corporate identity, yet this identity reflexively becomes part of the organization's culture. Corporate identity also reflects audience images while trying to shape them [2002, p.991]. Elsewhere, Hatch and Schultz [2000] argue that corporate identity is the explicit, instrumental effort to convey who an organization is to others; organizational identity, in contrast, is shared directly through interpersonal channels among organizational members. Unfortunately these and other treatments of these concepts do not lead to considerations of the rhetorical heart of corporate reputation. Instead they lead only to limited process views of corporate reputation efforts.

Second, models that link corporate identity to reputation begin to address some specifics of the communication process, but only in a limited way. In Alessandri's model [2001, p.178], 'visual presentation' and 'corporate behavior' express the corporate mission and lead to corporate identity, yet how corporate identity leads to corporate image and beyond to reputation remains a communicative mystery. Indeed, the grounding of the model in assumptions of visual identity and its perception as one of low involvement and then classical conditioning ignores literature in communication which has long rejected a 'hypodermic' or 'Magic Bullet' theory of communication as information transfer. More consistent with broader understandings of organizational rhetoric would be van Riel and Balmer's [1997, p.342] model which features a tripartite Corporate Identity Mix (CI-mix) that springs from strategy grounded in corporate culture history. Like Alessandri's model, corporate 'behavior' is one of the components. Their model is more effective because 'symbolism' and all 'communications' complete the mix. The CI-mix contributes directly to organizational performance, while reputation also mediates between mutual relationships between corporate identity and organizational performance.

Still, these models downplay or ignore the management process needed to orchestrate everything together. Markwick and Fill [1997, p.400] move us toward that end with a model that proceeds from corporate personality to corporate identity to corporate image (and reputation, placed within the same space as image but considered to be more enduring [see pp.398-399]). The process begins and comes back to strategic management. In between each step of the model we find processes such as 'organization development' and 'objectives and positioning' based on management (and marketing) communications. Most important for our purposes, the generation of corporate identity comes through self-analysis conducted through management communications, and 'planned communications' are strategically used to communicate corporate identity and influence corporate image and reputation among all audiences. Unplanned communication cues also affect the relationship between identity and image/reputation.

We build upon these models to create a model more suitable and complete for the study of why and how message design process is central to the study of organizational identity, corporate identity, image and reputation. In the model found in Figure 3 we make the message design process central to the interplay of organizational culture, both types of identity, organization image, and corporate reputation. Each block of the model proceeds through five or six steps; e.g., the message design process begins with research and then a specific focus on audience(s). Once a message platform with theme and copy points is developed, the message genre and specific discourse conventions are chosen to accomplish the objectives related to a research-based goal. Specific verbal and visual content then completes the chosen form.

Figure 3. Genre-based, rhetorical model of corporate reputation management.



In the next sections of the essay we will provide explanations and examples of what specifically is meant by ‘genre’ and ‘discourse conventions’, but a few nuances of our model should be noted. First, each block related to and from the message design block includes much more than the typical foci of organizational culture, identity, and reputation. Each block links these concepts to the specific concern of innovation and outcomes that should accrue when an organization builds its reputation as an innovator. As part of the organizational culture, innovation must become enacted and embedded through strategic planning, performance management, and processes. With regard to external audiences, reputation should lead to value, benefits, and competitiveness. For internal audiences, organizational identity should lead to a shared vision and continued organizational viability.

Second, our model employs terms of art from the organizational rhetoric literature for which we intend particular meanings. One important move is the replacement of ‘corporate identity’ with the term ‘corporate persona’. Due to the fact that some authors use the term image to refer to the corporate identity that an organization communicates, rather than as a receiver-based concept (i.e., image is perceived by audiences [e.g., Moffitt, 1994, 1999, pp.14-18]), we prefer the rhetorical notion that organizations communicate who they are through *personae* [McMillan, 1987]—because they most likely do not completely convey their corporate identities in every message they strategically employ. Such personae—along with audience members’ experiences within a particular context [Moffitt, 1994; Williams and Moffitt, 1997]—result in interpretations that create images of the organization in the audience’s minds. Multiple images, of course, then lead to long-term reputation. For internal audiences, corporate identity or *persona* (and, by implication, externally derived images and reputation—see the dotted arrow in Figure 3) is recursive because organizational members also are part of external publics. This recursive influence contributes to organizational identity through identification—organizational identification in the sense most frequently used in the organizational behavior and organizational communication literatures. Organizational members manage multiple identities [Cheney, 1991] but, most important for our model, identify with the organization in ways that other stakeholders do not.

Message design is thus the linchpin in the creation and maintenance of organizational culture and identity as well as external image(s) and reputation. Corporate identity is conveyed through message design in the form of a desire image, a corporate persona. We have argued that message design therefore is central to reputation building. However, before we illustrate how message design is of particular importance in linking innovation to an organization’s reputation, we provide a brief explication of genre theory, writing conventions, and their role in the formation and maintenance of discourse communities so that the examples we provide later in this essay may be appreciated fully.

Genre Theory, Writing Conventions, and Discourse Communities

Genre concerns have been with us since Aristotle, who argued that three specific types of situations (forensic, deliberative, and epideictic) necessitated the use of specific forms and types of argument. Logical appeals also exhibited a concern for form, with the syllogistic reasoning and a particular type of argument, enthymemes, associated with them. Rhetorical use of genres thus began as guidelines for the creation of messages. Although Aristotle's ideas are noted in general treatments of organizational discourse today [Cheney *et al*., 2004, p.86; Heracleous, 2004, p.181], most use of genres in organizational rhetoric serve as *post hoc* methods of rhetorical and literary criticism. We applaud (and have used) such methods, for there is much to be learned from examples of corporate practices done well or gone awry. However, we maintain that genres and their attendant writing conventions may be used in the same the Greeks used rhetoric: prospectively to address audiences as discourse communities.

Genre studies within the speech communication tradition are tied in part to Bitzer's [1968] 'Rhetorical Situation' article referred to earlier, for many studies have treated speech types or genres as responses to the constraints posed by situations and those related to audience characteristics or expectations. Chief among these has been the work of Campbell and Jamieson [n.d.], who argued that genres were a 'constellation of forms', a unique fusion of style, substance, and situation, recurring over time. Among the genres studied have been eulogies [Goldzwig and Sullivan, 1995; Jamieson and Campbell, 1982], various forms of discourse associated with the U.S. presidency [Campbell and Jamieson, 1986a], the diatribe [Windt, 1972], and messages that are prophetic in tone; i.e., apocalyptic rhetoric [Brummett, 1984] and the jeremiad [Johannesen, 1985]. Each of these genres has been shown to have specific audience needs, situational constraints on the message source, style and tone, and identifiable message strategies (specific content may vary, but the broader message strategies remain the same).

A generic approach 'aims at understanding rhetorical practice over time by discerning recurrent patterns that reflect the rules that practitioners follow. . . . Those rules outline the parameters within which symbolic action will express the rhetor's motives, will be acknowledged by the audience as a form or recognized as a convention for expressing intention, and will be capable of satisfying audience expectations' [Campbell and Jamieson, 1986, p.295]. This approach to generic analysis 'aims to illuminate rather than classify' [Swales, 1990, p.43]. So we can think of corporate messages as fitting specific genres of discourse that can be studied for their rhetorical and social dimensions. Approaches to genre found in linguistics, and in applications found in the technical communication literature, emphasize the latter.

From a linguistic perspective, genres of discourse may be defined not only in terms of the forms they take—the discourse conventions that have been used time and time again—but by the purposes they accomplish [Miller, 1984] and the audiences for whom they are useful towards those ends. Regarding this latter point, audiences who use and respond to a common set of genres and discourse conventions may be said to constitute a discourse community. For example, there is a large community that upholds conventions about enacting public relations discourse for external and internal audiences. Such social agreement about texts gets at the heart of discourse genre. As Swales [1990] asserts, a genre's communicative purposes 'are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. . . . In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience' [p.58]. Swale's perspective thus unites rhetorical and linguistic approaches to genres.

In short, multiple audiences use—and respond to—genres and discourse conventions. These include industry associations like the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Association for Business Communicators (IABC); university programs in public relations and the scholars and experts who research, publish, teach, and speak about, companies dedicated to publishing and holding conferences for and about public relations; scholars and experts who research, publish, teach, and speak about public relations; and practitioners themselves. Moreover, people from the news media and other organizational functions and disciplines (e.g., marketing, sales, research, personnel, legal) also participate in public relations discourse that is enacted for any given purpose. By this broad community of people, the genres of public relations discourse are institutionalized, but they also allow people to adapt them to specific organizational needs and communication situations.

Categories of public relations discourse derive from conventions for discursive action that are upheld by members of the large community of people in the field of public relations (and other disciplines) in both industry and academe. These people use language intersubjectively to structure their thinking about the ways things are for an organization. Therefore, the social process of creating any public relations discourse type is governed by contextual cues about the order of things reflected in the text itself, which is shared among diverse publics to induce cooperation with them. As Killingsworth and Gilbertson [1992] observe, ‘In selecting appropriate genres, writers model appropriate actions. They tell the audience something about the action implicit in the discourse and something about how they want the audience to respond. . . . Genres are shorthand codes for describing typical kinds of communal actions’ [pp.73, 87]. The categories of public relations discourse, then, are major genres of public relations that practitioners create and members of a discourse community respond to, for they exhibit formal appeal: As Burke [1984] puts it, ‘form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite’ [p.31] by reflecting certain discursive patterns—syllogistic progression (i.e.,. structured appeals that audiences recognize as they are communicated; note the earlier discussion of Aristotle’s concerns for form), qualitative progression (i.e., forms that create a mood or pattern that is recognized perhaps implicitly during its communication but explicitly recognized upon reflection), repetitive forms (i.e., consistently reusing ideas in sustained or varied ways), conventional forms (i.e. upholding conventions for recognized discourse from press kits to memos), and minor—i.e., simple—forms (e.g., metaphor, a business letter greeting,) [Burke, 1968, pp.124-149, with explanations and examples modified for present purposes].

What is striking to us is how little has been done, particularly in the public relations and organizational rhetoric literatures, to take what we know about genres and discourse conventions and apply them to the creation of organizational messages. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the majority of what we know in the organizational rhetoric literature comes, as referred to earlier, from *post* *hoc*, retrospective studies of organizational crisis communication. Granted, the research programs of Benoit [1995a, 1995b; Benoit and Brinson, 1994; Benoit and Czerwinski, 1997; Blaney, Benoit and Brazeal, 2002; Brinson and Benoit, 1996, 1999] and Hearit [e.g., Courtright and Hearit, 2002; Hearit, 1995, 1997, 1999; Hearit and Brown, 2004] have generated multiple studies of corporate *apologiae* [for a review, cf. Hearit, 2001], no rhetorical studies to our knowledge have proposed that typologies such as Benoit's [1995] be used in *propter hoc*, prospective scholarship to move beyond the logistics of crisis plans to scenarios to develop standby statements grounded in an understanding of apologia as a genre. We recognize that this is somewhat problematic since apologia does not conform to the generic parameters set by theorists such as Campbell and Jamieson [n.d.], for not all crisis situations have the same type of exigence, constraints, or audience needs. [For further discussion of this problem and an explanation of why this may occur, cf. Rowland and Jerome, 2004.]

Second, there may be a resistance to applying genre theory more generally to all types of organizational discourse because some forms (e.g., memos, news releases, public service announcements, etc.) may at first blush appear mundane and even uninteresting. Some of us may resist the idea because there are handbooks and writing textbooks that have presented any genre or discourse convention as merely following a formula or recipe for format, style, and basic content. Some industry articles [e.g., McCleneghan, 1999; Ryan, 1995] offer writers' preferred recipes for news releases, for example, but at best display an implicit and incomplete understanding of the reasons behind the discourse conventions they invoke. As we explained earlier, however, there are theoretical reasons behind the expected patterns. Yet, despite a call for studies of corporate communication that employ discourse conventions, genres, and other rhetorical concepts in a prospective manner [e.g., Smudde, 2004], we have found no studies of corporate communication criticism that lead to concerns for message design [for one exception, cf. Courtright and Slaughter, in press]. Only one experimental design [Coombs and Schmidt, 2000], has tested Benoit's [1995] image repair typology of apologetic strategies, but the study stops short of offering recommendations.

The lack of focus on strategic, prospective message design, let alone attention to the genre theory and discourse conventions associated with it, thus pervades both the literatures of corporate reputation and organizational rhetoric. The same is also true of the literature that indirectly links innovation to corporate reputation management. Our model suggests that this is a major gap in these and related literatures. What few studies in the corporate apologia literature might capitalize on the importance of innovation to image building and reputation management do not because of their focus on particular strategies used to turn crisis situations into opportunities. One such strategy is the use of model and anti-model arguments [Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, pp.362-371]. Certain crisis situations provide an organization with the opportunity to turn criticism into a justification for becoming the innovative leader within its industry. The company responds to the crisis by framing the accusations against them as the anti-model (i.e., the pattern of behavior that is not acceptable industry practice). Companies such as Merrill Lynch [Brand, 2007] and, we would argue, Johnson and Johnson with the introduction of tamper-proof packaging after the famous Tylenol scare, created the 'model argument'—that the organizations now were industry leaders due to their innovations. The Merrill Lynch study and others like it (e.g., Sellnow and Brand, 2001) look at model/anti-model arguments within crisis situations but only implicitly relate them to their function in conjunction with discourse conventions and genre considerations.

The need therefore exists to place message design, genre theory, and discourse considerations to the forefront of communicating corporate identity and managing reputation. The next section illustrates the utility of the model we have proposed toward that end.

Analysis

To test the imperative of message design as we've argued and modeled it, we chose to examine certain prominent discourse types from selected Fortune 500 companies as listed in 2006. Corporate reputation can be divined from discourse because, as Love and Kraatz [2005] say, 'Reputations are conceptualized to arise from audience interpretations of economic and other signals associated with the firm. Signals leading audiences to attribute desirable traits such as trustworthiness or honoring of commitments (e.g., does not behave opportunistically) are thought to lead to positive reputations…. High performance (along dimensions important to the audience) also leads to positive reputation…. Researchers stress that congruence, or lack thereof, with broader normative and cultural understandings shape reputational assessments as well' [p.1]. We picked Fortune 500 companies—3M (2007), Apple Computer (2007), AutoNation (2007), Cardinal Health (n.d.), Cisco Systems (1992-2007), and United Technologies (n.d.), known for innovation based on these parameters—and examined their news releases, annual reports, and websites for statements about innovation/innovativeness. These companies span a range of industries and include products or services. The three discourse genres we've selected give us samples of their recent strategic communication efforts to communicate innovation.

The first genre we examine is news releases. The benefit of this genre is that it presents, in effect, the organization's ideal news story, if it had complete control over what was published or carried in the news media. So we can see in this genre the most explicit statements about an organization's view of itself and its innovations and innovativeness. As might be expected, the news releases from our six companies chosen for analysis are straightforward in their use of conventions such as headline, lead, inverted-pyramid pattern of organization, etc. What is striking is the direct, factual framing of each story's lead. The fact that it is the company (or a particular division of it) is announcing some innovation is what comes first in the lead sentence—not the innovation itself, which really is the most newsworthy aspect of the story. Using Burke's pentad, the Agent and the Act of announcing the innovation would not seem to be the most important symbolic terms to emphasize. Indeed, the headlines are shortened versions of the lead paragraph, which is a pattern that places the newsworthy innovation first.

This use of the genre and its conventions may simply be the recognition that business news editors and other members of the business discourse community care more about factual information than extended narratives such as those found in feature stories, etc. However, using Burke's theory of form mentioned earlier, it could be argued that such message framing creates expectations for the message's receivers that the innovation's purpose (the why) is to be explained in the details to come. This happens in all of the news releases and product announcements we examined. What distinguishes news releases from the briefer announcements is an important rhetorical move to reemphasize the role of the organization as the agent, the social actor, behind the innovation. For example, 3M's news releases typically quote the senior manager from the division that developed the product or its improvement. In contrast, Cardinal Health quotes physicians who endorse the innovation. The quotes position the manager or an external endorsement as the 'expert.' The use of such quotes thus serves to enhance the credibility of the organization itself as the source of the story. (Incidentally, both authors teach their public relations writing students to include quotations early in the details of the inverted pyramid for this very reason.)

Our second genre is annual reports. Grunig [1993] explains that 'the *choice* and *use* of symbols to communicate impressions of an organization' is a vital and ethical part of public relations [p.129; emphasis added]. This is presented each year as corporations publish their annual reports, and of special importance in any annual report is the letter to shareholders. In these reports, a company's chairperson or chief executive truly functions as a 'corporate rhetor' [Cheney and Vibbert, 1987], because the letter to shareholders 'tells readers how the corporation performed over the past year and clarifies the company's stance on economic or political trends that may affect its future' [Hager and Scheiber, 1990, p.119]. To the extent that annual reports portray a company's view of its environment and relevant issues, letters to shareholders especially reflect ethics for corporate communication. Those letters are written for all of a company's constituencies, perhaps some more than others. Shareholders, for example, are the primary owners of a company and have a right to honest and accurate information. Annual reports are potentially the most important documents a company can publish during a year, and should be and reflect an ethical representation of the chair's or CEO's view of its performance over the previous year.

The sum of information in most annual reports is required (pursuant to U.S. federal regulations), demanded (on the part of shareholders and other external constituencies), and requested (as a function of a company's selected internal constituencies and its overall public relations strategy). Balancing all of these concerns is a formidable challenge, and suggests that ethics would be part of any annual report's development process and final product. In general, annual reports contain two basic forms of information: a narrative about a company's business (usually divided into sections or chapters, including the chair or CEO's letter), and consolidated and summarized financial data (e.g., income statement, balance sheet, cash flows, footnotes). The financial data serves to paint a general picture of an organization's financial viability over several years, typically three years. It is specialized, objective information in its own right, complementing the report's narrative as well as the detailed data found in the Form 10-K, which is required under Section 13 of the Securities and Exchange Act of 1934. Thus, the financial data is critical from both a compliance and an information standpoint; moreover, the data supports and is supported by the statements made in the narrative.

A company's constituencies learn from an annual report's total narrative—from its style, tone, and content—about who the company is and what its values are, what its businesses are and how successful they have been, and how the company manages its environments and interacts with its stakeholders. Because each audience has a need to know how and why a company conducted its business the way it did during the year, the narrative portion of an annual report is probably its most important part. It tells the story of a company's performance over the prior year to all of its publics and sets the tone for the year ahead. The narrative is an organization's opportunity to truly influence how its constituencies view it, bolstering its identity and public image through what is said and how it is said. In this regard, the chair's or CEO's letter to shareholders alone is likely the most-read part of any annual report because people look to what the top person in an organization has to say about its performance, business decisions, and future.

Our third and final discourse genre is websites. What's most interesting to note about websites is that the discourse conventions for them are not unique. Website design, when the Internet was very young, was a whole new thing. Anyone who had the skills and resources to design websites did so with vast ranges of effectiveness and creativity. Some sites were overly simplistic, others were 'over the top' with nearly every possible design element that could be put on a screen. Webmasters quickly surmised that some standards were necessary. The guiding question was, 'What makes a good website?' Much work went into answering this question from graphic designers to human-factors researchers. What emerged was a flexible set of discourse conventions using printed documents as the analog. That is, the language of web design was based on metaphors about printed material—websites have 'pages', etc. Even the name 'website' is a metaphor for something physical but really isn't—it exists electronically, and we read light, not ink.

So web designers used the discourse conventions for brochures, booklets, indexes, etc. to fashion Internet-specific standards for how text and graphics would work together on the virtual pages of websites. Subjects from the most basic to the most complex are indexed and linked page after page. A key to good website design is effective navigation, which gives website visitors a clear sense of what's where, how to get to it, and how to get back to something seen before by clicking on links to specific webpages about particular topics. As web technology has evolved, the content for websites evolved [cf. Smudde, 2005]. People have written 50 million online journals worldwide called web logs, or 'blogs'. There are downloadable audio shows called 'podcasts' (using Apple's iPod as the inspiration for the term) that resemble radio programs. And 'wikis' (which is Hawaiian for 'quickly') resemble dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference documents that anyone can update. All of these things are being used increasingly by organizations to communicate with internal and external audiences. At this point websites are a genre that could use improvement when it comes to demonstrating innovation's full potential—finding the press room is often problematic, and most companies bury community relations and put consumer purposes at the forefront. Major corporate social responsibility efforts are often linked uniquely and easily. What's more, however, is The formatting for blogs, podcasts, and wikis are very similar to—if not a replica of—websites, using the same software technology and design and usability (i.e., discourse) conventions.

On the websites for the six organizations we've selected we see sophisticated use of the website genre. All of them use the conventions for effective website design in different and reasonable ways. We'll not critique their website designs, because doing so would take us away from the thesis of this paper. Nevertheless, the companies' use of websites enacts important messages about innovation that support their reputation, identities, value, and competitiveness. Indeed, if any of these organization did not enact such messages, it would call into question why they overlooked such important points (at best) or what may be going on internally that might signal major change (at worst). All the websites use animation and interactive links to help visitors go deeper into the substance of the organization in multiple dimensions. Cardinal Health includes an RSS (really simple syndication) feed so that visitors can be updated on the latest information and news uploaded to the website, including blogs and podcasts. Cisco Systems has a wide variety of subjects available through RSS feeds, which is expected given that the company provides Internet technology worldwide. The depth and breadth of information on the companies' websites is impressive, and the design and interactivity of them is stunning. The bottom line, however, is how well the messages about innovation are enacted so that the companies' reputations are upheld. The model we've argued for and presented gives us a way to analyze and critique the synergy between this genre and key messages.

The results across all three genres for the six companies—3M, Apple Computer, AutoNation, Cardinal Healthcare, Cisco Systems, and United Technologies—suggest common themes, stylistic choices, and discourse patterns that a Fortune 500 company typically may use to frame expressions of its corporate identity, produce favorable images in the minds of stakeholders, and building and sustaining corporate reputation as an innovator. The use of the term 'innovation' is as interesting as it is in the annual reports—the term seems used to refer to at least the idea of being innovative or the presence of innovations created by employees. Greater evidential support is often needed to document the reality of a true innovation or the activity of innovating.

Conclusion: Implications and Questions for Future Research

Our goal in this paper has been to begin to fill an important gap in the reputation literature that has historically refrained from addressing formally reputation management's discursive and rhetorical nexus. Our approach and model challenges the field to take more seriously the discursive and rhetorical dimensions of reputation management and public relations. The literature has addressed certain aspects of reputation management and what it means in the particular occasions when organizations advance messages about innovations and being innovative. All too often, as we showed, these are either assumed or glossed over so that the 'hard organizing' work is featured over all the symbolicity that's needed to make reputation management and public relations successful. We found that the literature is weak in this vein, and we've accommodate this focal point as well. We created a model that is grounded in linguistic constructs about genre and discourse conventions, rhetorical principles about message design, and management processes used by organizations of any ilk in any arena of society. It sounds like a lot, and it is. The benefits to scholars, practitioners, and students alike are that we have a more complete way to view reputation management than ever, and it accommodates the very decision-making and management processes that must orchestrate any symbolic action on an organizations' behalf.

Our study's limitations are few but notable. This project is actually part of a larger one—a book on genre’s place in communications management and tactics. So we’ve only taken a short dip in the deep pool we’re wading into. Nevertheless, we see that our work here uses a small, convenience sample of Fortune 500 companies and their discourse. The next steps in this project—to expand on our initial thinking here for publication—is to follow a basic, systematic method that includes (1) determining a control group of “noninnovative” companies so we can compare the discourse from both innovators and noninnovators to discover the degree to which a broad set of practices are/are not adopted by all companies, which could yield a set of universal norms of desirable communications, and (2) collecting and putting the data in visual form that presents findings across all variables and makes discussion about those results more efficient. We plan to include more examples and even broaden the examples across more discourse types, public relations situations, and organizations. These matters also imply the need to explore cultural differences, as there are many different dimensions for doing reputation management in various organizations, in various cultures, in the variety of industries or social structures in the world.

Our study can and should be broadened further with a systematic approach to reputation management planning. This is part of our plan for our upcoming book on genre in communications. We can develop in our future work a program that answers the question, ‘What would a genre and rhetoric-based reputation program look like?’ Such an approach would also answer questions about how this approach works for organizations of various sizes. That is, larger companies, medium-sized companies, and smaller ones may use genres and discourse conventions differently. In this lot we would need to study those trying to become the innovative ‘gorillas’ [Moore, Johnson, and Kippola, 1999, pp.57-63; cf.

Moore, 2005, pp.68-72, 201-217] in the marketplace like those we noted in the Fortune 500. More work needs done to understand the rhetorical moves across the chasm. Also, how effective is the idea of innovation as an analog for the study of reputation management? We believe it is a great place to start because innovation involves the creating of something new to meet new needs. In this way our model enacts a view of reputation management and public relations as 'the measured and ethical use of language and symbols to inspire cooperation between an organization and its publics' [Courtright and Smudde 2007, p.4]. The communication demands for innovation parallel those for reputation management, public relations, emergency communication, and so on. Furthermore, we believe the model would be usable and useful for for-profit, nonprofit, government, nongovernment organizations, and other organizations.

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