CONSTITUTING THE RHETORICAL STUDY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CREATION OF DISCURSIVE NORMS

by

ASHLI QUESINBERRY STOKES

(Under the Direction of John M. Murphy)

ABSTRACT

Most studies of public relations (PR) are of an instrumental nature, with scholars seeking to explain how companies employ a given PR campaign to meet organizational image management goals. To complement this approach, PR should be studied rhetorically. By examining PR through a constitutive lens that seeks to understand how PR relations strategies help to create discursive norms, scholars gain an enriched understanding of this discourse’s discursive significance in contemporary culture. Through case studies of the PR battle between Metabolife International and 20/20 and an analysis of the pharmaceutical industry’s web-based PR campaigns, the use of a constitutive approach illustrates how PR encourages audiences to expect and incorporate discursive speed as well as participate in a rhetoric of corporate empowerment. Identifying how public relations creates these types of discursive norms shows how studies of corporate rhetoric can be pursued to engage disciplinary questions of identity, invention, and ethics.

INDEX WORDS: Rhetoric, Public relations, PR, Instrumental, Constitutive, Marketing, Advertising, Corporate, Discursive norms, Health, Empowerment, Organization, Identity, Invention, Ethics
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DEDICATION

To Jeff, for his continual support, encouragement, and belief that together we can do anything we decide to pursue.
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CHAPTER 1

_The major power of identification derives from situations in which it goes unnoticed._

Kenneth Burke, 1972

INTRODUCTION

The refrain “image is everything,” has become an American business maxim. Corporations spend billions of dollars in public relations (PR) tactics to hone their images for public identification, approval, and consumption. In 2001, for example, businesses spent $4.31 billion to publicize their products, manage media relations, and create corporate sponsorships (Neff, Dipasquale, & Halliday, 2002). Although PR is not a new phenomenon, its techniques are proliferating. Witness the rise in corporate sponsorships; firms hire athletes like Tiger Woods to “create a synonym between the company and the athlete to move products and services” (Longman & Brown, 2002, p. 1). Foods now have marketing councils to increase consumption, such as the United Soybean Board, the Mushroom Council, and the Cranberry Marketing Committee. In addition to creating speaker bureaus, PR firms also position themselves as information resources for journalists, hire health professionals to interpret scientific research about products for the public, and ghostwrite ads and articles to appear as public testimonials about a product’s virtue. In short, to boost image recognition, to increase consumption, or to battle public scandal, companies seek the latest PR “best practice.” Public relations helps companies cut through the media-saturated clutter of American life to get their messages heard and their operating fates secured.
What has become a sophisticated and necessary practice in business has been part of American culture for more than 80 years. A quick look at PR’s path to professionalization underscores how indispensable it is to industry. From the earliest days of Ivy Lee, PR practitioners taught business leaders that they ignored the public at their peril. Lee convinced America’s aristocracy that their enterprises would be more successful if they pleased the public. He persuaded the Rockfellers, for example, to form a joint labor-management board to mediate workers’ grievances. He then “humanized” them by featuring them “playing golf, attending church, and celebrating birthdays” (Seitel, p. 33). As America emerged into the age of mass production, these techniques became increasingly important to help businesses differentiate themselves.

The industry grew as practitioners experimented with ways to gain public acceptance in an increasingly competitive and vocal business climate. Beginning in the 1920s, for example, physicians met tobacco industry advertisement claims with outrage and flooded newspapers with editorials. In response, tobacco companies hired PR experts to counter the rising public outcry. Some of these campaigns are infamous today for their varied and creative approaches to legitimize questionable products (Pollay, 1990). Edward Bernays organized the Torches of Liberty parade, where women carried smoking “symbols of freedom” to publicize their suffragist demands. He created a “Green Ball” to emphasize the fashion of Lucky Strike’s new green packaging. In addition to tobacco campaigns, industries with less controversial products developed similarly successful techniques over the years. Heinz, for example, created a campaign to feed starving post World War II European children. Its strategy of donating cans of baby food based on consumer sales resulted in three million cans being distributed throughout Europe. During the 1960’s, Stouffer’s International Foods boosted sales by serving its food
products to the Apollo 11 crew, reminding audiences that, “Everyone that has been to the moon is eating Stouffer’s” (Ketchum, 2003). Clients ranging from Westinghouse to Gulf Oil to the Plastics Council relied on the increasing sophistication of PR to create relationships with audiences.

Government utilization of PR techniques during the first and second world wars added to the industry’s standardization. The government conducted studies that illustrated that PR activities provided more support for the war than official government announcements alone, leading to campaigns such as the Four Minute Men and War Bond drives. Following World War II, PR programs began to be implemented at universities, which resulted in the scientific study of PR practices and curricula. The creation of such university programs, coupled with practitioners moving from the government to the private sector, made PR less of a spontaneous art and more of an organized response to image challenges. As a result, scholars maintain that PR evolved throughout the 1960, 70s, and 80s (Seitel, 1992). PR managed increasing consumer movements, a major recession, and the globalization of business. No longer viewed as a merely a “finishing touch,” it became an integral part of organizational management.

Today, organizations rely on advances in technology to increase the opportunities to connect with and persuade a variety of audiences. Although the goal of managing communication between an organization and its audiences has not changed, PR has new equipment at its disposal. As Heath (1998) says, the World Wide Web, coupled with improvements in media technology ranging from television to data transmission, provides PR practitioners with many new communicative tools. He argues the Web, in particular, “offers increased opportunities for companies to display advertising and public relations messages to attract, persuade, and motivate consumers” (p. 274). Desanto (2001) concurs; today’s instant
communication capabilities and changing worldwide media have altered the communicative environment. Two brief examples illustrate some of the implications that can result from PR’s increased access to technology.

In 2002, corporate giant Microsoft took a hit for taking technological capability too far. Mimicking Apple’s popular “Switch” commercials, Microsoft placed a testimonial on its company Web site. In the ad, an attractive brunette touted the benefits of Windows XP over a Mac operating system. Close inspection revealed, however, that the author of this “testimonial” did not exist. A quick search of an on-line photo repository showed that the woman who had fallen in love with Windows was really a stock image paired with words written by a Microsoft ghostwriter (Pogue, 2002). Although Microsoft faced nothing more serious than public embarrassment in this instance, another example points to more serious implications.

In 2001, the Pentagon hired Rendon Group to improve the image of the war in Afghanistan by providing positive news coverage and creating a Web site about the US campaign against terrorism. Rendon was hired because of its previous success; during the Gulf War, it was responsible for media coverage of thousands of Kuwaitis waving small American flags following liberation. Not only did Rendon deliver the flags for the Kuwaitis to wave, it used its media contacts to make sure that people all over the world saw the celebration as American forces swept through the city (Foer, 2002). Satellite video transmission allowed real-time viewing of this patriotic image.

Clearly, then, the PR function has moved beyond securing media interviews for CEOs and writing press releases for new products. Indeed, PR activity saturates public life (Ewen 1996). The President appointed “queen of branding” advertising maven Charlotte Beers as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs. Studies show that fully 40
percent of what is assumed to be “news” even in such respected publications as the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, are culled almost verbatim from press releases (Stauber & Rampton 2002). PR has been called the profession of the decade, and is said to contribute to new values and behaviors regarding, for example, the environment, consumerism, gender roles, sexual behavior, and multi-ethnicity (Moloney, 2000, p. 43). In other words, technology and sophisticated techniques give PR practitioners new ways to achieve the goal of creating cultural impact. It is important that academic study of the industry keep pace with these new opportunities, particularly given its role within general marketing practices.

PR suffers from a definitional problem, and is frequently confused with advertising and marketing. Indeed, there are more than 472 definitions of PR (Moloney, 2000). To pinpoint why this particular form of persuasion needs greater attention, it is important to differentiate it from its promotional cousins. According to the discipline’s preeminent scholars, PR is best understood as the management of communication between an organization and its publics (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). As a concept, it involves creating, maintaining, or repairing an organization’s relationship with a variety of audiences; as a practice, PR means dealing with the media (Moloney, 2000). It is important to specify how PR interacts with the media, however. While advertising pays for space in a medium to publicize a product or company, PR tries to garner editorial coverage through press releases, backgrounders, interviews, and the like. Levine (2003) explains the difference this way: if advertising is about getting the public’s attention, PR “seeks to create and maintain a consistent feeling of familiarity, trust, reliability, and confidence with the targeted public” (p. 19). That is, if a PR expert gains coverage in a newspaper or on a news broadcast, that coverage often carries more credibility with audiences than an ad which, as they say, toots its own horn. As Ries & Ries (2002) put it, telling an audience in an ad that, “We’re making it
right by Firestone,” smacks of it doing something wrong. (p.72). If, however, a news program reports on Firestone’s safety efforts, that message will likely be received more warmly.

PR’s relationship to marketing adds another piece to the promotional puzzle. In general, PR and advertising can be viewed as (mainly) separate practices under the marketing umbrella. Marketing involves determining what to sell and how to sell it, advertising calls the audience’s attention to that product, and PR tries to get targeted media to carry messages about the product. As Levine (2003) says about the relationship: “Advertising is obvious, marketing is invisible, but public relations is the most difficult of all things to be: subtle” (p. 6). All of these distinctions are important to mention, however, because of PR’s operating philosophy: whereas advertising and marketing involve direct sales goals, a large part of PR is concerned with informing, and in particular, educating, along with influencing. In other words, “public relations uses the credibility of its messages, images, and spokespersons to educate and persuade its audiences (Catlett, 2001, p. 132, emphasis added). If an organization hopes to create an ongoing relationship with members of a public, it must do more than convince them to buy a product. PR, therefore, positions itself as an educational and informational resource in addition to contributing to the bottom line.

PR belongs in one more category that deserves discussion. In the past decade, organizations have been moving toward combining marketing, advertising, and PR activities into a larger process called branding. Branding is the creation and development of a personality or identity for a product or company for the purposes of creating long-term customer loyalty and relationships (Levine, 2003). A few examples demonstrate why organizations attempt to brand. People recognize the “personality” of a BMW, for instance as a luxurious, high-performance, and well-designed car; meanwhile, contrast this identity to that of Chevrolets and Pontiacs. As
Levine notes (2003), it is more difficult to differentiate between these two cars, and BMW thus occupies a specific desirable identity in the public mind. Similarly, Jennifer Lopez and Michael Jordan have become brands. Consumers choose products associated with these people because of what their personalities represent. In a nutshell, then, companies try to create brands because they engender lasting positive thoughts. I mention branding, however, because it shows how all parts of the marketing process are coming together. As Levine (2003) notes, “a brand is something that combines advertising, public relations, and marketing into a package so seamless it becomes impossible to tell where one discipline leaves off and the next begins” (p. 82). The interrelationship between these practices means that, while PR’s primary role is to cultivate positive media coverage in support of a brand, the lines between marketing types are growing fuzzy. As I will show, companies sometimes benefit from the blurring of these lines. Yet, for now, it is PR’s goal of informing and educating that deserves particular academic scrutiny. Its often subtle and indirect influence in the process of persuasion merits attention.

The Need To Study PR Rhetorically

Although it should be clear that PR has the potential to wield cultural influence, the way it is studied typically does not shed light into its technologically expanded salience. PR scholarship most often studies how well a given company’s tactics and strategies help it reach its instrumental goals. There are hundreds of such studies filling communication journals, from approaches utilizing corporate apologia to crisis communication analyses to standard PR tactics critiques (see, for example, Johnson and Sellnow, 1995; Benoit, 1995b, 1997, 1999; Mickey, 1997; Johnson, 1998; Marken, 1995; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Karlberg (1996) explains that most of these studies are tactical in nature, seeking to answer the how-to questions of PR techniques and focusing on micro-level questions (p. 256). Thus, a study might look at a PR
campaign, such as Exxon’s image repair efforts following the wreck of the Valdez, to discover what works best for companies in crisis. It might analyze public reaction to Avis’ attempt to change racially discriminatory practices in its company. It could evaluate how well Augusta National justifies excluding women from its membership. Yet, the ubiquity of PR in today’s society suggests that there needs to be a complement to this tactical focus. An instrumental perspective will not reveal how PR discourse shapes, reflects, and is constrained by the larger public sphere. Its influence on the media crafts and reinforces important shifts and trends in the trajectory of public debate. In other words, the types of PR we see today have taken on a level of cultural currency that extends beyond the instrumental understanding of how companies emerge victorious in times of corporate crisis or how they increase profits.

To illuminate the cultural impact of PR, then, we need to study the industry rhetorically. Several scholars attest to PR’s increased rhetorical significance in society. Ewen (1996), Beder (1997), and Duffy (2000) all argue that PR and advertising have become the most dominant social discourses of our time. Greer calls the marketing mentality the cultural expression of the millennium (in Moloney, 2000). DeLuca (1999) believes corporate discourses have eclipsed those of the nation-state in terms of influence. PR possesses rhetorical import because, in addition to boosting the bottom line, its strategies are being used more frequently to craft identities, influence public consciousness, and form the grounds on which many of our cultural exchanges occur, all typical subjects of rhetorical inquiry. In other words, contemporary PR represents and contributes to a change in the way discursive norms typically function. There is much more at work here than companies utilizing new PR tools. Rather, these efforts illustrate the need for closer attention to corporate discourse. As Cheney (1992) asserts, “We have yet to learn to cope with corporate persons in our theories and in our everyday dealings…the corporate
message, the corporate rhetor, and the corporate audience shape much of our communicative
world” (p. 179). Sproule (1988) concurs, “Today’s opinion leaders and mass audience are both
afloat in a world which large institutional communicators have defined the background setting
for political and commercial discussion” (p. 472). These statements were written at least a
decade ago and corporate rhetoric has still not received its due.

I argue that to understand these discourses’ rhetorical significance, we need to view PR
through a constitutive lens. That is, because PR techniques are so pervasive in our society, they
have the potential to influence how audiences think and talk about a variety of issues. Instead of
merely watching how companies handle an image problem, audiences begin to incorporate these
communicative behaviors. In this project, then, I examine PR from this perspective to illustrate
how it contributes to changes in norms of public discursive action. This chapter begins by laying
some groundwork for the larger study to follow in later chapters. I review the PR literature to
suggest the need to study how these discourses encourage their public adoption. I then situate PR
within a constitutive rhetorical framework that illuminates the implications of its generative
capability. Finally, I preview the arguments I make in the case studies. Specifically, I perform a
rereading of two PR practices to argue that these activities partly constitute contemporary
discursive norms in two main ways. PR’s insistence on capitalizing on time and speed, and its
contribution to the discourse of audience empowerment, encourages responses that help
constitute different sorts of public citizens. Through these case studies, then, I suggest that we
need to be attentive to the constitutive properties of PR, as these and other corporate discourses
continue to infuse more and more of our public life. A review of a variety of PR literature
demonstrates how the field’s orientation makes understanding the cultural impact of such
discourse difficult.
Review Of Literature

The bulk of PR literature explains how companies implement a number of techniques to meet their image management goals. Scholars discuss a variety of topics in the field, including campaigns, community, consumer, employee, and media relations, corporate image impression and crisis management, ethics, health, issues management, marketing, non-profits, and public affairs, but tend to support a management-based perspective. In my review of the literature, I focus closely on trade, crisis, technology, and theoretical literature, subfields that have the clearest implications for the creation of discursive norms. These areas tend to represent the most dynamic thinking in PR study because scholars try to explain how organizations deal with current problems. In doing so, I point out scholars whose work reflects some consideration of PR’s constitutive properties. As I show, however, most studies that contain elements of a broader view of PR still need expansion. These analyses often do not consider how these techniques can affect public discursive norms.

Trade Press

The history of PR necessitates an overview of both trade and scholarly press. Academic study of PR grew out of its practice, particularly following World War II, and still embraces a utilitarian focus. As such, both literatures continue to inform practitioners of strategies to boost campaign success while explaining why some campaigns fail. Publications such as PR Tactics, PR Reporter, and PRWeek review how PR agencies and in-house PR departments handle challenges to their images. They review campaigns ranging from the Mars Corporation’s decision to change the labeling on its packaging from “plain” to “milk chocolate” M&Ms, to The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association’s push to increase sales at restaurants. Today, such press focuses particularly on PR’s extended technological capabilities and challenges (Hood and
Gordon, 2002; Middleberg, 2002; Rountree and Jeffers, 2003). Rosen (1998/99), for example, warns that businesses have entered the Age of Transparency as a result of technology. No information is off limits to the public, and PR practitioners face more difficulty in exercising influence. Noack (1998) also points out that the informational climate for PR has changed. He demonstrates that journalists rely more frequently on the Internet to put together and post their stories; thus, he claims it is now more important that PR agencies keep corporate information updated and accurate in order to assist reporters.

Although these types of articles dominate the popular press literature, there are a few authors who point to the need to examine PR’s cultural impact. These articles do not specify how PR creates discursive norms but they do take a broader view. John Bissell (1999), for example, cautions that companies cannot have successful branding campaigns unless they solve their PR problems first. He points out that Philip Morris cannot successfully advertise its contributions to charity when it still makes a product that kills people. As such, articles like these point to PR’s generative potential by demonstrating that companies will face problems should they employ similarly unsound strategies, but they do not consider the effects such tactics have on public debate. There are a few popular press publications, however, that do consider the effects of PR strategies on our discursive norms. In two books, Stauber and Rampton (1995/2002) take a critical view of the industry, and through a number of case studies, demonstrate how PR strategies make consumers open to various business ventures. Their examination of Nutrasweet, for example, illustrates how corporate wording choices such as “choice”, “variety,” “unique”, and “new taste,” help consumers overlook the potentially health-threatening effects of the artificial sugar-substitute and choose these products. They argue that such wording tactics allow corporations in general to avoid answering concerns about products and falsely reassure
consumers. On the whole, however, popular press authors still write from an instrumental perspective; that is, they caution companies not to use these strategies if they want to be successful, rather than considering what the creation of this discursive norm means for society.

*PR Theory and Criticism*

When turning to PR scholarship, the instrumental tendency continues to dominate. From meta-theoretical essays to case studies, most work explains why PR campaigns do or do not meet their informational goals. To illustrate how pervasive this management-supportive perspective is, I look at a variety of academic PR writing, and then turn to the discipline’s theoretical background.

Academic essays that discuss managing PR crises are similar to the ones found in the trade press. Fearn-Banks (2002), for instance, expresses the most predominant view of crisis PR in her review of the industry’s “best practices.” Although she notes that organizations must fulfill the public’s expectations on some level for continued existence, her summary of the industry reveals an emphasis on successful techniques rather than concern for how these strategies become part of a cultural vocabulary. Even her definition of crisis reflects an instrumental bias: “a crisis is a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organizational as well as its publics, services, products, and/or good name. It interrupts normal business transactions, and can, at its worst, threaten the existence of the organization” (p. 480). Similarly, in case studies of crisis PR, we also find emphasis on strategy more than cultural influence. Scholars explain why, for example, NASA mishandled its PR effort regarding the Hubble space telescope, analyze the Coca-Cola scare in Europe, and explore Texaco’s reaction to tapes showing its discriminatory practices (Kaufman, 1997; Taylor, 2000; Hoger & Swem, 2000). These articles often provide a prescriptive recommendation along with analysis.
Another common type of academic PR study explores the relationship between the industry and technology. As Ramsey (1998) notes in her discussion of PR scholarship, “it may be difficult, in fact, to locate a category that does not contain at least one entry on technology” (p. 1). Instead of considering what technological change means for opportunities to craft public discursive habits, however, most work explains how the industry benefits from advances. Thus, articles consider how practitioners view the Web as a communication tool, the organization and function of corporate Web pages, and the use of technology in various types of PR (Newland Hill and White, 2000; Esrock and Leichty, 2000; Duke, 2002, White and Raman, 1999; Taylor, Kent, and White 2001, Whitmer, 2000; DiNardo, 2002). Indeed, most of this scholarship sees PR benefiting from increased opportunities to reach publics while finding challenges from the public’s ability to organize and receive information more quickly. PR’s management bias concerning technology, for example, is illustrated by discussions of how activists rely on these new technologies to organize for change. Li (2001) and Bullert (2000) look at the role activists play in creating challenges for corporations. These authors warn that companies face increased resistance as a result of technology. That is, technology is sometimes considered a threat to strategic success. Some PR scholars, however, start to consider indirectly how technology helps increase PR’s constitutive capability.

Two PR essays support this slightly generative view. Badaracco (1998) argues that corporate access to technology revolutionizes the manner in which PR works. She suggests it is more difficult for corporations and their leaders to control both their images and issues, while publics receive more control from increased information distribution and opportunities for dialogue. As such, this article contains elements of a constitutive perspective by arguing that technology increases opportunities for democracy as people adopt PR techniques formerly
reserved for business. Mickey (1998) challenges this positive view by arguing that the high tech industry employs PR in ways that shape the public in the corporate interest. He believes that business-sponsored computer access in classrooms should be viewed cautiously through a case study of MassNetworks, a partnership between business and government to bring the Internet to Massachusetts’ schools. Mickey (1998) warns that we need to realize how much “communal learning comes from the images of the media” (p. 337) supplied by PR.

When turning to an examination of PR theory, we see why viewpoints like Mickey’s are not very prevalent in the discipline. In general, PR theory is also geared toward understanding how PR supports management. Although topics range widely, there are several common issues and a common approach. Most often, authors explore theory regarding image restoration, persuasion processes, message audiences/publics, pedagogy, and relationship building with issues of practicality in mind (McElreath, 1997; Benoit, 1997; Slater, 1997; Cornelissen, 2000; Murphy, 1996; Hallahan, 2000; Vasquez and Botan, 1999; Bruning and Ledingham, 1998; Cancel & Cameron; 1999; Ledingham, 2001; Leeper and Leeper, 2001, Kent and Taylor, 2002, Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones, 2003).

Although these types of theoretical approaches are common, Grunig and Grunig (1992) provide the foundational theoretical essay that remains the subject of debate, praise, and criticism. They divide PR into four different types (one or two way, asymmetrical or symmetrical) that reflects the history and variation of the industry’s attempt to achieve organizational goals. Press agentry, for example, is a one-way mode of communication where propaganda is favored, and characterized the early years of the field. Public information, the second type, is also one-way but has more of an information dissemination motive, exemplified in the types of PR seen in World War I. Grunig and Hunt (1984) argue that the other two types,
the two-way symmetrical and the two way asymmetrical, allow dialogic communication. With the two-way asymmetrical model, PR campaigns favor the organization while attempting to change the public. In the two-way symmetric model, organizations and publics influence each other, creating mutually beneficial, balanced understandings. For the authors, the two-way symmetrical model represents excellent PR behavior, as it “adjusts the relationships” between the organization and its publics (1984, p. 289).

Although this perspective is dominant in both defining the discipline and directing its research, several scholars criticize it because even the typology’s most positive model still sees PR as working to influence publics to accept a viewpoint or position without considering the implication of this goal. The limited critical studies of PR, therefore, question the field’s reliance on the Grunig theoretical approach. These studies provide the discipline’s closest consideration of PR’s constitutive capabilities. Karlberg (1996) suggests that the Grunig management-based approach investigates only how a campaign achieved its goals and misses its broader impact on society. He calls for the discipline to explore why citizens are often ill equipped to communicate on the symmetrical level the Grunigs identify. Jones (2002) also argues that there needs to be a renewed focus on the “publics” in PR that the Grunig and Hunt model misses. He advises that the discipline study how publics make their own meanings from organizational messages. Several studies of activism continue this pattern (see Rodino & DeLuca, 2002 and Kovacs, 2001). They critique the Grunig model for not understanding how activists use PR in attempts to create symmetrical relationships with organizations or seek to maintain asymmetrical relationships to secure power, creating a fifth model to the typology. Finally, Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) support the need to challenge the Grunig model from a slightly different perspective. They, too, argue against a management-defined understanding of PR, suggesting
that an alternative approach should be one that “stimulates and activates attempts to restore and maintain a sense of community” (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988, p. 26).

Although these studies provide a touch of theoretical reflection on PR’s ability to mold discursive habits, there are only two case studies that move away from the dominant theoretical paradigm the Grunigs provide and suggest how PR functions constitutively. Margaret Duffy (2000) reviews PR instruction in the United States and warns that the reliance on the Grunig model does not adequately describe PR’s ability to control the meaning of a given situation. Her study is indirectly generative as she points out that instructors need to be mindful of PR’s ability to create sometimes problematic communication trends. Similarly, Knight and Greenberg’s (2002) case study of Nike’s promotional tactics shows how campaigns function constitutively for other organizations. That is, Nike’s marketing strategy associated the company with the needs of socially disadvantaged groups such as African Americans and women, as in its “Let us Play” inner city campaign. As other companies mimic Nike’s strategies, a variety of disadvantaged groups suffer because promoting sport as a solution to social problems, for example, effaces their realities. The authors demonstrate how Nike’s actions are constitutive because they blur the line between promotional and non-commercial activity, in that it acts for minority groups but simultaneously uses this action to promote itself.

PR scholars who take a postmodern approach to the study of the industry also indirectly point to its constitutive possibilities. That is, these scholars support the notion that language is not merely a tool or symbol but “a cultural artifact with political or economic reality for the individual in the culture” (p. 273). Mickey (1997), for example, draws on Baudrillard to caution that PR creates signs that can shape society through a case study of Hill and Knowlton’s handling of its client, Citizens for a Free Kuwait. H&K supplied bogus testimony to support the
position of going to war with Iraq. Mickey argues that the truth of the testimony did not matter; the testimony functioned as a sign that galvanized support for the war. Holtzhausen (2002) urges PR scholars to continue to investigate how organizational messages create hyperrealities through what she calls management bias. Some scholars are openly resistant to the idea that PR is more than a method of representation as Mickey and Holtzhausen charge. Toth (2002), for example, argues that postmodern theoretical concepts, while adding some psychological depth to the field, are not practical for practitioners because they do not increase effectiveness. While Toth agrees that a postmodern perspective allows scholars to see how PR creates metanarratives, for example, she cautions that PR scholarship must have a cash value for practitioners to be useful.

As I have shown, then, the majority of PR scholarship seeks to help practitioners improve the persuasiveness of their tactics or analyze how companies achieved success through their implementation. While this scholarship is important, it should be clear that it is incapable of providing theoretical insight into PR’s other functions. Some rhetorical studies of PR come closer to revealing PR’s ability to shape meaning, but, as I illustrate, do not push quite far enough to help understand how PR can create discursive norms.

Rhetorical Studies of Public Relations

In general, rhetorical approaches to PR take somewhat of a more constitutive approach to analyzing the industry, but do not focus on understanding its cultural influence. Most rhetorical studies take a middle ground between analyzing instrumental campaigns and identifying discursive norms. I outline the range of scholarship here to suggest how it might be extended to elucidate PR better.

Several rhetorical studies of PR adopt the solely instrumental perspective seen in PR scholarship. Apologia studies, in which scholars analyze an organizational rhetor’s defense of its
policies, remain instrumental in nature. These scholars categorize a rhetor’s defenses and explain which statements are most likely to help a company regain or maintain its societal standing. Benoit (1998, 1995a, 1997) Benoit and Brinson (1994), Benoit and Drew (1997) and Benoit and Lindsey (1987) investigate how image restoration strategies resolve corporate crises. In case studies ranging from Sears to Tylenol to Wal-Mart, these authors provide a theory of image restoration in which they analyze how certain strategies are more effective than others in crisis situations.

There are several rhetorical studies of PR that do examine more than campaign results. These authors do not discuss explicitly how PR shapes culture by creating communicative norms, but their findings support this idea. Ulmer and Sellnow (1997), for example, argue that when the tobacco industry communicates by using strategic ambiguity and challenges the validity of scientific evidence regarding nicotine’s addictiveness, the public is left without significant choice. In other words, the public faces two competing interpretations of nicotine and such strategic ambiguity in discourse harms the public’s ability to deliberate on this and other issues. Johnson and Sellnow (1995) also illustrate that a company’s communicative choices in the deliberative, or policy seeking, phase of a crisis determine it and other companies’ viability. That is, not only must a company use epideictic strategies to protect its reputation, it must also be careful in communicating its policy goals throughout crisis phases. Both of these case studies, then, illustrate how rhetorical strategies can shape subsequent communicative behavior.

Two collections of rhetorical essays provide the discipline’s most constitutive analyses of PR, yet many here still do not focus on the creation of discursive norms. Toth and Heath (1992) and Elwood (1995) provide essays that attempt to move beyond providing assessments of campaign effectiveness to explain how and why a campaign failed or triumphed. Pointing out
that PR attempts to create or respond to rhetorical situations, these volumes stress how PR tactics create and maintain perceptions of social reality. Thus, Cheney (1992) analyzes how the images created by PR create identification, Condit and Condit (1992) describe why the tobacco industry’s “healthy” cigarette failed, and Crable and Vibbert (1995) explore how Mobil used epideictic rhetoric to allow its deliberative discourse on oil policy to flourish. Yet, while these analyses move beyond the tactic/evaluation method of PR analysis, they do not explore, for example, how Mobil’s strategy indoctrinated the public to expect a company’s use of the epideictic to justify its deliberative choices. They do not trace how this tactic is now employed by everyone from President Bush to Right to Life anti-abortion organizations. While a typical rhetorical instrumental study might look at how anti-smoking groups try to persuade people to stop smoking, for example, they do not examine how, taken together, these campaigns change the public’s understanding of smoking. Instead of examining the success rate of a specific campaign, then, constitutive studies could explore how smoking today is regarded as a practice that can be banned citywide. How did the rhetoric of anti-smoking groups move people from talking about smoking as an individual right to discussing it is a collective health problem? In other words, rhetorical scholars would benefit from the use of a method that allows them to uncover these generative linkages because such connections gradually change the face of public debate.
A Constitutive Approach to PR

My critical perspective extends some of these rhetorical studies to illustrate that PR is a discourse better understood when we examine its capability to create discursive norms. The advantages of using a constitutive approach to analyze PR are numerous. This perspective highlights the notion that even as we use rhetoric to win resources, our choices collectively establish norms that govern rhetorical practice (Giddens, 1984; Duffy, 2000; Stein, 2002; Charland, 1987, Burke, 1950). That is, rhetors achieve communicative goals, but these goals are often unintentionally surpassed and the effort influences future discourse. Jasinski summarizes this perspective well. He says that rhetoric not only achieves goals but also shapes, “a culture’s experience of time and space, the norms of political culture and the experience of communal existence (including collective identity), and the linguistic resources of the culture (including, in particular, the stock of fundamental political concepts that shape the culture’s understanding of political existence)” (Jasinski, 1998, p. 75). Rhetors shape culture through the success or, occasionally, failure of their efforts. Constitutive rhetoricians argue that what counts as good rhetoric is often developed through what is accepted as good rhetoric. Tylenol’s smart PR decision to be open with the public after its tampering crisis, for example, had the unintended consequence of pressuring other companies to adopt similar rhetorical postures because the public then demanded them. A closer look at how some scholars showcase the constitutive elements of rhetoric suggests how we can identify this process at work among PR discourses.

A number of rhetorical theorists explain how rhetors shape the communicative choices of a community. Burke (1950) begins these constitutive lines of inquiry by arguing that identification is more important in rhetoric than persuasion. Scholars build on this idea to investigate how people are, in effect, created by and utilize the discourse with which they
identify. Charland (1987), along with Burke, argues that it is incorrect to assume that a person’s identity is extrarhetorical, existing as a given before one encounters forms of persuasion (p. 211). His study explores how people are called into being by rhetorical documents; indeed, they are not only persuaded by rhetoric but find their subjectivities and language shaped by its influence. Greene (1998) and Duquette Smith (2000) also illustrate how this process works. Duquette Smith (2000), for example, examines how Martha Stewart’s media empire produces a legion of subjects who exercise self-discipline, valorize the home, and express themselves through consumer purchases.

An analysis of the constitutive power of advertising discourses, however, most clearly suggests how PR study could benefit from this perspective. Sarah Stein (2002) builds on Charland (1987) to argue that audiences are not only constructed through political treatises and the like, but also by advertising texts (p. 173). As producers of repetitive media images, advertising and PR discourses contribute to and draw on our ideological and cultural discourses as they “have the power to establish frames of reference and mark the boundaries of public discussion as an integrative common language” (2002, p.175). In her examination of Macintosh’s “1984” ad, she explains that the company began incorporating the personal computer into people’s lives. The ad displayed a strong constitutive pull on how consumers thought about such emerging technologies because they were transformed into possessing the identity of a personal computer user, a subject position previously viewed with skepticism and anxiety (Stein, 2002, p. 175). Fortified by the ad, they utilized the tropes of freedom and revolution in their discourse about the personal computer; subsequently, a market was created that continues to influence our lives today.
As I show, PR, too, draws on a variety of tropes to direct audience thinking about organizations. A constitutive approach that looks at how PR shapes discursive activity, as well as its influence on identity, gives us a way to examine how another type of discourse frames our perceptions of, as well as our discussions and expectations, about society. Jasinski (1997b, 1998) asserts that texts exhibit constitutive force that enables and constrains subsequent rhetorical practice, meaning that the repeated use of a particular idiom allows people to conceive of events in a particular way. So, if something is construed repeatedly as a “conspiracy,” for example, then alternative understandings are constrained. Similarly, if PR experts influence the media to discuss “corporate downsizing,” rather than “firing,” then this media text encourages audiences to conceive of corporate policies more in this way. As such, there is a need to view the constitutive power of PR and advertising discourses cautiously. As Mickey (1997) points out, with constitutive rhetoric, “We are concerned not simply with the text, in this case, the campaign’s words and images, but with what that text is saying in the culture. Also, what kind of culture are we creating by that particular text?” (p. 282).

It should be noted that a constitutive perspective does not assume that audience interaction with a variety of PR texts guarantees the creation of a particular culture. Organizational texts, do however, populate our rhetorical landscape with messages that encourage certain meanings more than others. Texts make present certain readings (Condit, 1989). Although audiences can decode these texts to create an oppositional understanding of the messages, there are frequently limits. Texts make it “easier” for audiences to read a particular meaning over another. Throughout the application of my constitutive perspective, then, when I argue that PR texts “shape” or “encourage” audiences to come away with certain meanings, I use these words to emphasize that message creation and dissemination does not guarantee message
reception in this, or any, rhetoric. PR texts may make it easier to come away with a particular pro-corporate perspective, but they do not assure it. In this way, as Condit (1989) puts it, “The masses may not be cultural dupes, but they are not necessarily skilled rhetors” (p. 111). What she recognizes is that rhetoric is not completely polysemous or polyvalent (Condit, 1989). Texts may contain several meanings that can be judged in several ways, but this process is made more difficult by the ways in which media producers encode texts. Audiences may not come away with the same understanding and blind acceptance of a message, then, but they do not necessarily critically examine these messages either. Recognizing these limits of textual openness is important in constitutive evaluations of PR rhetoric. As I demonstrate, the rhetoric of the case studies chosen for analysis is both linked to and diffused throughout the culture, giving audiences frequent opportunities to interact with these texts. A brief look at these case studies will begin to suggest just how PR techniques make it difficult for texts to support a variety of audience meanings.

Key PR Case Studies

Studying PR from a constitutive rhetorical perspective suggests that there is more happening than promotion when an organization utilizes persuasive techniques. To unpack these implications, I examine how two cases of corporate PR use help to create a number of discursive norms. Although I suggest that examination of other uses of organizational PR would reveal how groups like non-profit organizations or governmental institutions shape society as well, corporate cases clearly show how PR relies on a variety of media to cultivate influence. In addition, the case studies chosen for analysis are examples of how corporations rely on technological advances to pursue traditional PR goals in new ways that exert influence on public debate. By exploring the PR efforts of Metabolife International and the pharmaceutical industry, I argue that
corporate rhetoric plays a crucial role in crafting social realities that deserves more attention from our discipline.

In the second chapter I examine how PR helps create a discursive reliance on speed. By analyzing the Metabolife International controversy, I indicate that this norm is beginning to filter out throughout our culture. In 1999, Metabolife, a well-known diet pill manufacturer, was targeted by the newsmagazine *20/20*. Fearing a negative corporate portrayal, Metabolife agreed to the interview but made its own copy. When the company learned that *20/20*’s report was as negative as it feared, Metabolife broadcast its copy of the entire interview over the Web before the *20/20* broadcast. This strategy spared Metabolife public condemnation while shifting the story into a debate about journalistic practices. Through a rereading of this controversy, I argue that the Metabolife case illustrates that speed of response, not the quality of the response coupled with its timing, is becoming one of our rhetorical norms.

If the first norm employs technology to shift deliberation, the third chapter illustrates how PR employs technology in new persuasive applications. I examine how PR creates a second discursive norm by persuading audiences that they are more empowered in today’s culture through an examination of the pharmaceutical industry. Instead of retaining control over information or directing it to specialized audiences like physicians, pharmaceutical companies are now disclosing more condition and treatment information online. This level of access helps to create a belief that citizens can more easily control their health because they have more information. Through an examination of the pharmaceutical industry’s sophisticated use of PR techniques that cultivate this perception of consumer access and power, I illustrate how the rhetoric of pharmaceutical empowerment urges consumers to embrace a more corporately influenced healthcare relationship.
To represent how the pharmaceutical industry clearly contributes to the emergence of an empowerment norm, I argue that companies such as Pfizer and Novartis use a variety of tactics to publicize their products under the guise of consumer education. By utilizing web content production companies such as Healthology, one of the leading health information producers on the Web, pharmaceutical companies employ a type of third party endorsement to support their products. These health content companies create professional programs that are streamed on the Web and appear as part of seemingly objective “disease information” Web sites. Often, the videos employ news anchors and provide testimony from medical doctors to provide the appearance of credibility and neutrality. Such rhetorical tactics make it easier for the discourse to encourage audiences to believe they are learning about an issue and gaining information that helps empower them to make informed decisions, rather than being persuaded to buy a given drug. As such, these corporate uses of PR together signal some broader issues this project illuminates.

Implications and Challenges

PR discourse is viewed as suspect. Like the slightly seedy traveling salesman or the snake-oil purveyor of days gone by, it is often a disparaged rhetoric. This understanding needs revision. PR is not only used by those companies trying to deflect public attention away from malfeasance, by those hiding behind smoke and mirrors. Most businesses and organizations, as exemplified by universities and non-profits, have had to adopt these techniques for their survival. My project indicates that scholars can no longer afford to treat PR discourse as simplistic puffery. To dismiss this discourse is to miss understanding an important component of our contemporary rhetorical landscape.
Yet current study of this discourse leaves us with a limited vocabulary that reinforces the view of PR as pedestrian. This happens in two ways. First, PR is part of a triumvirate of discourses that traditional rhetoricians wish to leave to those most familiar with words such as “effects” or who use quantitative measures. As such, rhetorical study tends to lump these discourses together. Even as we see the rise of branding, however, there remains a difference between an ad campaign that sells a product and a PR program that influences the way a given issue is discussed. This is not to say that there are not interesting rhetorically based studies of marketing practices in general. Along with the ones mentioned in this chapter, recent work has concerned activist group use of PR and branding strategies, as well as ones that concern the role of advertising in medicalizing conditions (Owens & Palmer, 2003; Harold, 2004; Johnson, 2002). Just as we study the differences between presidential and social movement rhetoric, however, so should we continue to pinpoint how these organizational rhetorics vary. We therefore miss some of these discourses’ persuasive powers when we do not fully understand and articulate the crucial differences in how they function. Second, as discussed, much extant PR study reinforces the view that PR is merely a practical discourse. When we only examine how a campaign achieves its goals, we miss the broader implications of what PR can do in our society.

It is not enough to understand how and why campaigns are persuasive. We should also understand how they are discursively generative. Examining campaigns in this way reveals some interesting complexities about contemporary organizational rhetoric. For example, in Chapter 2, I argue PR does more than protect Metabolife’ image and instantiates a cultural expectation of speed. This case, I argue, encapsulates the societal view that quicker is better, that those who are first are best. Similarly, I argue in Chapter 3 that audiences are coming to expect to be told that they are in charge, that they can achieve, but with the help of corporations, not themselves. In
these ways, PR creates byproducts that help shape our linguistic choices and experiences. Public relations encourages audiences to demand rhetorical speed and to believe that they are obtaining information that will help them control their lives. As such, the study of these techniques uncovers the ways in which organizational rhetoric, like rhetoric generally, is capable of creating public discursive norms.
CHAPTER 2
CRUSING THE RHETORICAL HIGHWAY WITH METABOLIFE: PR AND SPEED
NORMS

Acceleration is no longer an intangible function of the imagination, gently nudging the ordinary events that constitute history. Right now, acceleration is history. It is the event. Acceleration is the prime physical, technological, and even spiritual engine of this moment.

Kuipers and Aitken, 2000.

Introduction

In the above reflection, we begin to get a sense of what it means to study speed constitutively. More than contributing to technological advances, speed shapes the understanding of our contemporary cultural moment. In the last chapter, I argued that corporate rhetoric, specifically public relations discourse, needs to be studied for more than its instrumental potential. In this chapter, I sketch an example of what it means to examine public relations constitutively by examining the ways in which the speed techniques employed by the practice constitute norms. I investigate the public relations battle between Metabolife, Inc., and the newsmagazine 20/20 to explicate how the corporate reliance on speed encourages audiences to incorporate, expect, and mimic these techniques. This case study thus details the culturally significant implications that arise when scholars complement the instrumental study of PR with a constitutive perspective.

Normally, for instance, we think that increasing speed means increasing success. Runners strive to shave seconds off their times. The fast food industry attempts to deliver food to
consumers ever more quickly to beat competitors. News organizations work to be the first to break a story. Although increasing speed often equals increasing profits, acceleration has more meaning. Kuipers and Aitken (2000) argue that speed influences everything from urban gang warfare and modern business to the entertainment industry and social identity. Speed, they maintain, allows gangs to form more readily because it is easier for them to learn and mimic violent habits through rapidly circulating media. Bollywood, the Indian equivalent of America’s movie industry, is now able to produce more than 900 films yearly as a result of swift production capabilities. Identities transform as Americans seek ever more ways to beat the clock, to get where they are going, to do things more quickly.

Clearly, our lives now move more quickly. Media critic Todd Gitlin (2001) also proclaims that speed is the essence of our world. James Gleick (1999) concurs, positing, “we have reached the epoch of the nanosecond. This is the heyday of speed” (p. 6). He suggests, “The wave patterns of all these facts and choices flow and crash about us at a heightened frequency. We live in the buzz” (Gleick, 1999, p. 10). We now surf the Web, talk on the phone, and make dinner at the same time. Executives videoconference instead of attending meetings. The changes in our lives due to speed are too numerous to list, but consider a few particularly significant examples. We now measure time in nanoseconds, not milliseconds. In a millisecond, a bat presses against a ball, a sprinter crosses the finish line; in a nanosecond, bats and sprinters appear motionless. Elevator companies install placebo “door close” buttons for those who do not like to wait the extra five seconds it takes for the elevator to move. Impatience increases when we do not get an instant response to our instant computer messages. As Gleick (1999) summarizes, “instantaneity rules in the network and in our emotional lives: instant coffee, instant intimacy, instant replay, and instant gratification” (p. 13). Speed technologies affect so many
aspects of our lives that we can forget that the pace of life has changed dramatically. It seems as if we have always moved this fast.

In some ways, however, the changes introduced in our culture as a result of speed mimic the changes in social relations brought about over the years by other technologies. James Carey (1989), for example, has pointed out how the telegraph changed America’s culture in a variety of ways. It altered the meaning of time by standardizing time zones and altered the meaning of space by allowing organizations to disperse geographically. The telegraph also contributed to changes in journalism and language because as news and speech mimicked the telegraph’s truncated style. In more recent times, we can also look at the effects of technologies on our habits. The remote control contributed to myriad changes in television programming. As viewers could easily flip from one channel to the next, the industry changed the format of commercials and programs, making stories and images more segmented, punctuating an hour’s worth of broadcasting with short bursts of images and sounds. TIVO, too, changes how audiences watch TV. As viewers can now fast forward commercials and decide when and how they want to watch a given program, the television industry’s reliance on advertising revenue is poised to change fundamentally. In other words, the effects of speed in our lives have more than competitive implications. A variety of speed technologies alter what we do and how we do them.

It is not surprising, then, in both personal and public interactions, speed has become a central rhetorical component as well as a cultural one. As Ananda Mitra (2001) notes, the speed of a culture possesses implications for its rhetorical activity:

In the emerging ‘right here, right now’ culture we are always connected, literally ‘jacked into’ a discursive space where waiting for information has become an unacceptable phenomenon…In short, we have created a new globe where the traditional boundaries of
space and time are quickly disappearing and the expectations about rapidity with which we can send and receive information has transformed dramatically. We want to be heard immediately and we expect a rapid response. (p. 3)

In other words, in what Gitlin calls the “media torrent,” immediate response has become necessary. Through an examination of the role of response speed in the Metabolife case, I argue that PR influences the emergence of a norm of public discursive action in which traditional deliberation is short-circuited. To do so, I first explain how instrumental analyses of the element of speed in the Metabolife case are limited. I then perform of a constitutive reading of the discourse to illustrate how this perspective helps to highlight the discursive significance of the case. I explain how contemporary rhetors rely on a different understanding of kairos that focuses on rapidity and an altered sense of decorum through practices such as remediation. I argue that these practices help constitute different kinds of rhetorical norms that require different types of rhetorical analysis, such as the reliance on an argumentative form that emphasizes speed. This form affects our rhetorical habits. Indeed, the practice of deliberation, traditionally understood as a collective, measured decision making process, is up-shifting.

**Speed Limits**

The importance of speed in our culture is exemplified in the 1999 dispute between Metabolife International, Inc. and the ABC newsmagazine *20/20*. Metabolife, a well-known diet pill manufacturer, faced the damning prospect of having its product labeled deadly and unsafe on a highly popular broadcast. Metabolife’s diet aid, Metabolife 356, contained large amounts of ephedra, an herbal stimulant. Used by the Chinese for thousands of years to relieve congestion and to help asthmatics breathe more easily, in diet pill formulations the supplement is used to speed up metabolism (Prakash, 2002). Along with increasing metabolic rates, the supplement can
also speed up heart rate and constrict blood vessels leading to heart attacks or stroke, particularly when taken with caffeine. Although rumors were beginning to circulate that linked health problems to Metabolife’s product, the company denied it had received any of these reports (Prakash, 2002). *20/20*’s story investigating these potential health problems and tying them to Metabolife, then, was reason for corporate alarm. The company was understandably nervous in light of the fate of other companies subjected to such “infotainment” media exposés. Hidden camera footage of Food Lion, Inc. employee practices forced the company to stop expansion plans and to close several of its stores. *60 Minutes*’ story about a Brown & Williamson whistleblower helped to indict the tobacco industry as a whole. In other words, Metabolife needed to adjust its public relations strategies to counter *20/20*’s upcoming broadcast.

The company’s choices signaled PR’s ability to help organizations retain control over their fate by shaping public perception. By agreeing to an interview with *20/20*, yet insisting that it be taped in front of 300 company employees, Metabolife began its response by retaining some editorial control over the network’s story. The company later suspected, however, that *20/20* was editing the story unfairly. Rumors circulated that *20/20* was basing part of its report on a doctor who was listed on a competitor’s Web site. In an aggressive response, Metabolife decided to broadcast its copy of the entire interview over the Web. It then created newspaper and radio ads to draw potential viewers and current customers to its Web site. When the *20/20* program aired on October 18, 1999, Metabolife ran commercials during the broadcast that also attempted to draw viewers to its site. Following the broadcast, the PR profession celebrated Metabolife’s preemptive public relations strike because the company emerged triumphant from the controversy, reputation and product sales mostly intact. Although it could not assuage entirely the public’s fear about the safety of its products, Metabolife cast doubt on *20/20*’s story and
journalistic practices as a whole. Its innovative use of the Internet as a PR tool, in particular, sparked speculation and debate among media and public relations pundits about the future of PR in American business and throughout the culture.

This understanding of the case emphasizes the instrumental perspective common in analyses of public relations. Typically, communication scholars would examine the struggle for dominance by illustrating how one company emerged victorious from an image crisis. In both trade and scholarly press, this approach predominates. Throughout the media, for example, trade authors touted the sophistication of the Metabolife strategy by noting its innovative and aggressive qualities. Lawrence Grossman of the Columbia Journalism Review proclaimed, “Put yourself in the shoes of someone who’s worried about becoming a victim of the press. What do you do to fight back? Now there’s a powerful new online weapon you can deploy that even the press should cheer. It’s better than battling a lawsuit” (1999, p. 70). Similarly, a writer in Forbes praised the strategy by noting, “Anybody in Metabolife’s spot will try to spin or even kill a story before it’s aired or published. But by using the Internet, Sitrick (Metabolife’s PR counselor) has taken advantage of a direct, unfiltered medium for reaching potentially millions of open minds” (Lubove, 1999, p. 145). Throughout such articles, this theme of praising the company for its technologically advanced preemptive strike outweighed examinations of what the strategy could mean in terms of contributing to changes in the nature of public discourse.

Communication scholars, too, typically provide a similar, but more theoretical, understanding of Metabolife’s public relations activities. A number of them use apologetic theoretical approaches to analyze such crisis communication battles (Benoit, 1998, 1995a, 1997; Benoit and Brinson, 1994; Benoit and Drew, 1997; Benoit and Lindsey, 1987; Hearit, 1995, 1997). The rhetorical analog of kategoria, a rhetorical attack, and apologia, a speech of defense,
are time-honored tools that can be useful in explicating controversies, particularly between the media industry and corporations. According to Hearit (1995), although an apologia responds to a variety of charges, it also functions on behalf of a company faced with defending itself against the charges of a media institution. For example, Exxon offered an apologia to expiate its guilt after it accidentally dumped millions of oil into the Prince William Sound in Alaska. Companies do not only have the tools of apologia on which to rely for image repair, however. The strategy of kategoria is used when a company issues an attack to deal with a controversy. According to Hearit (1995), “a kategoria asserts that an organization has violated the norms of public responsibility to the community in which it operates. Here critics charge that a corporation’s policy is irresponsible and violates the ‘public trust’” (p. 5). When a company believes the media has violated its standards of public responsibility, it attacks the institution on those same grounds.

If scholars were to apply this method of analysis to Metabolife’s actions, they would receive a more nuanced understanding of how the company managed its image successfully; that is, the components of its instrumental efforts would become clear. To illustrate the limitations of this approach, however, I want briefly to perform this type of analysis here. Such an apologetic reading of the case unpacks the strategic merits of a company’s crisis management choices, yet does not fully illuminate the discourse. From an apologetic approach, for example, due to the opportunity presented by speed, Metabolife employed both kategoria and apologia simultaneously. It did not merely utilize kategoria before the 20/20 broadcast and apologia afterwards. Several statements issued by Metabolife before ABC’s broadcast, but after it had posted the interview on the Internet, demonstrate this blurred quality. For example, in an ad placed in the New York Times and New York Post before the broadcast the text, reads,
“Metabolife supports vigorous debate and public scrutiny – but it should be open and honest…The company has also posted considerable factual data on these issues. You can view it all…” (“Metabolife,” 1999). The ad, then, draws on the qualities of fairness, honesty and objectivity to insinuate that 20/20 might be behaving inappropriately (kategoria), but also subtly defends itself by telling people of its factual data available for viewing (apologia). Viewed from within the climate of distrust that is growing among the public against the media, Metabolife capitalized on the opportunity to make an attack on 20/20 and a defense of itself. Speed allowed Metabolife to violate the typical accusation/response cycle of a controversy. Since it was able to submit the evidence for the public’s perusal before the broadcast, the company could begin to attack before the air date and continued this practice even as it was forced to defend some of its actions later during the controversy. Speed, then, was important in these early phases of the crisis, and continued to become more so. In other words, an instrumental reading of the crisis reveals that this element was a crucial one.

Even after the 20/20 broadcast aired, Metabolife did not issue a traditional apologia, as elements of both attack and defense are found in its comments. Its preemptive speed strategy allowed it to take this approach. During a PBS interview, for example, two executives of the competing companies debated the controversy. Metabolife clearly relied on an apologia, in the sense that it challenged the authority and power of its attacker, while simultaneously attempting to undermine it through strategic accusations. When the interviewer, Terrence Smith, asked Michael Ellis, the Metabolife CEO, whether he felt that the 20/20 report was a ‘hit piece,’ Ellis responded,
Well, I think what it was is that it was a wash-down hit piece. I think it would have been a whole lot worse if Metabolife would not have drawn attention to ABC and the practices and what they do – journalism (“PBS,” 1999, p. 4).

This statement highlighted Metabolife’s instrumental argumentative approach. It argued that it had been victimized, and thus defended itself by agreeing that the program was a ‘wash down’ hit piece. Yet Ellis also attacked ABC’s journalistic practices. This strategy was smart. Ellis capitalized on the public’s sentiment that exposés often unfairly accuse companies and thus garnered some sympathy. He also built on this sympathy to serve as evidence for the necessity of its communicative position. From these types of comments, it was apparent that Ellis was continuing to challenge the practices of the media while defending his company.

It is clear, then, that the instrumental approach facilitated by a kategoria/apologia analysis sheds some light on the discourse. It shows how Metabolife successfully combined these techniques to persuade the public not to condemn it. More than illustrating that Metabolife pursued a successful approach, this perspective brings a level of scholarly depth to the case that is not found in the trade press evaluations. What this type of analysis fails to do, however, is move beyond the questions of how Metabolife responded to its image problem and whether or not its strategies succeeded. It is not that these observations are unimportant. The study of rhetoric, after all, should understand the process of persuasion. We should, however, be able to complement questions of success or failure with an understanding of how rhetorical choices shape public discussion.

In other words, even though Metabolife used kategoria and apologia in an innovative manner by capitalizing on speed, these concepts alone are incapable of highlighting the rhetorical significance of its discursive actions. That is, the prevalence of corporate discourse, here in the
form of public relations techniques, calls for more than tactical evaluations. I suggest that these rhetorics do more than convince consumers to buy products. In the first chapter I reviewed how Sarah Stein examines corporate rhetoric for more than its instrumental capabilities. She argues convincingly that such rhetoric is able to shape the identities of its audiences. With its “1984” ad, Mactintosh began incorporating the personal computer into people’s lives. Stein’s analysis, then, shows how advertising is capable of constructing identity. This is an important constitutive function, but it is not the only one.

My intent in the remainder of this chapter is to illustrate how corporate discourse begins to influence our rhetorical habits. Although Metabolife and Mactintosh rely on similar tropes to direct audience thinking about their companies, there is more here at work than the construction of identity. These rhetorics begin to influence how we speak, what we expect from corporate rhetors, and how we evaluate rhetorical exchanges. That is, the element of speed capitalized on by these companies begins to function as a discursive norm in our culture that has several byproducts. As I argue, one of the significant byproducts of a discursive speed norm is a shift in traditional deliberation. One of the three classical rhetorical genres, traditional deliberation concerns a public’s collective determination that a course of action or a policy is useful or harmful (expedient or inexpedient) (Dillard, 2001, p. 160). Although deliberation is formally regarded as a process that takes place in governmental structures and bodies, it can also be carried out informally through letters to the editors, in casual conversation, or on the Web. In other words, when people communally make decisions about the future or pass judgment on past actions, they make deliberative judgments (Dillard, 2001).

Traditionally, deliberation is seen as taking place through the exchange of arguments. Indeed, some scholars see arguments as the crucial element of deliberation; as Dillard puts it,
“advocates are believed to be under an obligation to provide reasons, in the form of arguments, for why a policy should or should not be adopted” (p. 161). Although there have been scholarly challenges as to what counts as an official argument (such as narrative, the use of feminine style, etc.), scholars generally agree that the exchange of good reasons is key to the deliberative process. Customarily, there are other elements integral to deliberation. James Fishkin (1991) argues, for example, that deliberation requires messages to be exchanged: 1) interactively, 2) at length, and 3) under conditions of studied reflection. Scholars are beginning to challenge these requirements, suggesting that mass media technologies have changed the face of communal decision making. Some argue, for example, that today, “deliberation is part of the air we breathe, but it is also like a mist – felt but not seen, and only vaguely felt at that” (Fishkin, 1991, p. 212). I want to engage this line of debate. I argue that PR, as a type of mass mediated activity, contributes to a shift away from traditional deliberation to one that favors product, not process, and conclusions, not arguments. I detail this shift by first explaining how Metabolife’s actions embody an understanding of kairos that sacrifices traditional decorum (or propriety) for speed.

Kairos, Speed, and Fleeting Opportunity

Understanding Kairos

Given that Metabolife’s strategy involves capitalizing on time and speed, one way to highlight the constitutive implications of its discourse is to examine its actions through a kairotic lens. Traditionally, rhetoricians investigate how well a rhetor acts within the bounds of kairos, one of the cornerstones of the rhetorical tradition. Generally understood as the “opportun moment, the right measure, and the fitting or appropriate,” kairos’ clearest emphasis is on the temporal element of the rhetorical situation (Carter 1988, p.98). More specifically, kairos and its focus on responding at the right time represents the sum total of how well a rhetor is able to
respond to an exigence. As Miecznikowski Sheard (1993) points out, “Kairos encompasses the occasion itself” (p. 291). In other words, the ability of a rhetor to respond at the right moment with the right words involves meeting a number of expectations and is considered to be a crucial factor in determining rhetorical success. Poulakos (1999) posits that, “ideas have their place in time and unless they are given existence, unless they are voiced at the precise moment they are called upon, they miss their chance to satisfy situationally shared voids within a particular audience” (p. 26). These understandings of kairos tend to assume a stable rhetorical situation, one in which there is a clear linear progression of time. Rhetors face an exigence and respond accordingly. The speed with which statements are made today renders such understandings of kairos problematic. Changing technology means that the temporal order of the rhetorical situation becomes unstable. Metabolife and others illustrate that there is often no longer a given sequence rhetors must follow for success. Moreover, speed has become such a standard that what is considered to be the “appropriate” part of the kairos equation is changing.

Traditionally, the concept of decorum addresses rhetoric’s ability to fit its situation, to correctly and carefully match words with the type of action desired from an audience. Decorum is often considered to be the Miss Manners of rhetorical discourse. It has been described as the “keeper of the peace, the genial arbiter of conflicting claims, the guardian of moderation and common sense” (Beale, 1996, p. 168). To speak decorously, from Cicero forward, meant making one’s speech meet an aesthetic, political, and moral ideal (in Beale, 1996). Indeed, Cierco noted that “what is proper is morally right, and what is morally right is proper” (I.93). These understandings of decorum highlight the concept’s link with cultural standards that contemporary scholars now analyze. That is, each culture has expectations for what rhetoric should be; therefore, to be decorous means understanding the “expected ways of doing and
saying things.” Indeed, even though decorum is often a contentious term, “one point on which all contemporary scholars agree is that the idea of appropriateness cannot be reduced to fixed unchanging rules or principles” (Beale, 1996, p. 150). I suggest that such principles are shifting in American culture to facilitate a general reliance on discursive speed.

Speed, not the politeness or measured quality of public speech associated with prior political eras, is becoming the appropriate today. I do not mean to suggest that our political discursive history is one of consistently polite, well-ordered exchanges. Then, as well as now, instances of “improper” deliberation are evident. Speed technologies, however, give today’s rhetors faster ways to share their messages, which is contributing to an overall shift in what is considered to be appropriate. As Beale points out, the word decorum hints at this element of adaptability. He notes that decorum and the corresponding verb form decree imply decoration and pleasing design (even décor) as well as appropriateness (in Beale, 1996). In this way, we can liken the effects of speed on public discourse to changes in public taste. Less popular are the shag carpets and split levels of the 1970s; today’s consumers wish for main-level master bedrooms and stainless steel appliance bedecked kitchens. Similarly, I argue that we have been shifting from valuing well-supported, orderly argumentation to expecting a fast-talking, shut down your opponent rhetorical culture. A closer look at the Metabolife case points to a need for an understanding of kairos that highlights the importance of timing along with changing rhetorical expectations. We see how much speed has come to influence both parts of the kairos equation.

In a number of ways, speed allows rhetors to dispense with the linearity of the rhetorical situation. No longer must kategoria precede apologia, the attack the response, or even the event the analysis. This understanding is gained from the instrumental reading previously discussed.
Advances in Internet technology allow the company to combine these tactics to its advantage. An instrumental reading shows how speed facilitated Metabolife’s kairotic capability. When we view kairos from a constitutive perspective, however, we gain additional insight into what this lack of linearity means for rhetorical engagements. If kairos is viewed for its creative, or constructive potential, rather than its instrumental response, we are able to see how much rhetorical speed can change our discursive landscape. If an instrumental reading shows that speed is important for victory, a constitutive one highlights how it can transform or challenge a preferred reading and inspire others to do the same.

To view speed constitutively, we must move beyond the idea of rhetorical cause and effect. Metabolife, through its preemptive action, did not do what is expected of news exposé targets. That is, its act of posting and advertising the unedited video cannot be seen as a typical response, or effect, of 20/20’s upcoming broadcast, the cause. Normally, newsmagazine reporting strategies put targets at a distinct rhetorical disadvantage. A damning attack reaches the public and limits the options with which a target can respond. The ability to alter time, however, alters the rules of rhetorical engagement between opponents. Therefore, even though the impending broadcast called attention to Metabolife’s possible malfeasance, its speed strategy limited the amount of damage to its image while simultaneously becoming a rhetorical resource for others faced with similar problems.

It is useful to examine how Metabolife relied on speed to alter the understanding of the newsmagazine’s charges. Prior to the 20/20 investigation, Metabolife enjoyed sales of $1 billion (Cowley, Reno & Underwood, 1999). To guard against a loss in sales and reputation, when it learned that a Boston ABC affiliate aired a damaging report, it quickly filed a defamation suit. This action was not unique, as many companies targeted by media exposés use this tactic.
Metabolife is unlike other victims of exposés who had to wait until after damaging broadcasts to fight their claims. When 20/20 decided to give the story national exposure, Metabolife capitalized on speed. It demanded proactively that the interview it did with 20/20 be taped and then decided to broadcast the entire videotape contents over the Internet when it became suspicious of 20/20’s overall report. It did not wait its turn to speak. The company placed ads and press releases in a variety of publications stating, “The Company said it believes this is the first time that the entire unedited and uncut footage of a TV newsmagazine has been released by an independent source prior to the broadcast date” (Metabolife Posts, 1999, p. 1). In other words, Metabolife used speed to change the cycle of reporting and defined the terms of the controversy. Without employing this tactic, it likely would have suffered the same fate as other newsmagazine targets.

In this way, Metabolife acts with a different understanding of kairos. It does not act within the view of kairos that sees rhetors responding with traditional understandings of propriety or decorum, where they embody “a principle of adaptation and accommodation to convention, expectation, predictability” (Miller, 1994, p. xii). Instead, Metabolife exercised a second and less explored notion of kairos. Its actions “broke the rules,” yet still must be viewed kairotically. In a view of the concept represented by the sophistic, particularly Gorgianic tradition, kairos is seen as a much more freewheeling, risky action, one that we see at work here. As Carolyn Miller (1994) describes it, “kairos is understood to represent not the expected but its opposite: the uniquely timely, the spontaneous, the radically particular” (p. xiii). This view is more in line with Metabolife’s rhetorical choices. Typically, exposé targets waited until after the broadcast to launch their responses. Metabolife did the unexpected. In this fashion,
if decorum counsels us to be accommodative, this sense of kairos encourages us to be creative in responding to the unforeseen, to the lack of order in human life. The challenge is to invent, within a set of unfolding and unprecedented circumstances, an action (rhetorical or otherwise) that will be understood as uniquely meaningful within those circumstances (Miller, 1994, p. xiii).

This is the kairos, with its flexible sense of decorum, which guided Metabolife. Unlike previous targets, it faced a situation in which its copy of the interview afforded it an option unavailable to the others. If we were to view its actions in terms of previous responses to newsmagazines, its decision would be difficult to evaluate in terms of decorum. Rather, Metabolife created an opportunity. As such, “the timely action will be understood as adaptive, as appropriate, only in retrospect; it cannot be discovered within the decorum of past actions” (Miller, 1994, p. xiii). This statement encapsulates Metabolife’s strategy. Viewed as a gamble initially, it was lauded in the period following the ABC broadcast. Indeed, before the 20/20 broadcast, the press speculated that the strategy could end up backfiring, because it called audiences’ attention to a broadcast they may have otherwise ignored (Lubove, 1999).

In other words, the sense of kairos Metabolife embodies focuses more on the opportunity presented. The company capitalized on its demand for a copy of the damning interview and instant access to the Internet. It simply had to act in the moment, taking advantage of the alignment of kairotic forces. To wait its turn and act with decorum as convention is not the sense of kairos evident here. Instead, as Michelle Ballif (2001) notes about this sense of rhetorical engagement, “Gorgias’s notion of kairos is based on the notion of vacillating moments…” (p. 74). This conception of kairos, then, is less about mastering a situation, ensuring that you have controlled it, and more about finessing the options the occasion presents. As Charles Eric White
describes it, for the rhetor to be successful acting with this sense of kairos, “the orator as seducer must be ‘seduced’ in turn by the occasion of the speech. Persuasion depends on self-effacement, on acceding to the terms laid down by the circumstances confronting the speaker” (in Ballif, 2001, p. 81). In the past, targets of exposés had acceded to the terms laid down by the circumstance but had assumed a defensive posture in an effort to control perception. They had let their opponents designate the terms of controversy and responded to those charges. Metabolife was more successful in truly acceding to the circumstance so that it could be persuasive. It did not attempt to deny 20/20’s charges. Instead, it capitalized on speed to plant the idea of its innocence.

Capitalizing on Kairos

Privileging speed, then, is different from asking for the public’s careful evaluation, different from acting with decorum as typically understood. Kairotic speed helps rhetors dominate public interpretation of a controversy without regard to following the conventional rules of engagement. Metabolife told the public it could “view for themselves” before 20/20’s broadcast and investigate the interview footage, but it is its focus on speedy response that helped it to retain a positive image. That is, its reliance on speed dictated the frame or scope of the public discussion. Instead of being left to defend its products, Metabolife offensively made the controversy about media practices. It used speed to reframe the news media as sensationalist, rather than as an institution working in the public’s interest. To do so, it allowed Web visitors to view the full interview in a variety of formats. A reporter noted that audiences could read the entire transcript of the ABC interview, which “features more footnotes than a David Foster Wallace story” (in Elder, 1999). They could even watch Metabolife’s own edited version of the interview, containing some of the same highlights as the 20/20 show. The power of media
editing could become clearer as viewers watched the same footage support two radically different interpretations. All of these tactics encouraged the audience to question 20/20’s interpretation of the controversy. They also fed on the public zeitgeist.

Recent court decisions show that the public is becoming more exasperated by news media tactics. For example, in the PR case between Food Lion, Inc. and PrimeTime Live, PrimeTime Live was forced to pay Food Lion $5.5 million. Metabolife used speed to capitalize on this view. It fed on the public’s doubt about the news media by showing how the institution operates, as Web visitors could discover how much of the interview footage was cut for the 20/20 broadcast (the 20/20 broadcast only contained three of the 70 minutes of the interview). Food Lion had a more difficult road in receiving damages. Unlike Metabolife, it did not have such an opportunity to frame a controversy. When it found itself facing an unbalanced interview, its PR counsel sent a videotape to selected reporters that purportedly showed how ABC had mischaracterized the activities of Food Lion employees (Lubove, 1999). It could not fully embrace Gorgian kairos however; instead, the tape was sent after the broadcast, and only to a select few. Its actions were defensive, not offensive.

In this way, corporate rhetors as a whole benefit from the ability to defend an image through speed. As Lawrence Grossman (2000) former president of NBC News and PBS puts it, instead of participating in long and costly trials, aggrieved parties like Metabolife will “continue to search for new and speedier tactics to counter what they view as damaging or unfair treatment by the press” (p. 71). Thus, the Metabolife example demonstrates that corporations can disrupt the normal sequence of the rhetorical situation through speed. To maintain its corporate success, it was necessary that Metabolife not wait until after the 20/20 broadcast. As we see, however, it
is not as important what the company says; what counts is its ability to get its challenge out first.

According to Grossman (2000), speed, not content, mattered most for Metabolife:

Metabolife was perhaps not really as eager as it claimed to be to have the millions of people who clicked on its Web site actually read or watch the unedited, uncut interview. Certainly the imposition of onerous pre-conditions – including the threat of an ‘Improper Conduct service fee’ – did not encourage the curious. (p.71)

In this fashion, Metabolife embodies the Gorgian notion of kairos. It takes its chances that audiences will be persuaded of its innocence just by virtue of posting the interview. It cannot master the situation because it cannot fully retract its interview. Therefore, it tries to shape the interpretation of that interview. This type of kairotic response is appropriate for Metabolife. It is attempting to insinuate that meaning depends on interpretation. It does not fully assert that it is innocent of ABC’s charges, but hopes that its gamble of posting the whole interview first makes it appear as though it is. Like Gorgias’ use, then, Metabolife’s kairotic performance here is “a process of continuous interpretation in which the speaker seeks to inflect the given ‘text’ to his or her own ends at the same time that the speaker’s ‘text’ is ‘interpreted’ in turn by the context surrounding it” (White, 1987, p.14). By responding in this way, Metabolife attempts to tip the scale in its favor while hoping that the climate of hostility directed toward newsmagazines, the popularity of its product, and the innovative nature of its PR technique support its view. In the Helen, Gorgias attempted to recast common belief in a new light. Gorgias did not offer just one alternative explanation for Helen’s actions or attempt to suggest that he had a probable account of her actions. Rather, he offered a series of possibilities for her behavior, any one of which could have been true. Metabolife uses speed kairotically in an attempt to do the same. Gorgias tried to free Helen from blame; Metabolife’s actions try to encourage audiences to read it
innocently. A Gorgian understanding of kairos, then, shows how rhetors “can respond to
discursive surprises as well as create them” (in Ballif, 2001, p. 96). This conception of kairos
emphasizes the idea of multiple truths that both rhetors embrace.

When we see how Metabolife privileges speed, not content, to constitute its image, we
begin to understand how speed can become a norm that can change deliberation significantly.
Rhetors need not respond within the bounds of kairos designated as traditionally fitting or
appropriate; rather, Gorgian kairotic speed helps rhetors garner cultural control even though
deliberation is short-circuited. In this way, what can be most important in rhetorical
controversies today is who can institute the signs that will constitute the culture the fastest. As
Munn (1992) asserts, “Control over time is not just a strategy of interaction; it is also a medium
of hierarchic power and governance” (p. 109). McKerrow (1999) concurs by noting that “Both
space and time are symbolic processes which are fully implicated in engaging, constraining,
producing, and maintaining discursive practices” (p. 272). Traditionally, we have understood
timing as part of this symbolic process; Metabolife illustrates that it can supplant other rhetorical
elements. In other words, speed helps rhetors gain cultural ascendancy over one another. In
rhetorical controversies then, power goes to the opponent who can most quickly dominate the
modes of representation. The use of speed allows rhetors to alter audience perception of an event
or issue. As Kuipers and Aitken (2000) point out,

Speed is about beating the clock, but the clock can’t be beat. Time cannot be destroyed,
and like energy, is conserved. Meaning: you don’t get it back. Speed blurs perception, but
reconstructing perception according to increments of time clarifies the event once more,
making it perceptible.
Speed gives Metabolife this possibility of reconstruction. It is able to blur the idea of before and after, attack and response, so that these terms become less important. What becomes more significant is the ability to plant the suggestion of 20/20’s foul play. The Metabolife case illustrates that the speed of response, not the quality of the response coupled with its timing, is becoming one of our rhetorical norms. Metabolife demonstrates that we expect speed so much that responding before an incident is now necessary for rhetorical victory.

As such, the Gorgian notion of kairos helps rhetoricians to account better for rhetorical speed and understand its constitutive properties. At first glance, the rhetorical tradition appears to provide few tools to understand how speed functions constitutively. Aristotle, for example, had difficulty understanding speed’s rhetorical significance. As Gleick (1999) reminds us, “Aristotle struggled enough with the abstraction of motion; to pin down a concept of velocity required a precision in measurement – and a belief in the precision of measurement – unattainable in the pre-Galilean, pre-Newtonion world” (p. 51). Indeed, languages had no words for the units of speed until the use of the word “knot” helped sailors determine their progress. In general, then, Gleick suggests that there was a much different understanding of the concept, remarking, “For the ancients speed was indefinable. Before it meant velocity, Old English spede or sped meant something more like success and prosperity; “God speed” didn’t mean “May God hustle you along” (Gleick, 1999, p. 51).

A Gorgian notion of kairos gets us closer to accounting for rhetorical speed. It is better able to address the contemporary use of speed. More than quick, Gorgian kairos means smart, risky, and perhaps a bit reckless. Success and prosperity means talking quickly, but talking cleverly. As this discussion reveals, it is not just the speed of the response that is becoming more important. In addition, the ability for rhetors to employ speed cleverly in the service of their
other PR efforts deserves closer examination. As Gorgias was able to suggest a number of reasons for Helen’s betrayal, inciting the audience to rethink their beliefs, so too was Metabolife. By posting the ABC interview on the Web, it puts a contemporary spin on a timeless kairotic strategy.

Constituting Speed Through Remediation

It should be clear that rhetorical speed, not the content of the interview, became the lynchpin in the Metabolife case. It is important, however, to examine what rhetorical processes enhanced the company’s ability to take advantage of kairos’ fleeting opportunity. Although the company focuses more on response speed, the way Metabolife presents information to viewers on the Web helps it fulfill its kairotic strategy. By remediating, or stylizing, the information it offers to viewers, its ability to focus on speed is enhanced. It is not enough for companies to act quickly; that is, the way in which they share information is also important if they want to use the speed strategy successfully. To get a full understanding of how speed functions in the Metabolife case and as a heuristic, it is necessary to examine how remediation allows corporations to capitalize on a competitor’s message and complicate a discourse’s encouraged reading. This technique works by using new media to refashion prior media forms. There are two types of remediation I examine here. One seeks to disrupt television’s claims to provide the viewer with a representative experience, and the other tries to remind the viewer of the medium. In the Metabolife case, both work together to dispute 20/20’s preferred reading of the controversy and seek to reveal to the viewer an alternate understanding.

Utilizing Remediation

Typically, the way in which a given medium presents an audience with information shapes how those messages are received. Viewing a crime story on television, for example, may
encourage the viewer to form one opinion, while reading about the same story in a newspaper may elicit a different response (see McLuhan, 1964; Carey, 1989). This observation is applicable to how viewers derive meaning from newsmagazines as well. Richard Campbell (1991), for example, in his study of the newsmagazine *60 Minutes*, illustrates how a particular presentation of information guides viewer understanding. Campbell asserts that *60 Minutes* constructs public narratives that come to signify meanings through five conventions or characteristics: 1) the representation of reporters as characters; 2) construction of multiple stories; 3) mediation of dramatic tension; 4) control over the frame; and 5) direction of the discourse (see Campbell, 1991). In *60 Minutes* and other newsmagazines like *20/20* these conventions encourage the viewer to accept the interpretation of an event favored by the producer. I examine these conventions briefly in *20/20* in order to illustrate how Metabolife’s strategies of remediation disrupt the functioning of the newsmagazine narratives and help offer the viewer another understanding of the controversy.

By assigning reporters roles, arranging multiple plot lines, and heightening dramatic tension, newsmagazines such as *20/20* influence how an issue is judged. For example, in each episode of *60 Minutes*, reporters play roles that suggest how viewers should interpret their worlds, from detective to therapist to tourist. This convention is also evident in *20/20* in Arnold Diaz, its correspondent for the Metabolife report. Diaz is constructed as conscientious detective in just a few frames in the broadcast. He asks the viewer to be concerned and join him in accusing Metabolife and its CEO of suspicious behavior. He is often “troubled” by his investigative discoveries. When discussing a restrictive label Texas placed on the Metabolife bottle, Diaz asks, “Now isn’t that a warning the rest of the country should have?” (*20/20*, Lines 260-261). Plot lines are then dramatized, as newsmagazines often “pit individual against
institution, nature against culture, tradition against change, honesty against deception, humanity against technology” (p. 34). 20/20 chose to construct its narrative conflict on the foundation of the honesty against deception theme, as Diaz and Ellis participate exchanges regarding whether or not Metabolife provided untrue statements on its Web site:

Mr Ellis: That statement there is written by a third party, [it] has nothing to do with Metabolife International.

Diaz: It's also on the Metabolife main Web site.

Mr. Ellis: It is not on the Metabolife Web – Web page.

Diaz: It is not?

Mr. Ellis: No, it is not, sir.

Diaz: (voiceover) Oh yes it is. We showed him the page. (20/20, Lines 176-187).

This type of convention appears numerous times throughout the broadcast, with Diaz attempting continually to catch Mr. Ellis in acts of deception.

The convention of narrative control is also clearly functioning in 20/20’s story. 20/20 controls the frame of the program to influence viewers’ meanings by editing together the interviewee’s comments and reporter reaction in a manner that supports its narrative point of view. It also controls the frame by cutting away from interview scenes and giving Diaz the final word. When Diaz confronts Ellis about the Web site statements, for example, the scene cuts away and fades out while Diaz accusingly trails off, “Are you saying this is not…” (20/20, Line 204). Since the scene is cut, viewers are not allowed to here whether Metabolife uses metamphetamine-derived substances in its products.

20/20 relies on Campbell’s final convention, the direction of the discourse, to allow the narrator/character Diaz to address the viewer, through both on-screen and voice-over narration.
Instead of letting viewers just watch an interview, this technique allows reporters both to control the construction of the characters in the drama as well as bring the audience closer to the story. Diaz makes such remarks as, “But what do we know about the man behind Metabolife?” and “For now, in the meantime, the best advice is, see a doctor before you take this.” The audiences are addressed and thus play a role in the drama. Through the use of all these conventions, 20/20 encourages a particular understanding of Metabolife’s practices.

When faced with this type of damning narrative, companies can rely on the first type of remediation, which seeks to disrupt television’s claims to provide the viewer with an immediate, or representative, experience (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 187). Television functions typically as if it were a direct channel between an event and ourselves; indeed, television news in particular works to persuade us “they are presenting what really happened” (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 189). When corporate rhetors such as Metabolife use the Web to remediate TV by replaying its content, they seek to provide a more transparent immediacy. In the Metabolife case, then, remediation seeks to pour the content of the original medium into the Web, so that “the viewer stands in the same relationship to the content as she would if she were confronting the original medium” (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 45).

This is a clear expression of Metabolife’s Web site usage. By allowing viewers access to see the original content of the videotape on the Web site instead of an edited television screen, it claims to offer viewers what “really” happened in the interview, thereby offering an alternate understanding of the controversy. Direct, or immediate, access to the videotape thus disturbs the newsmagazine’s conventions and its claim to the real. Because the Web can provide greater transparent immediacy, it beats the newsmagazine at its own game. Typically, newsmagazines offer undercover or hidden camera footage to show viewers what “really” happened; here,
Metabolife shows how this process is constructed. Without the voiceovers, for example, the reporter cannot as easily play the role of detective. No longer are there multiple stories to build a solid case against Metabolife, just one interview. This, in turn, makes it harder to enact the deception versus honesty theme, because 20/20 cannot as easily add in the information that makes Ellis look more suspicious. Indeed, there are no edits, so viewers can hear Ellis’ entire defense; finally, viewers are not addressed and thus not as likely to feel included in the investigation’s conclusions.

The first type of remediation, then, assists rhetors in enacting kairos. It is a technique that gives them a different way to provoke their audiences to re-evaluate claims. It is not that this strategy is new; rather, it can be used as a faster way to encourage different audience interpretation. In the Helen, for example, Gorgias attempts to change the audience’s opinions about her guilt. He questions the beliefs about her responsibility, thereby enacting a number of turns, or movements away from current understandings. Similarly, Metabolife encourages these types of discursive turns through remediation that enhances its fulfillment of kairos. As Gorgias asks his audience to believe his interpretations of Helen, so, too, does Metabolife encourage its audience to test their beliefs about their malfeasance. That is, it uses remediation to encourage audience to consider the “real” interview and suspend their condemnation. Here again, we return to a Gorganic understanding of kairos, the moment of decision where rhetors intervene “in the nick of time.” As Hawhee (2001) notes, a decision means to cut off, to act (p. 9). For Gorgias, it means cutting into the discourses surrounding Helen, “deciding to use some of the existing discourse here, ignoring (i.e. selecting out) some there” (Hawhee, 2001, p. 9). Metabolife makes such a decision by drawing on technology. It offers the interview, drawing on the existing discourse, but limits, or cuts access off through the use of the second remediation strategy.
Utilizing Hypermediacy

Due to all of the conventions disrupted by the first type of remediation strategy, viewers have the opportunity to employ a critical eye to the controversy more easily. This potential shows how Metabolife relies also on the second type of remediation strategy for its public relations needs. As the Web incorporates previous media into its digital space, it critiques that media by employing the strategy of hypermediacy, or “a style of visual representation whose goal it is to remind the viewer of the medium” (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 272). Metabolife does not want the viewer of the original content to forget that it is disputing the 20/20’s interpretation of the videotape footage. This second strategy works in two ways. First, Metabolife offers the appearance of access but subtly restricts it through remediation. It makes users sign a lengthy user agreement. This move allows it to claim that it is being open yet it counts on many viewers not to closely investigate the interview because of the agreement’s onerous terms. The company’s user agreement tells viewers that there is more to the story but makes close study of it more difficult to do.

Metabolife further hypermediates the Web site to encourage viewers to take its side. It hypermediates the content through the Web’s features. Metabolife designed a typical Web site, one that provided the user with the ability to construct her own text, but in a way that supports its position. Users could click on a variety of links to learn about the controversy. Along with the videotape content, users could read the comments of experts that Metabolife believes 20/20 has not relied on for its story. Users could also read a story that discusses how sources for the 20/20 report may have conflicts of interest. Metabolife also supports its position by providing more statements of product safety. Further, it also offers a poll that functions as critique or at least as debate. Viewers could vote online whether or not they thought 20/20’s broadcast was fair after
viewing the whole interview juxtaposed with 20/20’s version. Note, however, how Metabolife uses the seemingly neutral poll to further reframe the controversy. Instead of being about the safety of Metabolife’s products, the poll is about 20/20’s broadcast. Ellis reported in a PBS interview that the Web site was overwhelmed with millions of hits. These visitors did participate in forming opinions about the controversy by interacting with the poll. According to Ellis, the opinions about the fairness of the 20/20 report varied between supporting ABC or Metabolife. In other words, then, hypermediacy encourages viewers to layer these various texts. Technology supports the creation of polyvocal meaning, in that viewers participate in the creation of an argument. Although 20/20 presents more of a monological text through newsmagazine conventions, Metabolife’s use of this strategy complicates its narrative. In all, the Web’s hypermediated content helps support the possibility of multiple interpretations of the 20/20 report. Metabolife uses the strategy of hypermediacy to interrupt/disrupt the news’ accepted practices. Hypermediacy allows Metabolife to play the role originally assumed by Diaz. Like a concerned journalist, it claims to offer the information viewers need to understand what really happened.

Through both uses of the remediation strategy, Metabolife, like other users of digital media, can shift the ground of a controversy. For Metabolife and other companies that are attacked by newsmagazines, remediation allows them to shift the argument into one about reform. Instead of debating the charges at hand, these companies can deflect attention onto journalistic practices. In this way, remediation can works as reform in two broad ways. First, those who remediate previous media, whichever strategy they employ, possess the same goal, ‘to get past the limits of representation and achieve the real’ (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 53). In this sense of reform, Metabolife wants to offer a competing view of the “reality” of its actions. It
reveals the constructed nature of the news and demonstrates that there is more than one “truth” of the event. Remediation can also seek to reform broader senses of reality as well (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 56). Through its actions, Metabolife wants to reform the reality of journalistic practices. In media interviews after the 20/20 broadcast, Ellis remarks, for example,

I think true journalism is [to] lay out all the facts of the issue and let the consumer or the viewer actually draw a conclusion…I believe that a lot of consumers may look at 20/20 as actually being a news piece, when I think maybe it might be a little bit more an entertainment piece to get ratings and such so that people watch, and unfortunately, it’s usually at the expense of either corporations, politicians, or individuals. (“ABC’s of Metabolife,” 1999)

ABC clearly disputes the need for reform; an executive president asserts, “We don’t want other people attempting to get into and shift the journalism process” (in Grossman, 2000).

Hypermediacy allows the rhetors to debate the need to discipline, or remediate, the state of journalism. The strategy succeeds by using style to turn away from original content, from 20/20’s initial charges.

Thus we see how remediation supports the speed strategy. It questions 20/20 and encourages the audience to turn away from the newsmagazine’s opinion. It gives the audience access to the interview, but asks them to turn away from it. This move allows Metabolife to add an alternate discourse about the event while protecting itself. It shows how 20/20 does not offer the definitive explanation of Metabolife’s guilt and suggests that there is not just one way to view the controversy. In this way, Metabolife acts like Gorgias who “does not seek to replace the previously accepted ‘truth’ about Helen with another truth, but rather undermines the very notion that one truth (or any truth for that matter) exists” (Hawhee, 2001, p. 10). Remember, too, that
Metabolife does not proclaim its innocence; rather, it tells the audience it believes debate should be open and accurate. Instead of denying the charges about itself and its products, it asks the audience to decide for themselves. Metabolife, then, uses remediation to support its kairotic strategy and constitute a new understanding of the crisis. As such, we can see how the speed norm can have a number of implications for public discourse. It is important to consider what it means when rhetors perform on speed. The remainder of the chapter points out some changes in public discursive action that the speed norm encourages. It then discusses how the use of this argumentative speed form speeds up the deliberation process.

Rhetoric on Speed

As we have seen, when speed becomes the featured term in a rhetorical exchange, the typical relationship among discursive elements is altered. Instead of focusing on argument quality or careful reasoning, for example, rhetors emphasize swiftness and brevity. Rather than maintaining distinct rhetorical spaces, the remediation practices used to enhance a rhetor’s ability to act with speed result in blurred rhetorical boundaries. I want to explore two broad rhetorical implications the speed norm encourages in this section. After examining how the speed norm disrupts the functioning of rhetorical forums, I suggest how changes are encouraged in our deliberative habits. As speed becomes a kind of argumentative form, audiences are encouraged to expect and incorporate different types of information and evidence and to focus on conclusions rather than reasons. In other words, when speed is used an argumentative form, rhetors and audiences are motivated to privilege the quick rather than the traditional.

Within the rhetorical tradition, an important concept in examining rhetorical exchanges has been in part understanding the characteristics of where these exchanges occur. The emergence of a discursive speed norm complicates the spaces in which rhetors interact.
Farrell (1993) has called these areas of rhetorical exchanges forums, or a “space of engagement wherein the modern constraints of rhetorical culture assert themselves” (p. 282). He notes that the way forums are structured plays a role in how an issue is judged. To him, forums grant, “precedents and modalities for granting a hearing to positions, as well as sorting through their agendas and constituencies” because they often provide both a “provisionally constrained context and an avenue of mediation” (Farrell, 1993, p. 282). As we have seen, this is certainly true of newsmagazine forums. Like other forums in our society, by virtue of its characteristics the newsmagazine typically provides “loose but recognizable admission criteria as to who may speak, what may be spoken about, and how they are to be held accountable for what they say and do” (p. 288). By following certain conventions, newsmagazines such as 20/20 have been adept at constraining the discourse that audiences use to make decisions about Metabolife and other corporations. In other words, the forum’s conventions have been successful in dictating who can speak, what can be spoken about, and how the issue can be judged. Although Farrell argues that forums tend to stabilize discourse, I suggest that PR facilitates the development of a speed norm that presents a challenge to this claim. The speed strategy, enhanced by remediation, prevents the conventions of a forum from operating independently from other cultural discourses and in a sense, infects a forum’s ability to control discourse.

In this way, the speed norm capitalizes on remediation strategies to constitute meaning in two ways. First, a given forum’s characteristics do not necessarily influence how an issue is discussed and decided. It is becoming more difficult to demarcate sanctified media spaces for rhetorical engagements where a rhetor can have the definitive say. In this way, the Metabolife case illustrates that, “No medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning” (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 55). Thus,
thinking in terms of rhetorical forums, no forum that emerges from a mediated rhetorical occasion can be fully stable, as Farrell seems to suggest. There is always the possibility that the type of media used in one forum will influence a decision in another. Corporations use this instability for PR advantages. They reinterpret the meaning of a particular rhetorical exchange. Indeed, since most rhetorical occasions are mediated today, some rhetors will attempt to perfect methods to guard their forums as others will try to invent more ingenious ways to infect them. We are faced with different forums interanimating each other continually.

Additionally, the ability to interanimate a rhetor’s argument and discursive space encourages more polyvocal readings. That is, rhetors have more avenues to dispute a claim and make their case, which encourages the audience to form alternate interpretations. As a result, rhetors have more power in situations that have typically presented major discursive challenges. Metabolife clearly illustrates the significance of forums that can become malleable with speed. Without offering access to information by disseminating the original 20/20 footage over the Web before the newsmagazine’s broadcast, the company could have protested 20/20’s claims repeatedly. It likely would have thus suffered the same fate common to most targets of exposés. That is, the damage would be done in the court of public opinion solely by virtue of the claims made by newsmagazines. By the time a trial verdict vindicates a target in the legal realm, it often does not matter in the public one. For example, when faced with a similar newsmagazine exposé, Food Lion protested that PrimeTime Live doctored its footage and made false claims, but to those who had viewed the broadcast, pictures of slimy, rotten meat and bleach on fish meant that “seeing was believing.” Indeed, as I have mentioned, it even mailed consumers videos after the broadcast to show how PrimetimeLive made spurious claims. This action, however, was too little, too late. Even after the trial verdict stating that PrimeTime Live had committed trespass and
fraud, Food Lion knew better than to sue on the basis of the broadcast images. The company realized that it could not fight the perception that “images don’t lie.” Too many people had seen the broadcast for this strategy to work.

To remedy its similar problem, Metabolife capitalizes on speed and offers its audience the ultimate backstage pass, thereby challenging the newsmagazine forum. It offers access to the images in an attempt to create proof, or, more important, to cast doubt on 20/20’s claims. As Web visitors have access to the footage before the broadcast without editing, they see the story for themselves and decide whether Metabolife was suspect. In addition, after the broadcast, they can visit again and see how 20/20 intercut the actual interview footage with personal narratives of Metabolife-induced woe and used out of context medical statements. Web visitors, then, have the ability to decide whether or not the story has teeth. As audiences employ pastiche, or picking and choosing among a text, Metabolife appears as if it has nothing to hide. It offers all of its information and invites the audience to peer inside and “see for themselves” in an effort to boost its credibility.

Metabolife, then, has the opportunity to argue by locus of quantity, an option that is more difficult to employ without the use of the speed norm. To it, speed offers the chance to provide audiences with more information. By disrupting the forum, it can challenge the conventions of 20/20, claiming to offer the viewer the “real deal.” The ability to disrupt forums through speed means that it can more easily challenge the perception that the newsmagazine offers the correct account of the company’s actions. The debate shifts from questions of culpability to an argument about journalistic norms. Metabolife however, also offers the user a mediated, corporately influenced experience. Metabolife’s PR tactics give the appearance that instead of offering audiences another image, it really is providing the accurate version of the controversy by
offering an open look at its company and products. Metabolife, then, substitutes access for deliberation. By virtue of its offer to look under the hood, as it were, it claims it is being honest with the public. As Grossman (2000) points out, however, “The strategy seems to have had more to do with planting the idea that the 20/20 piece was likely to be unbalanced than with truly informing the public about the facts” (p. 2). Metabolife’s implication that it is being honest by providing more information, therefore, is problematic. As discussed, its information is remediated. The Web site does not only offer the original videotape footage (which is not unbiased anyway as it was filmed in front of 300 cheering Metabolife employees), it also provides all the hypermediated elements. Nevertheless, through its tactics, Metabolife joins the current PR “best practice:” that of letting the information offer itself as a sign of its truthfulness, sincerity, and goodwill. Speed allows the company to provide information proactively, not reactively, and weakens the power of the newsmagazine forum. Its information appears more credible because it does not have to wait and respond in a reactive position.

This, then, is one consequence of the speed norm. Companies are encouraged to find ways to make a case for their position in order to disrupt how a forum typically functions. The information is presented in a format that encourages quick readings, jumping from bit of information to bit of information, and fast judgments. Metabolife disrupted the forum in this way. It facilitated audience support by clips and quips. In terms of broader implications, however, what does this type of information presentation mean for an audience’s member’s ability to make a fully informed decision about the case? Not only are rhetors affected by this norm, audiences are also affected by what Laidi derisively calls the “tyranny of urgency” (in Gitlin, 2001). This emphasis on speedy consideration, more than traditional deliberation, has consequences for the types of exchanges that occur in disrupted forums. Audiences are coming
to expect a speedy response, and not necessarily a traditional, well-developed one. There are several ways speed contributes to these changes in deliberation.

Deliberation & the Speed Form

Audience deliberation can be encouraged or discouraged by the way in which the information is discussed. Typically, a particular type of argument encourages a specific type of audience response. Rhetorical theory seeks to explain how this process works. According to James Klumpp (1993), for example, “traditional argumentation theory seeks ideal forms which an arguer can master. With these forms, the arguer can generate sound arguments and can, in turn, critique argument to find fallacies or lines of refutation” (p. 149). I suggest here that the speed strategies identified in Metabolife case are beginning to function as this type of culturally specific form, which Burke (1931) has characterized as the “arousing and fulfillment of desires” (p. 31). A brief look at how forms work rhetorically sheds light on how speed functions this way. For a form to work successfully, Burke asserts that rhetors must create an appetite in the mind of the auditor and subsequently satisfy this need adequately. Thus, mass-produced “bodice ripper” romance novels work by promising the reader a tale of passionate romance and fulfill that desire by filling the story with exotic locales, mysterious characters, and highly descriptive interactions. Forms, however, are at work in more than literature. Audiences who are presented with forensic arguments, for example, tend to weigh information and debate evidence in specific ways. With forensic arguments, then, attorneys are expected to make a case for the guilt or innocence of a person. They must describe a particular crime and then specify how the accused is implicated within it. It is important to recognize, however, that argument forms are culturally specific. Forensic argument forms in American courtrooms, for example, differ from those employed in British ones. Just as Americans expect their situation comedies to develop in certain ways,
audiences have certain cultural expectations that rhetors employing forms must consider in order to be successful.

In this way, as I have argued that speed has become a central cultural and rhetorical component exemplified by the Metabolife case, I believe that it is beginning to function as a particular type of rhetorical form in our culture. The Metabolife case illustrates how speed drives a rhetor’s strategy and the audience’s response. Technology is moving faster, and so rhetors and audiences do too. It is becoming a given that things happen quickly. As Gitlin notes, “ours is a civilization that revels in the pure experience of speed” (2001, p. 105). My analysis shows how rhetors can argue in ways that complement the culture’s expectations. That is, Metabolife successfully relied on a culturally appropriate form of argument. Just as different types of argument forms meet the expectations of a given moment, as lengthy speeches satisfied 19th century audiences and pulp fiction gratified post-war readers, so too does the speed form. We crave speed; corporate rhetors satisfy that desire.

Speed, then, is becoming a kind of rhetorical form. It is not one of the conventional or repetitive forms that Burke identifies, but one that is progressive. There are two types of progressive forms. As Campbell and Burkholder argue, a syllogistic progressive form “is rationalistic, a perfectly conducted argument, that advances step by step the premises forcing a conclusion, whether in a rhetorical work or mystery story” (1997, p. 96). Burke likens this type of progressive form to a syllogism, because if given a certain thing, other things must follow. He discusses this form in terms of diagramed arrows, each arrow pointing to the next and so on.

Rather than functioning syllogistically, however, speed forms progress qualitatively. That is, a speed form encourages audience participation through a non-logical, non-linear sequential contrast. It changes the mood, the volume, the tone of a discourse. It satisfies our need
for speed and instant gratification. Burke (1931) remarked that a writer uses the form of a text to keep the reader wanting to predict what will come next. Qualitative forms, in particular, work progressively by creating an expectation that a particular quality will follow or persist (Campbell and Burkholder, 1997). Instead of expecting arguments to proceed step-by-step through the use of a rationalistic form, the use of a qualitative speed form encourages audiences to anticipate and be gratified by the quality of swiftness. This type of progressive form is subtler, “where the presence of one quality prepares us for the introduction of another” (Burke, 1931, p. 125). With speed forms, an audience’s curiosity is piqued (through advertising, PR, media soundbites, and so on), and then rapidly satisfied. This type of progressive form is particularly suited to describe the way rhetors use speed in discursive exchanges. Indeed, as Burke points out, “We are prepared less to demand a certain qualitative progression than to recognize the rightness after the event. We are put into a state of mind which another state of mind can appropriately follow” (p. 125). Metabolife’s actions only make sense in the context of its particular controversy. It put the audience in a state of curiosity that it could then follow appropriately with its Web strategy.

In this way, for speed forms to work, rhetors must share information differently. Here, Metabolife arouses the audience’s curiosity but satisfies it in a way that supports its position. Since speed encourages a focus on outcome rather than process, Metabolife can offer all of its information yet discourage its close inspection. In other words, speed forms function as structures that can subsume content. Through cultivating the audience’s desire to see the broadcast preemptively, it capitalizes on novelty, not argument. Kathleen Jamieson has argued that television causes speakers to rely more on images and an associative, rather than deliberative logic (1988, p.14). The speed form works in a similar, but even more haphazard fashion. When rhetors employ the speed form they can use less evidence. They instead focus on eye-catching
headlines, quips and clicks, and startling video clips. In other words, the use of the speed form means that discursive information between speakers and listeners is shared in different, and often more truncated styles than in previous eras. Leone (1999) points out that the Web provides opportunities that often add to the truncated nature of public argument. It allows the speed form to function more easily. Rhetors are able to employ remediation strategies to arouse and satisfy the audience’s need for instant gratification.

Speed forms thus challenge traditional deliberation because they encourage a focus on product, not process. Instead of enticing audiences to watch and evaluate as a controversy unfolds, they emphasize its conclusion. Rhetors employing speed forms gain credibility by virtue of being fast; that is, they can be perceived as able to respond to charges so quickly because they must be right. Speed forms discourage rhetors and audiences from weighing information as they would in a court case. We are encouraged to communicate in a different communicative style, one that de-emphasizes syllogistic forms. Jamieson (1988), for example, argues that,

Speakers in the golden ages of American, British, Roman, and Greek oratory routinely laid out the range of policy alternatives for examination, scrutinizing each in turn…Today, speeches argue by hitting and running. A single supposedly telling statistic, report, or anecdote is slung under a claim before the speaker moves on. (p. 11)

It is important to recognize that Jamieson, in 1988, made her observations before the introduction of the Internet. Today, this trend continues, supplemented through the use of the Web to respond quickly and provide audiences with conclusions.

Although speed forms discourage audiences and rhetors from forwarding and evaluating pros and cons, their formats still foster decisions. As a result of the use of a speed form, audiences still seem willing to make judgments. They just make them more quickly. If
companies can argue more quickly, so too are audiences willing to decide. In the Metabolife case, as I have illustrated, audiences interacted with the bits of information on the Web site, in the television report, and in the press. Yet even though audiences received information in these truncated ways that do not perhaps provide for traditional deliberation, they still made judgments. After Metabolife posted its information on the Web, not only did record numbers of citizens visit the site, I have described how they engaged in its online poll to vote on the fairness of 20/20’s story. This poll, surprisingly, did not merely function as a PR tool for the company. According to the Metabolife CEO, responding to the results of the online vote, “Well, it’s been popping back and forth across the 50 percent mark. So one hour it is somewhere close around 51 percent in favor of ABC and then 49 at Metabolife, and then vice versa, it starts changing” (“ABC’s of Metabolife,” 1999, p.3). It appears then that audiences are willing to make decisions with or without extended deliberation between the companies. These findings point to the possibility, then, for the public to digest the 20/20 broadcast, the Metabolife site, and the press around these actions. Indeed, as Gleick suggests,

We have learned to grasp things quickly. We can read signs, change lanes and avoid other vehicles at seventy miles per hour while also listening to a song and planning our weekend…Things come at us a rate our ancestors could not have imagined, and we handle them (1999, p. 201).

Handling or digesting, however, is different than careful consideration. Given these cultural conditions, it is tempting to speculate that our ability to consider information is degraded. Although deliberation is certainly different in light of speed forms, it seems important to understand, and not just disparage, one contemporary manifestation of this rhetorical process.
As such, instead of merely lamenting the corporate use of the speed form, we need to re-think how the citizenry interacts with these types of arguments (see Goodnight, 1991; Jamieson, 1988; Postman, 1985; DeLuca, 1999; Gleick, 1999; & McGee, 1990). Indeed, Metabolife and other cases of corporate speed provide the opportunity to study how audiences may receive information. Rather than faulting contemporary audiences for their lack of concentration and passivity, audience reaction to Metabolife’s PR tactics suggests that while audiences may be distracted (see DeLuca 1999) by the images circulating around them, they have come to expect, and use, the type of information provided in a speed form to make decisions. I conclude this chapter by suggesting some ways that rhetors employ speed forms and how audiences receive them.

Conclusion

One way to understand how the speed norm functions is by examining what happened to Metabolife after its employment of the speed form. Since the company’s battle with 20/20, it continued to promote its products, but in a more traditional fashion. It tried to retain its high profits through contributions to politicians, for example. These contributions were designed to stem FDA legislation that has been pending against ephedra for the last five years. In an effort to discourage regulation, in 2000, Metabolife contributed $40,000 to George W. Bush’s re-election campaign. With the contribution, the Bush administration relaxed the rules for companies marketing their ephedra products. *Business Week* reported in 2000 that Metabolife also paid California Governor Gray Davis $150,000 to influence him to veto a bill that would ban its products. Since 1999, Metabolife has contributed $1.6 million to national politicians. By 2002, however, more than 85 lawsuits had been brought against the company. Ephedra had been linked to a number of strokes, heat attacks, seizures, and more than 100 deaths. The Justice
Department launched a criminal investigation to determine whether or not it lied about the safety of its products (Hilts, 2002). At issue in the investigation, as well as in the lawsuits, is whether Metabolife’s sweeping marketing efforts misled consumers.

Negative attention continued to follow the company. The NFL, the NCAA, and the International Olympic Committee banned ephedra. After one of its players died from suspected ephedra use, the Major League Baseball Association also banned the substance. Sales of ephedra-based supplements plummeted after the increased publicity following the Baltimore Orioles pitcher’s death. Today, diet supplements on the market take pains to notify consumers that they are ephedra-free. In the wake of these problems, Metabolife stepped back into the spotlight. It pursued a “transparency” strategy, releasing its records of the more than 13,000 complaints it has received about its products. It also offered to begin a PR campaign to warn consumers of the dangers of the abuses of ephedra products (in Hilts, 2002). As of April 2004, however, the FDA decided to ban ephedra-based supplements, including Metabolife. The Food and Drug Administration urged consumers to quit using dietary supplements containing ephedra immediately. In light of these developments, then, what can be said about the corporate public relations use of the speed form?

The above examination of Metabolife’s success with the speed form would seem to suggest that this type of argumentation tends to focus attention temporarily on appearance. In other words, the employment of the form deflects attention away from charges of malfeasance. It succeeds in temporarily delaying close inspection by the media, consumers, and the government. From an instrumental point of view, then, it might be appropriate to view the employment of a speed form as a temporary stay; that is, one to use until you can enlist other strategies. I want to suggest here again, however, that we benefit when we consider the constitutive along with the
instrumental outcomes of a strategy. This emphasis on speed and remediation encourage possibility rather than probability when traditional deliberation emphasizes the probable over the possible. Thus, Metabolife, like everyone else, could be right, or it could be wrong. Speed makes possibility more central. Metabolife’s actions are thus reflective of a larger discursive speed norm. Cultural rhetors rely on these forms of argument in ways that alter public discourse and have constitutive effects.

Other rhetors facing similar situations engage in similar rhetorical strategies. When 60 Minutes targeted Nissan for a story about its cars sudden acceleration problems, for example, it too pursued preemptive strategies. It first found that the newsmagazine was basing its reports on the comments of a disgruntled employee. It then stalled the story by contacting the Wall Street Journal and promising an exclusive on the former employee’s embezzlement; it would do so only if, however, the paper would run the story before CBS could broadcast its show. In other words, speed allows media-accused rhetors some leverage in a largely media dictated culture. Speed norms change the logic of “‘never piss off the media so you’ll have a future,’ to ‘you won’t have a future if you let the media bury you first’”(Lubove 1999). It would appear, then, that the rhetorical and physical health of the public body would benefit from understanding PR’s ability to facilitate discursive norms.

The constitutive implications of the speed norm exemplified by Metabolife, for example, do not only influence corporate PR strategy. These implications can be seen also in the way the newsmedia is altering some of its reporting habits. While it is impossible to argue that the corporate public relations use of the speed norm is responsible for instigating subsequent changes in the news media’s reporting habits, the overall influence of speed exemplified by Metabolife does show how the norm works for more than corporations seeking PR. In other
words, the speed norm can work in different ways for different rhetors. Earlier, I noted that newsmagazines voiced concern about corporate interference into the editorial process that Metabolife represents. Neal Shapiro, executive producer of Dateline NBC, for example, remarked that “if a reporter feels his question can be used against him before it is broadcast, that can be bad” (p. 3). News organizations worry that because of speed, tactics like Metabolife’s “could set a dangerous precedent, encouraging subjects to air their interviews online or even give them to a rival news organization” (Eisenberg, 1999, p. 80). Shapiro further worried that Metabolife style tactics “could encourage sloppy journalism, as reporters rush their stories out to avoid being beaten” (in Eisenberg, 1999, p. 80).

This is what has happened since the 1999 battle, and news companies have altered their tactics accordingly. It is not surprising that the argumentative speed form is becoming more prominent in the news media because it is both influenced by PR and by the cultural expectation of speed. Indeed, as I have mentioned, the media relies on PR to submit stories. News companies increasingly focus on the speed and snippets PR facilitates rather than pursuing installment investigative journalism (Downie and Kaiser, 2002). This trend is supported by the industry’s turn to increasing their cable and Internet presences. Whether delivering international, entertainment, or political news, news agencies try to find ways to report more quickly. To provide political news before their competitors, for example, “Pollers use electronic devices during political speeches to measure opinions before they have been fully formed” (G, p. 13). A variety of technologies, therefore, contribute to the industry’s ability to provide audiences with instant gratification. In other words, the cultural expectation and ability to move with speed changes the news in some significant ways.
It also encourages audiences to react in certain ways. Consider, for example, the following scenarios. When a rumor surfaced on the Internet that the U.S. military had accidentally shot down TWA Flight 800, the nightly news reported the speculation. Following the network news’ discussion of the rumor, 41 percent of the American public believed that the government was suppressing the truth about the flight (Denzenhall, 1999). Similarly, movie gossip Web sites contribute to box office failures. Studios attribute the lackluster performances of movies such as Batman and Robin and Gigli to these Web sites. The negative buzz they foster is picked up by the mainstream media and influences audience choices. The mainstream news media, too, picked up Internet rumors in 1994 that the Intel Pentium chip was flawed and the company watched its stock tumble. Until Pentium offered to replace the chips (which would only become flawed in highly complex calculations done by mathematicians) the stock did not recover.

Not only does the newsmedia’s use of the speed form contribute to quick judgment, its structure makes arguing a conflicting viewpoint or responding to charges difficult. According to Denzenhall (1999), “The Internet provides little or no recourse. Even if I can ‘post’ a correction or explanation, the chances are that anyone who received the bogus or hostile information has already made up his mind” (p. 160). Clearly, this problem was at work in the Metabolife case and throughout the examples listed here. 20/20 can defend its editorial practices by arguing that it gives the viewer all of the relevant information needed to make a decision about a company’s malfeasance, but viewers can counter that they have been cheated when they can find the whole interview on the Internet. The government and movie studios can argue against charges, but the speed form allows the claims to stand more easily because audiences are encouraged to believe what they hear or see first.
In light of these different manifestations of the speed form, it should be clear that preemption is thus becoming one of the orders of the day for the news industry. The speed norm, for more than those seeking corporate PR, then, makes responding before your competitor can more important. It contributes to a focus on acting quickly to shape perception. More than forwarding an image through rhetoric, rhetors draw on the speed form in an attempt to shield themselves from debate. By examining how the speed norm can influence the rhetorical choices of corporate and news rhetors and audiences, it should be reasonable to imagine that this is a discursive norm that is far-reaching. An implication of this chapter, therefore, is the need to complement the instrumental study of PR with ones that examine the numerous ways in which PR strategies can act constitutively. This chapter has demonstrated that PR is more than just its tactics; indeed, these tactics influence others and contribute to broad rhetorical changes. The Metabolife case, therefore, illustrates how public relations is a discourse that helps constitute discursive norms. As such, constitutive studies of PR are important because they can illuminate how this discourse operates as a generative rhetorical resource for other societal actors and their audiences. As these discourses can form norms in our culture, we need to be mindful of how they might work for other rhetors and audiences interested in using them.

Dieters constantly search for the fast fixes offered by diet pills like Metabolife. These chemical cousins of speed offer dieters hope that they can instantly transform themselves, a desire that translates into sales close to $1 billion for Metabolife. Speed norms offer rhetors a similar promise. Acting quickly provides them with the opportunity to satisfy the rhetorical need for speed. Empowerment norms, conversely, offer audiences different promises. Chapter 3 examines how empowerment language gives corporations the ability to shape consumer understanding of health.
CHAPTER THREE
PLACEBO EFFECT? WEB-BASED PHARMACEUTICAL PR AND EMPOWERMENT
NORMS

A spoonful of PR helps the medicine go down.

Introduction

A presidential commission is formed to urge Americans to exercise. Numerous public health campaigns inform children, in particular, of the need for healthy eating and less sedentary lifestyles. One such campaign, “Verb: It’s What You do,” seeks to get children to participate in a variety of physical activities instead of whiling away hours in front of computer or TV screens. Meanwhile, American adults debate the merits of a variety of diets. High carbohydrate, low fat diets are contrasted to embracing low carb living. In restaurants and supermarkets throughout the country, signs announce either “low carb menus” or “healthy alternatives.” Americans, it seems, are far from the pink of health. Instead, they are learning that their health report card is unsatisfactory. News of increasing obesity rates, high cholesterol levels, and increased cancer risks dominate news broadcasts. More than one third of our citizens are overweight, health care costs are the most expensive in the world, and many Americans continue to go without health insurance, although the United States spends more on health care services than any other industrialized nation (Wise, 2001, p. 476). It is not surprising that the topic of public health dominates the culture. As Wise (2001) observes, “One can hardly pick up a metropolitan
newspaper, a national news magazine, or watch a network news broadcast without being exposed to a health-related story” (p. 475). In short, we seem to be a nation consumed with our health.

As a result, Americans increasingly seek more health information. Non-profit organizations offer information on topics ranging from breast cancer to heart disease, health magazines subscriptions are increasing, and Americans are going on-line in search of health information. As of 2003, studies report that more than fifty percent of consumers now search the Internet for health information (Dutta-Bergman, 2003; Eysenbach, Powell, Kuss, & Sa, 2002; Harris, 1997). Additionally, seventy percent of consumers report that Web information influences their health decisions, with thirty-six percent reporting that it helps them make a decision on behalf of a loved one (Horrigan & Rainie, 2002). Another study says that more people now log on to the Web to search for healthcare information than for pornography, the Web’s previous most popular search topic (Blackett, 2001, p. 23). Devereux (2001) agrees that the web is now used most often for this purpose (p. 89). It is clear that the Web provides more access to health information; however, the content that is available deserves scrutiny. Along with an increase in the availability of educational health information, the amount of promotional health discourse has also increased. As a result of a 1997 act by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Americans are more likely to encounter promotional drug treatment information than ever before. Once only able to target physicians, pharmaceutical marketers can now reach the public through a variety of media including radio, television, print, and, especially, the web. Marketers, in other words, have capitalized on and encouraged the development of the nation’s mood to go in for a check up.

This chapter will explore the constitutive implications of the PR element of pharmaceutical marketing efforts. Instrumentally, it is clear that the public is responding to such
information. These carefully designed campaigns resonate with the consumer as drug sales are at an all time high and doctor visits are on the rise. After examining these instrumental outcomes, I look more closely at what types of rhetorical norms a specific type of pharmaceutical campaign, electronic direct to consumer (EDTC) web marketing, encourages. By examining the web-specific campaigns generated by drug giants Pfizer and Novartis, I show how this type of pharmaceutical public relations contributes to a discursive norm of consumer empowerment. To understand the surge in circulating health information, a little history of pharmaceutical advertising is in order.

The August Switch & The Explosion of DTC Marketing

1997 saw the biggest moment in the history of pharmaceutical marketing when the FDA decided that drug marketers could explore new ways of providing consumers with health information. Prior to August of that year, marketers were restricted when advertising directly to the consumer. Although many over-the-counter drug makers relied on print and broadcast spots to promote everything from aspirin to muscle rub, strict FDA rules discouraged companies from advertising their prescription products in this manner. According to Dietz (2002), tight FDA regulations allowed marketers to choose from only four options for advertising directly to the consumer. Prescription drug companies could use print to advertise a product but had to include voluminous small print about the product’s potential risks. They could also choose to advertise on radio and TV, but would have to disclose the same risks. Another option allowed them to promote the brand name but not the product’s indications, risking consumer confusion and/or irritation. As Dietz (2002) points out, a customer might demand, “What is Lipitor? What kind of a company would spend all that money to produce that commercial and not explain what it’s for?!?” The last option available to marketers, Dietz argues, is even less appealing. Here, a
commercial might discuss the problems of a condition but could not advertise a brand name, risking that consumers might end up with another product once at the doctor’s office.

The August switch greatly increased the options available to marketers. After a long debate, the FDA decided that pharmaceutical companies could advertise directly to the consumer, and not just to the physician. The pharmaceutical companies successfully argued “consumer protection should no longer be seen as simply providing the public with access to accurate claims but rather as providing the public with knowledge that they would not have, were it not for the ‘educational’ benefit of pharmaceutical advertising” (Woodward, 1996, p. 3). Although they would still have to discuss some of a given product’s risks, marketers could now mention both product and ailment. Under the new guidelines, marketers would also have to list other ways consumer could get more information, such as toll-free numbers, World Wide Web advertising, and the like. The FDA decision led to an almost immediate explosion in pharmaceutical advertising spending, with such campaigns ranking fifth in terms of ad spending, behind the other categories of automotive, retail, movies and media, and financial services. Further, spending has more than tripled since 1996, from $800 million to $2.7 billion (Knoll & Morales, 2003). It is expected to reach 7.5 billion by 2005 (Johnson, 2001). The biggest jump is the amount spent on television commercials, with spending moving from $220 million in 1996 to $1.6 billion in 2000. When the allergy drugs Claritin, Allegra, and Zyrtec were heavily advertised in the first half of 1998, sales increased 32%, 100%, and 52% respectively (Davis, 2000). To put this amount of spending in context, consider these other uses of ad dollars. Findlay (2001) points out that, “each of the top-seven most heavily advertised drugs beat out Nike’s ad budget of $78.2 million for its top shoes.” Ad spending for just one arthritis drug, Vioxx, exactly
matched Dell Computer Company’s ad expenditure of $160 million for its top brands of computers (Findlay, 2001, p. 22).

Davis (2000) notes five general trends regarding how the new DTC advertising regulations help marketers achieve their instrumental goals of increasing profits. He suggests that DTC ads drive consumers to be more aware of the prescription drugs and the conditions they treat, to use that awareness to talk with their doctors about the advertised conditions, to take the initiative in requesting the advertised drug, to request highly advertised drugs more frequently, and to pursue relentlessly the requested drug. Indeed, Davis (2000) reports that survey data indicates that between half and three-quarters of all drug requests are approved by a physician. If they are not, consumers treat doctors with “suspicion and hostility,” causing many to “shop around” for a physician who will prescribe the drug.

Several studies have been conducted to detail these trends. In a study commissioned by Prevention, for example, the magazine reported that as many as 54.8 million consumers “had spoken with their physicians about a drug they had seen advertised, 15.3 million had requested a prescription for an advertised drug and 12.9 million had obtained such a prescription” (Findlay, 2001, p. 112). Further, he reports these researchers also found that “24.7 million Americans had approached their physicians for the first time about conditions such as allergies, heart disease, and diabetes mellitus directly as a result of hearing or seeing an advertisement” (Findlay, 2001, p. 113). In a different FDA telephone study, more that 85% of respondents replied that an advertisement had made them aware of new drugs (Findlay 2001). Other studies confirm that these ads increase doctor visits. For example, allergy drugs were the most heavily advertised drugs in 1998 and 1999, and doctor visits concerning these symptoms jumped from about from about 14 million to 18 million a year (in Findlay, 2001). Further, a number of studies concern the
increasing amount of prescriptions written once a consumer visits a physician. In an earlier study of DTC advertising, 2 billion prescriptions were written in 1998 while more than 3 billion were written in 2000. Another study notes that DTC advertising motivates consumers to press for more widespread availability of pharmaceutical brands, with 90% of US consumers now in favor of making more drugs available without a prescription (Blackett, 2001, p. 23). It is important to recognize, however, that even in light of these impressive statistics, there are other forces affecting which drugs get prescribed and the level of drug spending. Some of these forces include a general increase in the number of drugs being approved, increases in conditions that benefit particularly from drug therapy, physicians using a wider array of drugs, and more extensive coverage of drugs by health plans (Findlay, 2002). Even in light of these contributing elements, however, it is clear that DTC advertising has helped to change the drug landscape.

Assessment of DTC Advertising

From the industry’s point of view, DTC advertising has a number of valuable instrumental effects. The industry claims this advertising provides the public with important information about both diseases and treatments, helping them to seek medical attention they otherwise might leave undiagnosed and untreated (Bell, Wilkes, & Kravitz, 2000). Indeed, Bell et al. wonder whether DTC advertisements “are filling an important void for consumers whose desire for medical information seems insatiable” (2000, p. 656). The industry argues that DTC advertising improves public health. One commonly cited study notes that DTC ads increase the use of all brands in a particular “therapeutic class” rather than switch consumers from one brand to its competitor’s (Knoll & Morales, 2003). The industry claims that DTC advertising helps match patients’ needs with specific drugs. Further, marketers maintain that the public is sophisticated enough to comprehend the scientific language used in their advertising. There are a
variety of other benefits cited. Industry representatives and some consumer groups laud the increase in patient autonomy (Findlay 2001). They also argue that drug treatments save money over other treatment approaches. A commonly cited study, for example, found an average $435 per employee per month savings for employees who experienced migraines and received drug therapy (in Findlay). At base, then, marketers argue that DTC advertising will make consumers more informed than they ever have been about drugs and healthcare (Blackett, 2001, p. 23).

On the other hand, some public health observers wonder if the ability to advertise directly to consumers shifted concern from public health to maximizing profit (Foote & Etheredge, 2000). Opponents of DTC advertising argue that health education and drug promotion are “inherently at odds” (Bell, Wilkes, Kravitz, 1999, p. 1092). Observers maintain that the desire to maximize profits results in a host of problems for physicians and consumers. Public health policy watchers counter the industry’s claims of creating savings in health costs. These observers argue that there is not a decrease in cost, stating, “much of the recent increase in spending on prescription drugs is an add-on expense with no well documented offset in healthcare spending (even discounting the higher price for newer drugs)” (Findlay, 2001, p. 116). Many suggest that the increase in DTC advertising is the primary reason for escalating drug costs, as for example, the average price of medicines is also increasing from $30 in 1992 to $71 in 1998 (Knoll & Morales, 2003). Further, public health observers caution that the increase in drug spending has not resulted in the benefits of increased doctor consultation that the industry claims. Studies show, for example, that although prescriptions for cholesterol lowering drugs have increased and that these drugs are effective, populations who could benefit most from these drugs still do not receive them. All of these arguments, both pro and con, center on the question of whether the
goal of persuading audiences to increase profits can work in the public’s best health interest. In other words, they examine DTC advertising from an instrumental viewpoint.

Other issues begin to take us away from these instrumental outcomes to constitutive questions. There are elements of DTC advertising that do more than persuade a health consumer to purchase a particular drug. One area of concern lies in the appearance of the ads themselves. Reports of misleading and incomplete information, violation of the public trust, and the potential for consumers to misunderstand complicated health content abound throughout the public health literature. Davis (2000), for example, charges that the FDA’s criterion of “fair balance” in DTC advertising is not being met. This criterion is supposed to ensure that a balance of risk and benefit information is being provided to the consumer. According to Davis (2000), “prescription drug advertising is only in the consumer interest if it is constructed and presented in a way that helps consumers fully understand a drug’s benefits and side effects” (p. 360). These concerns contest the industry’s claims that such advertisements perform an educational function for the consumer. As Bell et al. (1999) maintain, in terms of these ads meeting that educational function, “that day is not yet at hand” (p. 1096). The educational merit of these ads is particularly important to assess when noting that consumers rely on the advice of DTC advertising, rather than a friend or relative, as the primary source of information before asking for a specific brand from a doctor (Devereux, 2001, p. 85).

Another area of concern involves the relationship between patients/consumers and physicians. Doctors report that advertising pressures them to give in to patient demands, countering claims of increased patient autonomy. These demands make it difficult for physicians to suggest similar over the counter drugs or certain lifestyle changes rather than prescribing the patient’s request for the advertised drug. It is not surprising, then, that, “physicians worry that
DTC advertisements reinforce a cultural bias that there is a ‘pill for every ill’” (Findlay, 2001, p. 113). Similarly, some observers worry that the success of this advertising causes pharmaceutical companies to focus more on prevalent, but not life-threatening, conditions such as baldness, sexual dysfunction and memory loss (Findlay, 2001). Findlay (2001) also worries that pharmaceutical companies are shifting resources from research and development to marketing. These changes in the drug industry influence the way that consumers perceive drugs. As he notes, “the advertisements send a strong signal that prescription drugs are just another consumer product, like soap, cereal, cars, snack foods, or for that matter, OTC drugs” (Findlay, 2001, p. 118).

It should be clear that DTC advertising is changing the way consumers interact with health information. Pharmaceutical ads succeed in motivating consumers to take action. Instead of waiting for doctors to tell them what prescription should be taken, DTC helps consumers play a larger role in determining their health care, a role, as we have seen, that is debated for its positive or negative potential. From a constitutive viewpoint, however, there is more to this debate. It is important to recognize that we have examined the effect of the FDA’s decision on advertising. That is, when a commercial comes on TV or when an ad is printed in a magazine, the role of corporate sponsorship is evident. In a type of closely related PR-influenced marketing practice, however, pharmaceutical companies create elaborate educational web sites about a particular illness, ostensibly designed for empowering consumers with health information. These EDTC campaigns blend traditional advertising with PR to provide users with a library of health information, the opportunity to watch or read transcripts between journalists and doctors about an illness and treatment options, and the chance to interact with the Web site in a variety of ways. Unlike traditional advertising, however, typically the role of corporate sponsorship in
these sites is harder to ascertain. As a result, consumers are encouraged to believe they are educating themselves about their health, yet this information is supplied by corporations and contains subtle promotional elements. As such, I argue that these sites contribute to a rhetoric of corporate empowerment that celebrates simple access to information. PR shapes and reinforces the development of a norm where the Web is seen as an empowering educational resource rather than a promotional tool. By examining how health PR encourages consumers to feel empowered about their health, we continue to examine how PR creates discursive norms. To do so, I first differentiate between PR and advertising in more detail. I then locate this discussion in the context of debates about the web’s empowerment potential generally. With this groundwork laid, I detail the components of a pharmaceutical rhetoric of empowerment by analyzing a number of EDTC campaigns.

Web-Based Pharmaceutical PR

PR is poised to cultivate a rhetoric of consumer empowerment. Where advertising is designed to sell by connecting a given product with a specific company, PR has a different marketing focus that the Web enhances. Often, PR tries to create a positive relationship between a corporation and consumer by engaging in media relations, or the attempt to induce journalists to write about a company’s products and services. The logic of PR, then, is slightly different than advertising. Advertising wants to create an association between product and company and works in a self-interested fashion, i.e. “Nike makes good shoes,” whereas PR wants someone outside of a company to review a product or service favorably in order to create this association. This “outside” review helps to give the company credibility, as a promotional message is separated from the promoter. Public relations experts call this practice the “third party technique.”
These “third party techniques” are at work in the pharmaceutical industry, helping healthcare PR firms to earn more than $300 million in 2002 (Burton & Rowell, 2003). This practice is particularly important when promoting health products. As one practitioner notes, if a pharmaceutical company either defends or promotes one if its own products, it “would have much less credibility than if an opinion leader or a prescriber said it” (Burton & Rowell, 2003). Uses of this tactic in pharmaceutical PR practice are numerous. One way the tactic is employed is by training “key opinion leaders” such as physicians to speak on behalf of a given pharmaceutical company. As Burton and Rowell (2003) note, the physicians’ roles at conferences, for example, “can span everything from presenting papers to fielding questions in open conference sessions” (p. 2). Medical publications are also used to promote a specific company’s product. Freelance journalists and science reporters are hired to submit the results of corporately funded studies to a variety of medical journals. Practitioners note that even when a study does not support a particular key message, the introduction and discussion sections still provide a platform for message delivery (Burton & Rowell, 2003). Similarly, some freelance journalists cover trade conferences and then provide upbeat stories to medical publications, even when results of a particular drug or treatment are tentative or preliminary. Pharmaceutical companies also attempt to influence public opinion through media relations programs. To publicize their arthritis drugs Vioxx and Celebrex, for example, Searle and Merck created extensive campaigns to generate media coverage, including scheduling celebrity appearances on popular news programs like Larry King Live and sending press releases to a variety of targeted media outlets. As a result of the campaigns, sales for the two drugs jumped, with Celebrex, in particular, setting industry records for total prescription volume and refills, “making it the most
successful U.S. pharmaceutical product introduction in history, even bigger than the anti-

Instead of being aimed at journalists or doctors, however, PR attention is now increasingly directed to potential patients/consumers through the use of the Web. As a PR practitioner notes, “one cornerstone PR opportunity on the Internet resides in using the Web for consumer relations” (Ditmer, p. 132). Rapaport (1997) says that there is a PR shift from targeting journalists to reaching on-line consumers. This shift is touted as the most important opportunity for PR practitioners since the emergence of the fax machine and email (Duke, 2002). There are several reasons why the medium is viewed so positively. Using the web allows practitioners to reach a much larger number of people, achieving a mass communication function, yet the technology’s features allow messages to be targeted in ways that are more difficult to achieve in traditional media. The ability to target, coupled with the opportunity to reach consumers anywhere, at any time, creates a type of connectivity that changes the way public relations typically operates. As the Web allows company spokespeople to bypass a variety of media gatekeepers, “public relations in the age of the Internet is a new ball game” (Rapaport, 1997, p. 100). This ability to reach consumers directly through the Web is particularly relevant for pharmaceutical marketers. As Dutta-Bergman (2003) states, “the medium has emerged as a key player in healthcare, fundamentally reshaping patient decision making and altering the traditional doctor-patient relationship.” Coupled with advertising, PR experts can encourage consumers to take direct action on behalf of their health by learning about a drug’s potential to solve a given health problem. This tactic influences consumers, in other words, to supplement or even counter, the information provided by their physicians (Burton & Rowell, 2003).
As a result, two types of EDTC campaigns are exploding. One allows consumers to find out more information about a product online after seeing or reading an advertisement. The other type of EDTC campaign persuades consumers that they have reached an “educational” web site. When searching for information on high cholesterol, for example, consumers could type that subject into a search engine and end up on a Web site devoted to discussing the problem and its treatment options. Unlike corporate sites that contain advertisements, these sites are distinct from their sponsoring companies. They take the medical article and the trade conference online. Consumers watch webcasts and read transcripts of doctors discussing an ailment and its treatment. As a result, proponents claim that such a site “empowers the patients, addresses the problems of underdiagnosis and undertreatment, and increases the dialog between doctors and patients” (in Teinowitz, 1999, p.55). A closer look at these sites, however, complicates this claim. It is clear that the Web has given consumers more opportunities to receive corporate pharmaceutical information. What is less clear is how these sites constitute a discourse that promotes empowerment and whether this rhetoric contributes to a change in how healthcare is considered. We should be able to move beyond questions of whether or not these strategies increase sales to ones that seek to examine what they mean rhetorically. It is useful, then, to explore some arguments about the role of the web in creating empowerment to point us in this constitutive direction.

Empowerment.com

In contemporary culture, it is commonplace to hear how much technology adds to our ability to gain information. Everywhere we turn we hear how consumers have more choice, more options, more personalization; in essence, audiences seem to have more access to information than ever. This opportunity is celebrated. As Gitlin (2001) notes, “Information society glows
with a positive aura. The very term information points to a gift -- specific and ever replenished, shining forth in the bright light of utility. Ignorance is not bliss; information is” (p. 5). Similarly, Andrew Shapiro (1999) has called our ability to gain access to information the “control revolution”:

To an unprecedented degree, we can decide what news and entertainment we’re exposed to, whom we socialize with, how we earn, and even how goods are distributed and political outcomes are reached. The potential for personal growth and progress seems limitless. (p. xiii)

Many early studies and some current ones view the Web’s role in our information society in a celebratory light. Some see communication on the Internet as enhancing community, facilitating education, and benefiting individuals. Selnow (1998), for example, embraces this positive evaluation: “the Internet empowers audiences because they can use this technology to seek out the information that they decide is most relevant to them, filtering out unwanted or unneeded messages” (pgs. 63-64). A web user, then, can acquire information from a variety of sources, avoid media gatekeepers, and choose outlets that most meet their communicative needs. Poster (2001) suggests that users’ access to a variety of Internet texts results in collaboratively produced, new cultural meanings. As Shapiro (1999) points out in his book, however, it may be an overstatement to characterize our cultural condition as revolution. PR discourses reflect and shape the emergence of a discursive norm that promises audiences greater empowerment through more information. That is, such discourses suggest people have more opportunities to get the inside edge, to discover the truth, and to control their lives from the wealth of available information. Yet, we must be careful of claims that more information is always better information.
A number of cultural theorists describe the movement toward information driven societies in negative terms. Hart & Negri (2001) and Delueze (1995), for example, characterize our cultural moment in terms of “Empire,” and “Control Societies,” respectively. At base, these authors argue that an information-driven culture moves from a type of capitalism based on production to one based on control generated by information exchange. Societies of information exchange have no boundaries or territories, and societal control is exercised through continuous assessment by information. Access to information means pitting individual against individual in ongoing competition. The type of control that extends from the interaction of institutional information, then, is much harder to locate on a single form of power. Today, societies exert power through continuous control and communication, where citizens are continually monitored through a variety of information technologies.

As this is a society that is not geared toward production and instead is oriented toward information exchange, the authors argue that the corporate focus on marketing increases. Indeed, since this capitalism is directed toward sales and markets, sales become a business’ “soul.” Delueze (1995) takes a particularly strong view of the push toward marketing: “Marketing is now the instrument of social control and produces the arrogant breed who are our masters” (p. 181). Instead of being empowering, then, computers are viewed as a tool employed by marketing: “the digital language of control is made up of codes indicating whether access to some information should be allowed or denied” (Delueze, 1995, p. 180). Marketing becomes a particularly strong form of control in an exchange society. We are becoming “dividuals” rather than individuals who surf instead of sport. Through marketing, corporations begin to “directly structure and articulate territories and populations,” and “produce needs, social relations, bodies, and minds – which is to say, they produce producers,” (Delueze, 1995, p. 32). Similarly, scholars
question the benefit of the constant consumer information choice the web provides. Sunstein (2001), for example, critiques the concept of filtering, or selecting only the information one wants to see. Since viewers only see what they choose to, they risk not encountering other viewpoints and perspectives, possibly culminating in a decrease in civic community. All of these authors’ claims, then, challenge the notion that we are empowered through the availability of information in today’s society. To them, instead of offering empowerment, computers control and motivate consumers in the service of marketing. Yet this is just one view of the potential for empowerment. In terms of health discourse, other perspectives offer insight into the relationship between information, marketing, and empowerment.

Before the introduction of the Internet, the concept of empowerment concerned the ability for a person to gain control over his or her surroundings. The exact meaning of the word, however, varied depending on the context in which it was used. In the social work literature, for example, empowerment was defined “as a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situation” (Gutierrez, 1990). Another definition of empowerment described it as “an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989, p. 2). Underlying these ideas of empowerment was the sense that power is being transferred to a given audience. Audiences appeared to be given the tools to exercise more control over their lives. As Paconowsky (1988) noted, “to em-power is to suggest that power can be given, provided, controlled, held, conferred, taken-away (p. 57).
In organizations, management scholars noted that this sharing of power typically worked in two ways. One involved delegating or sharing power with subordinates in an effort to increase employee participation in organizational decisions and issues (Ford & Fottler, 1995). The concept may also mean, “to enable,” whereby individuals believed they “can adequately cope with events, situations, and/or the people they confront” (Conger & Kanugo, 1988, p. 473). Here, empowerment concerned meeting people’s needs for self-determination and personal self-efficacy. In management situations, supervisors attempted to make employees feel more powerful by boosting their belief in themselves that they could handle the challenges the workplace provided. Rather than delegating authority, then, this sense of enabling “implies motivating through enhancing personal efficacy” (Conger & Kanugo, 1988, p. 473). On its face, then, this understanding of the discourse of empowerment was designed to confer more autonomy and authority to audiences, a seemingly positive trend, whether it was employed in medicine, business, government, or the like.

As this discourse begins to filter throughout culture, the movement toward embracing empowerment doctrines moves beyond the realm of business operations. Just as some organizations seek to increase employee participation and self-efficacy through empowerment, consumers today in turn seek more social responsibility, sincerity and commitment from their companies, including pharmaceutical ones. In *Citizen Brand*, Gobé (2002) claims companies are responding to this pressure, resulting in a shift to “people driven marketing” that tries to increase people’s “emotional identity” with a brand. Instead of buying a product, he believes that consumers “want to establish a multifaceted, holistic relationship with that brand, and this means that they expect the brand to play a positive, pro-active role in their lives, which goes far beyond a mere business transaction and into the realm of the emotional” (p. xxi).
Gobé maintains that the emotional connection between company and consumer is built through creating a sense of empowerment: “empowerment is the feeling that customers develop ‘about themselves’ as a result of interacting with a company through its people, products, processes and services. Empowerment is what differentiates a ‘repeat’ customer from a loyal customer.” (Gobe, 2002, p. 217). For Gobé (2002) then, a successful company is one that builds on the discourse of empowerment to create “an emotional hook that draws us to their promise” (xvi). He claims that shift in marketing represents a general movement toward buyer’s empowerment, where, “one of the most profound results of this evolution toward popular empowerment is that as people have become more and more empowered, commerce, in order to succeed, has had to begin to strive to be more relevant to people’s needs and desires.” (2002, p. xxxiii). Indeed, many business CEO’s directly cite the Internet as empowering the voice of the consumer. They claim that if companies are not receptive and responsive to consumers in this medium, they will go out of business (p. 166).

In other words, the prevalence of empowerment language influences how marketers approach consumers. To remain relevant in people’s lives, marketers adopt the language of empowerment in order to illustrate how their products or services allow consumers to participate actively in their relationships with corporations. Marketers capitalize on the language choices generated by this discourse to persuade consumers that they can make effective and important decisions when choosing products or services. This adoption of a particular language into a different context is a practice that has a long rhetorical history. In shifting a discourse into a new arena, rhetors can capitalize on familiar or positive associations for the purposes of persuasion. To understand how this process is at work in pharmaceutical industry marketing, it is useful to explore a theoretical perspective that details the benefits of facilitating a discursive shift.
On a smoking cessation commercial, a narrator intones, “You can do it. We can help.” Another commercial for an allergy symptom reliever begins with a variation of a Mommas and Papas song, “You’ve got to go where you want to go, do what you want to do.” Yet another showcases a grateful mother and her three-year old, clearly relived that they have the capability to test the daughter’s diabetes without inducing great pain. In each of these examples, the growing power of the consumer to control his or her health is celebrated. The use of this approach in marketing is not surprising given the cultural landscape I have described, where a number of societal institutions and industries employ doctrines of empowerment in their operating rationales.

Co-opting or adapting a familiar language for new purposes is a rhetorical tradition. JFK adapted the language of progress to direct the American people during the Cold War. Companies drew on the themes of American might in World War II in their advertising. This practice is popular and has a number of uses. Kenneth Burke (1941) discusses the unifying power of adapting rhetorical traditions to new subjects in the ways seen above. In illustrating how Hitler drew on a variation of religious rhetoric to unify the Germans against the Jews prior to World War Two, Burke highlights the symbolic power of these adaptive practices. Burke calls Hitler’s twisting of religious thought to draw Germans against the Jews “one terrifically effective weapon of propaganda” (Burke, 1941, p. 208). By making Jews a type of devil figure that could be scapegoated to provide curative spiritual rebirth for the weakened Germans, Hitler provided a worldview that relied “upon a bastardization of fundamentally religious patterns of thought” (Burke, 1941, p. 218). That is, Hitler employed the symbolic power of religious rhetoric to new ends. The ideas of sin, salvation, and re-birth were all put to use to justify the actions of the Nazi regime.
In a similar fashion, marketers employing the rhetoric of empowerment draw on symbolically popular ideas and use them for new ends. Clearly, in terms of the pharmaceutical industry, the use of empowerment language is not as ominous as Hitler’s adaptation of religious rhetoric. The rhetorical utility of this practice, however, provides corporations with the opportunity to appeal to consumers in familiar and accepted terms. In drawing on a language of empowerment that encourages active participation in decisions and increases the belief in personal self-efficacy, pharmaceutical marketers take these ideas out of the workplace and into the marketplace. Consumers are encouraged to play more involved roles in healthcare decisions and are motivated to get the information necessary to do so. The consumer adoption of empowerment language, however, potentially entails a shift in the role of marketing in people’s lives.

Some management scholars, for example, point out that the celebration of empowerment, with its apparent transfer of autonomy to audiences, reorganizes the workforce to benefit management. Hales (1999) maintains that the ambiguities in the concept of empowerment can allow senior & junior managers, as well as general employees, to approach the term differently. For instance, if workers are empowered to be more “accountable” for their work, the need for junior managers to oversee their work decreases, thereby reducing organizational cost. In this way, the authors note that the idea of empowerment can act as an implicit “frontier of control” (Hales, 1999). Workers are controlled by their need to “empower” themselves, while junior managers find that the value of their traditional roles decreases. To justify their existence to senior management, their jobs now center on ensuring that the workforce embraces the motivation to empower themselves. Junior managers become coaches, facilitators, advisers, and mentors, yet provide control in the workplace under the guise of guidance.
I suggest that it is important to take a closer look at whether the rhetoric of empowerment used in marketing practices encourages a similar outcome. Through EDTC, if a marketer becomes less of a salesperson and more of a counselor and/or guide, a consumer’s relationship with marketing changes. And, consequently, if our “counselor” helps us to “speak out” and/or “take charge” of our illness, then the need for the hard sell diminishes. The opportunity for self-persuasion and/or identification increases, as it does in empowered workplaces. It is illustrative of this process, then, to examine how EDTC Websites promulgate this rhetoric of consumer empowerment. Such an exercise will contribute to the project of performing Web studies in specific contexts, which helps avoid either extreme of either only damning or praising Web communication’s potential for empowerment. As Jordan (2002) notes, “the time has come to look at the contexts of Internet communication and seek to understand how this new technological phenomenon is being shaped by, and in turn shaping, our culture” (p. 128). The volume of healthcare information generated by the Web positions it as one particularly significant context to explore these constitutive patterns. Indeed, as Jordan (2002) points out, to deem web communication as only positive or negative obscures its discursive role in culture today.

**Empowerment & EDTC**

EDTC campaigns capitalize on the language of empowerment to position the Web as an educational resource. With the relaxation of the FDA marketing guidelines, pharmaceutical companies can choose from a variety of “content” producers to create Web sites that offer the consumer more information about different illnesses and treatments. Available through search engines such as Yahoo or Google, or linked to the Web sites of many large newspapers such as *The Philadelphia Inquirer, Miami Herald,* and the *Los Angeles Times,* consumers can interact
with sites that appear educational. For example, if a web user is interested in arthritis or cancer treatment and types the phrases into a search engine or follows links from a web newspaper health section, they can visit sites like “arthritisanswers.org” or “understandingcancer.com.” Once on the site, they can watch or read a variety of programs featuring journalists interviewing doctors about a particular health issue. While watching the broadcasts, however, viewers are not told that pharmaceutical companies sponsor them. Simultaneously, users also have the ability to sign up for health newsletters through email, participate in chat rooms, and access other editorial features, all of which are designed to encourage consumers to feel capable of making informed health decisions. Web content and pharmaceutical companies maintain that these sites offer valuable, educational information to consumers.

This marketing practice is an example of the shift from targeting doctors to creating relationships with consumers by providing them with access to resources. As Holliday (2001) explains, the idea behind the creation of such sites is to use the Web as a “customer relationship management tool to personalize information for and develop an ongoing dialogue with consumers. The Web also allows anonymity, permitting customers to feel more comfortable revealing personal information” (p. 12). Since the consumer is targeted directly, the goal is to empower him or her to talk to their doctor and request the specific product. These techniques help change the way health information is approached and understood, with consumers playing a larger role in determining healthcare decisions (Dutta-Bergman, 2003). Marketers see great promise in this channel, predicting that 88.5 million adults will use the Web to find health information and communicate with health providers by 2005 (Holliday, 2001).

These sites, however, have a somewhat dubious history. The popularity of using the Web as an outlet for these corporate programs can be traced back to the public relations practice of
sending video news releases (VNR)s to television stations. PR practitioners would employ journalists to discuss a product or company in a “newsbreak” style program, which some television stations would air as part of their content. This practice has become widespread as a result of its effectiveness. Indeed, the Bush administration has used a version of the practice for promotional purposes. Pear (2004) notes that the Bush administration paid people to pose as reporters praising the benefits of the new Medicare law and its prescription drug benefit. According to Pear, the segments were created by Home Front Communications production company for the Health and Human Services Department. Although some users of the technology only produce segments for use in a larger broadcast, the practice has expanded to companies producing entire shows to air on television. Pharmaceutical companies, for example, pay producers like WJMK approximately $15,000 to create a “news style” program that companies are allowed to edit and approve before they are distributed for broadcast. As of late, companies who produce program content for either medium have come under fire, because critics argue that since sponsoring institutions pays for these webcasts or TV programs, the line between journalism, PR, and advertising becomes blurry. WJMK, for example, was criticized for paying Morley Safer, Aaron Brown, and Walter Cronkite to anchor a variety of pharmaceutical broadcasts (Petersen, 2003). Media critics charge that such programs mislead viewers by making promotional material look like news; indeed, they argue that firms are attempting to buy credibility through such activities. The reach of these programs also elicits concern. An average of 30 million households see the videos as they are offered to television stations free of charge; critics charge the practice amounts to free advertising. Companies who use the services, however, maintain that the videos are educational and serve a vital public service by informing audiences of illness treatment options.
Websites have incorporated a version of this practice, offering programs as part of an overall information presentation. The sites therefore blend elements of PR, because they employ third parties and cannot dictate content, with advertising, because the companies pay for the productions, even if in an indirect way. To evaluate how this practice contributes to a rhetoric of pharmaceutical empowerment, I examine a number of sites produced by Healthology.

Healthology is one of the leading health content companies on the Web, supplying physician-generated health and wellness information to approximately 3,000 Web sites. Healthology claims that its content offers consumers quality health programs while offering a unique marketing solution. The company’s homepage describes the service of offering doctor commentary in this way: “only through the direct involvement of experienced health professionals can consumers feel that they are receiving current, trustworthy health information” (healthology.com/about). Healthology is the only content supplier who produces 100% of its content in consultation with more than 20,000 licensed, practicing physicians. The company takes pains to notify potential “sponsors” (i.e. pharmaceutical companies), that acceptance of “educational grants” (i.e. sponsorships) in no way indicates Healthology’s endorsement of a company’s products or services. It also informs “grant providers” that they “shall not dictate the form or substance of any content appearing on a supported program for Healthology or any of its third-party Web sites” (heatlhology.com). The upshot of these policies is that Healthology is able to position itself as an educational health information resource rather than as an advertising channel, arguing that its peer review process creates content that is used on “more hospital sites, patient advocacy sites, non-profits, foundation, government and educational sites than any other source” (healthology.com).
As such, I investigate how these sites capitalize on the language of education to empower the consumer. Through this examination, I identify several textual and visual markers of this pharmaceutical rhetoric of empowerment. Building on Burke, I show how the discourse of empowerment is adapted by pharmaceutical companies. As I show, this trend in pharmaceutical marketing has implications for a variety of other corporate discourses. Ultimately, I believe this development contributes to the prevalence of a discursive norm of corporate empowerment, one where audiences promulgate the conflation between promotion and education.

**Textual Empowerment**

I have demonstrated how the concept of empowerment in the management literature benefits from its ambiguity. Now, I argue that a similar type of concept flexibility aids in the ability for pharmaceutical companies to persuade users. I suggest that the idea of empowerment performs as a type of condensation symbol, with all types of smaller ideas associated with the larger concept (Graber 1976). The ability for the concept to subsume a number of characteristics allows a wide variety of interpretation with open ideological space (Hales, 1999). That is, the rhetoric of pharmaceutical empowerment downplays the obvious sales initiative. Since it appears to be focused on education, consumers are more likely to trust the content. This trust in turn encourages them to have a different understanding of “health” that makes the pharmaceutical company part of the healthcare equation in more dominant ways.

Through an examination of Healthology webcasts addressing a variety of types of cancer, irritable bowel syndrome, and overactive bladder, I identify how content capitalizes on the language of empowerment. By capitalizing on consumers’ desire for health education, pharmaceutical companies create a rhetoric of empowerment that instrumentally increases sales but also encourages consumers to take a market-shaped approach to their health. I demonstrate
how they draw on the rhetorical characteristics of novelty, subtle promotion, reassurance, encouragement, and education to do so. Although I will point out how each characteristic performs specifically, it is important to recognize that this rhetoric’s strength comes from the way in which the concepts interact. In rhetorical terms, the discourse of empowerment operates as a hierarchy of values, where support of a variety of smaller values are the means in creating support for the dominant value or end, here “empowerment” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2000, p. 81). These authors concur that values are generally interconnected, whereby if support is granted for one of the more subordinate values, approval for the dominant one will be admitted more easily. In terms of the empowerment value hierarchy, then, as one marker refers to or creates an association with another, the overall feeling of empowerment increases. In order to begin persuading consumers to take charge, however, marketers must convince them that they are privy to the most current health information.

**Novelty.**

One notable characteristic of pharmaceutical empowerment rhetoric is the emphasis on providing patients/consumers with the most updated information regarding treatment options as possible. Treatment and research are always discussed in terms of their status at the forefront of current options for dealing with a particular disease. Through this approach, consumers are encouraged to feel as if they have access to the same sort of information as health experts. On the TargetTumors.com site, for example, a specific type of drug treatment is discussed as being the newest option for treating cancer: “Targeted cancer therapies, which attack cancer cells in *unique* and precise ways, are an important part of oncology’s cutting edge.” Similarly, the IBS-help.com (irritable bowel syndrome) site talks of how “researchers have *recently* made major advances” and the site “will keep you *up-to-date*” on the latest developments in treatment. The
overactive bladder site, oabrelief.com, contains similar language, promising visitors that it will provide them with “sound advice” for dealing with their condition. All of these language choices bring the audience closer to the inner “medical circle” and create a sense of being informed and current, just as they expect their doctors to be.

Reassurance.

With a product’s exciting treatment potential established, webcasts then reassure consumers that they should feel confident in confronting an illness or condition. Reassuring consumers plays a large role in empowerment rhetoric and is achieved in a variety of ways. In the management empowerment literature, scholars note that encouraging words, along with providing a supportive and trusting group atmosphere, is empowering to the individual (Pacanowsky, 1988). These techniques, along with reassuring consumers that they are not alone in their suffering, are evident in pharmaceutical rhetoric. In many transcripts, we find doctors making statements like this one found on the IBS site:

They’re scared to see a doctor. They’re worried they’re going to get bad news; many of these patients are very concerned their symptoms represent cancer. They’re embarrassed to talk about their symptoms. They’re worried that there won’t be any treatment for their symptoms. And so, many of these patients kind of remain hidden and remain undiagnosed.

By showing users that their fears of confronting the illness are widespread, these types of statements attempt to reassure users that they should address the problem.

In addition to the variety of ways consumers are made to feel as part of a group, the scientific language in which the transcripts are written convey a feeling of authority that imparts reassurance. That is, the ability to read exchanges between doctors reassures readers that they are
receiving credible information. What is interesting about these transcripts is the level of familiarity they assume when discussing the diseases. Most transcripts contain a good deal of complexity, which seems to suggest that the content producers are targeting those consumers who already have a working knowledge of the disease. The reader would have to have some knowledge of the differing types of cancer for the following exchange to make sense:

SALLIE GLANER: Doctor, how are neuroendocrine tumors different from the more common types of cancer, say, breast cancer?

LOWELL ANTHONY, MD: Well, neuroendocrine tumors overexpress, oversecrete hormonal products which are not common in breast cancer, lung cancer, or colon cancer. And these hormonal products may be related to serotonin or it could be peptides that are secreted. Peptides could be insulin, glucagons, a vasoactive intestinal peptide, it could be a number of different types of peptides that could cause the flushing and diarrhea and other things we don’t see in the more common types of cancer.

Without some type of working knowledge of these terms, the doctor’s differentiation would likely be unclear to some users, yet these exchanges impart reassurance because the doctors clearly demonstrate their expertise.

To prevent the potential of scientific language from becoming too complex for users, a number of markers are used to increase user identification. First, users are addressed familiarly, with the web sites addressing the sufferer directly. In classic rhetorical style, identification is created by addressing users as “you.” The overactive bladder site, oabrelief.com, for example, tells the visitor, “Whether you have come to this site seeking information for yourself or a loved one,” while ibs-help.com tells viewers “how you can prepare” for a discussion with your doctor.
Advancesinoncology.com relies on the same form of address, by telling visitors “this site offers you educational programs.” In all, this technique begins to draw in the viewer by differentiating these sites from typical medical information web sites that are repositories for complex medical articles. The visitors here are invited to participate in the construction of health knowledge instead of only reading information created by others.

Transcripts are also interspersed with personal stories to retain user interest and identification. This tactic typically works in two ways. Visitors will encounter a typical patient’s experience with the drug or they will learn how a professional dealt with the disease. Either way, this value is similar to the empowerment that results in the workplace when employees vicariously experience others performing successfully on the job. By seeing how others benefit from beginning treatment, anxiety may be reduced. On one cancer site, a doctor describes his own experience with the disease to create identification with the users. After discussing how he used to treat cancer patients before he became afflicted with the disease, he notes,

> And since then, I’ve dealt with hundreds, and hundreds of people with cancer. And I understand what they’re going through now. I didn’t at the time. It’s just not easy to describe the feeling you have, of fear and helplessness, and that you have to deal with it.

When “Bill” offers his support for the drug, his enthusiasm, but in particular, his experience with a particular treatment, is then more persuasive. He affirms, “I would take bisphosphonates until I’m not here anymore. This is my penicillin. It’s why I’m alive. That’s my belief. There’s much scientific evidence to support that. And until something better comes along, that’s what I’m going to continue doing.” In this way, by treating the disease in human terms, consumers are reassured again that their anxiety over an illness is expected. These strategies are particularly
powerful when they draw on a fellow sufferer’s experience. In an overactive bladder transcript, for example, one woman says,

    THERESA ROCHE: If I was going to be out in the park walking, I knew I had to wear a depends. And if I was going some place to the supermarket, I knew every bathroom in every supermarket. I thought it was the normal part of aging.

(oabrelief.com)

These types of statements legitimize conversation about a subject, easing people’s reluctance to deal with a condition. As Gobé (2002) notes about their use in discussing men’s health issues, for example, these types of statements “gives [sic] men who are often reluctant to address this issue permission to do so” (p. 66). With the groundwork of reassurance laid, viewers are primed to want to learn more about a particular treatment.

*Education.*

Many textual features of the Web sites promote themselves as repositories of consumer health education. Indeed, each of these sites claim to be the primary education center on the Web for a particular condition. On the IBS Help website, for example, the site bills itself as “your online destination for essential information on IBS.” On targettumors.com, the homepage states, “this site offers you education programs featuring researchers and clinicians involved in the development and use of drugs against brain cancer, brain tumors, lung cancer, prostate cancer, and more. Whether you are seeking information for yourself or a loved one, Target Tumors will provide you with the information you need.” On Advancesinoconology.com, users are invited to “expand your knowledge and improve communication with your treatment team by exploring video programs and articles featuring oncologists discussing key issues.” In all cases, the sites are positioned as resources that individuals can use to find answers to their health questions.
They are addressed specifically to those most interested in seeking help – either those afflicted with or affected by the disease. This ability to target differs EDTC sites from commercials traditionally broadcast by advertising. Since user interest is already established, the educational, rather than promotional, nature of the site is maintained. However, with this groundwork laid, the discussion of the merits of treatment options also can remain more with the educational realm.

One important way these sites impart a sense of education is by mentioning many scientific studies. What is interesting about this feature is that while studies are frequently mentioned, their qualifying sources or status in medical research is not mentioned. For example, the IBS site says in a number of its transcripts about the condition that, “Several good studies over the last few years have shown,” and “research has shed light,” without discussing the origin and credibility of this information. Similarly, statistics are often used in this way, with users encountering statements like “anywhere between 7 and 30% of individuals with IBS will report they had previous proven bacterial gastroenteritis” (ibs-help.com). Users are offered the appearance of medical authority by the volume of these statements, rather than by their credibility within the medical field.

Even the site names and URL’s are designed to promote them as an educational resource. For example, ibs-help.com, targettumors.org, and advancesinoncology.com all convey a place to learn about a condition, not one that is focused on sales. By using these naming strategies, the sites are differentiated from Healthology, their content producer, but more importantly, they are distanced from the companies who make the products discussed on the sites under the guise of education. In fact, the only place a user can sometimes find corporate sponsorship information is in small letters, sometimes located at the bottom of a web page. Even then, the company mentioned as sponsor is introduced through the following language, for example, “supported
through an unrestricted educational grant from Novartis.” With this type of language, users are still encouraged to see the sponsoring company as participating in an educational venture, not a marketing one.

*Subtle Promotion.*

With consumers provided with more education about a condition, the promotion of a particular drug or treatment is achieved in sophisticated ways on these sites. Gobé (2002) claims that as pharmaceutical companies move toward a more consumer-product mode more available to them as a result of the softening of FDA regulations, they need to be more sensitive and responsible to people’s needs, and not just sell them products that may or may not be helpful (p. 65). That is, the shift from persuading doctors to promote a product to approaching consumers directly entails a shift in marketing strategy. By relying on a type of subtle promotion that emphasizes the value of consumer education, marketers can more easily perform this customer sensitivity. If a company is trying to educate, then, it is not just trying to sell a pill. Indeed, as Gobe (2002) states, “The idea here is to create a relationship with the consumer through education, with the focus on consumers and their needs and experiences – as opposed to pushing the product itself” (p. 66). This strategy is realized on EDTC sites in a number of ways.

One approach to promotion supports the educational focus of the sites, helping the overall feel to be one of empowerment. Often doctors will discuss a variety of treatments and rely on a particular drug as representative of that option. So, for example, there are exchanges like the following:

BRETT SCOTT: Dr. Connors, there are a number of different types of targeted therapies for cancer? What are they? And how do they work?
JOSPEH CONNORS, MD: I think of them in two broad types…(goes on to explain in detail what the types are)

BRETT SCOTT: Dr. Druker, Gleevec has received a lot of press lately. What class does it fall into and how does it work?

In these types of exchanges the doctor featured in the webcast will go on to explain why the featured drug works in treating the discussed disease. By introducing a specific product within the context of a more generalized exchange about treatments, the doctors remain authoritative, rather than overtly promotional. This technique has advanced beyond the old ad technique, for example, of a commercial declaring, “four out of five doctors choose product X.”

Another type of subtle promotion compares the representative drug to other drugs in its class, but also in a scientific manner that supports the site’s educational focus. For example, doctors will discuss an entire class of treatments as being effective in treating a disease, yet highlight one by discussing its performance in patient studies and trials.

BRETT SCOTT: Although there are differences between the aromatase inhibitors, direct head to head studies are few and have only recently been reported. Doctors discuss the results.

CARSTEN ROSE, M.D.: When we are talking about the results from a head-to-head comparison between Femara and Arimidex, we performed this trail in women who had already seen tamoxifen and progressed upon that therapy. The most interesting finding from this study was that the saw a difference in what we call the response rate…Femara was actually capable of giving us 50% more responses than Arimidex in this trial.
Although two drugs are compared directly, the doctor’s use of phrases such as “progressing upon a therapy” and “response rate,” continues to promote the educational tone.

What is particularly interesting about these types of exchanges is that the doctors in these transcripts will decrease their support of a drug over another drug if both are made by pharmaceutical companies who rely on Healthology to produce their content. When researching the drugs by name in a search engine, for example, we find that Femara is made by Novartis while Arimidex is made by Astra-Zeneca, both Healthology clients. As a result, in these cases, users will find statements like the following after the relative merits of both are discussed:

HYMAN MUSS, MD: I think, by and large, all these compounds are extremely well tolerated… I would say that there are probably aren’t any convincing studies to me of patient preferences that I would use to select one over the other.

In general, then, these promotional tactics keep the discussion of a particular drug’s merits well within the rhetorical authority of a medical discussion. This tactic keep the webcasts from appearing overly self-interested and reinforces the theme that a consumer is learning about a variety of treatment options.

**Encouragement.**

Encouragement markers come in a variety of forms on the Web sites and ultimately encourage patients to visit a doctor about their respective treatment options. One way the sites try to encourage people is through playing on the desire to become “normal” again. For example, the IBS site states on the homepage, “Let IBS Help improve your ability to manage and cope with this condition – and get your life back.” Meanwhile, one of the overactive bladder site’s transcripts encourages,
ANNOUNCER: So if you're one of the many people who are suffering needlessly from overactive bladder, talk to your doctor today because regaining control means winning back your freedom.

In the management literature, scholars recommend that managers encourage employees to take control by providing reward and recognition for their efforts (Pacanowsky, 1988). When this rhetoric is adapted by the pharmaceutical industry, the need for this type of tangible outlay is not as great. If the sites successfully demonstrate how a visitor can regain health through education, encouragement helps the visitor act on this knowledge. In most webcasts, the announcer and the featured doctor work together to encourage users to visit a doctor and get the reward of better health. On the IBS site, for example, users see the following exchange:

ANNOUNCER: While the causes of IBS remain unknown, doctors can provide a great deal of help. In fact, one of their key messages to people suffering from gastrointestinal disorders is: don’t try to go it alone.

BRIAN LACY, M.D.: As a physician, one of the frustrating things I find about IBS is that often times patients with chronic symptoms don’t see a doctor. And I think that we need to educate patients better about that to get them to come in so we can reassure them. And to let them know there are now medications available that can improve their symptoms and improve their quality of life.

This tactic allows the doctor’s expertise to again motivate the user. This technique is not the same as the ad practice of showing a product and then saying “ask your doctor.” These exchanges focus more on the doctor serving as a counselor. This approach positions the doctor as part of the health care team. These tactics serve as the pharmaceutical equivalent to the workplace practice of forming “task forces” to solve a problem. By creating a type of team
attitude between doctors, patients, and products, pharmaceutical empowerment rhetoric, like that used in the workplace, can “encourage a ‘we’ attitude among functional units rather than a ‘we/they’ attitude between the units” (Pacanowsky, 1988, p. 375). Pharmaceutical empowerment rhetoric thus brings patient, doctor, and pharmaceutical provider closer together by reducing the distance between them.

The tactic of encouraging people to visit a doctor in order to achieve normalcy is persuasive in a subtler way as well. The transcripts are written in a way that suggests not acting to fix a health condition keeps one from becoming “normal” like everyone else. In other words, relying on “I thought I had to put up with this” examples tells the user that putting up with the condition is abnormal. To be in charge of your health means not suffering anymore. To suffer from creaking joints, sexual dysfunction, or frequent bathroom trips means that one is not empowered by knowledge like everyone else. This sly form of pressure again highlights an ability of EDTC campaigns. These transcripts show how a person is lacking (here’s how to fix that little sexual malfunction) but rely on the educational, more relational PR technique to tell the consumer that they can have access to numerous sources in order to fix the problem. That is, while these sites make treatment almost an obligation of the consumer if he or she wants to be empowered, they make meeting that demand easier and/or more comfortable.

Overall then, these carefully woven texts works together to empower the consumer. Each thread clearly points to the next, with the attempt to reinforce the consumer’s decision to act on their health in a certain way. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2000) note that it is important that a hierarchy of values is ordered correctly so that the audience member is not led to incompatibilities or the need to make disparate choices. In pharmaceutical empowerment rhetoric, if a reader accepts each of the promulgated values, there is really only one choice to be
made: see a doctor for this particular treatment and take charge of your health. The rhetoric of
empowerment is not just textual, however; indeed, there are a variety of visual techniques that
enhance its performance.

Visual Empowerment

As web-based campaigns, the visual structure of the content very much enhances its
textual persuasiveness. That is, the web’s hypertext and visual images also encourage the
characteristics discussed above. Viewers are made to feel up to date, reassured, educated,
encouraged, and persuaded by these web sites’ visual techniques. In discussing marketing’s
general move to creating buyer’s empowerment, Gobé (2002) suggests that there is a push from
communication to dialogue with consumers the web facilitates. To him, the web offers a perfect
forum for dialogue as a result of several characteristics:

- it presents layered access to information, it allows people to choose and
  empowers them to find whatever they wish in whatever amount of depth and
  amount they wish. It uses people’s smarts and can satisfy their intellectual
  curiosity, and brings visual and sound oriented sensory experiences to them. The
  key is in making the communication an interactive game where the people
  participate willingly. (p. 199)

I first describe how the web’s visual system of navigation increases users’ willingness to play
with the discourse of empowerment by enhancing the characteristics of education and novelty. I
then discuss a number of visual techniques that support the components of reassurance,
encouragement, and subtle promotion. Both styles are designed to keep the user on the sites and
interacting with pharmaceutical rhetoric.
Visually Performing Novelty & Education.

It is not surprising that the Web is such a popular medium for providing health information. The web’s notoriety as a “place” to track down information, search for answers for a variety of questions, and interact with different communities makes it a natural fit for distributing health information. There is more than its content, however, that makes the web particularly suited for informing consumers about health issues, a typically personal and historically specialized, guarded information community. One visual characteristic of web content, hypertext, aids in creating the feeling among users that they are educating themselves with the most current information. As Clark (2004) notes, the ability to click from one piece of information to another in a non-linear fashion has been associated with increasing democracy and aiding the individualization of information. Richard Lanham (1993) claims that the digital media forms encourage “a radical democratization of ‘textbooks’ that allow every student to walk an individual path” (in Clark, 2004, pg. 10). In terms of pharmaceutical discourse, such a format allows the user to feel as though they are talking with a doctor rather than being talked to, because they can become informed about a given topic and thus begin their in-office treatment conversations on a different plane. Instead of leaving a doctor’s office to learn more about their condition, they may enter with some of this knowledge already established.

The very ability for a user to “hypertext” gives them more freedom over a text than they would have in other mediums, facilitating the development of novelty and educational themes. In 1945, Vannevar Bush envisioned the idea of hypertext as “associative indexing, the basic idea of which is a provision whereby any item may be caused at will to select immediately and automatically another” (p. 107). This ability to move seemingly at will among topics of interest seems liberating. Hypertext, and more generally, digital media, are said to perform by “placing
knowledge under man’s [sic] command and control” (Clark, 2004, p. 2). This indeed is how web health discourse appears. When users have a health library right at their fingertips in the privacy of their own home, knowledge does seem to be removed from the quiet halls of the doctor’s office and put into the possession of the web user. This access to current knowledge is particularly apparent on the Healthology sites concerning cancer. In addition to running “ticker tape” style cancer statistics at the bottom of a visitor’s screen, viewers can register for cancer update email newsletters, and choose to watch a variety of webcasts about different types of cancer. They can also click on links for the latest news and learn about the “faculty” who appear in the webcasts. By labeling participating doctors as faculty, their educational value is further increased. In other words, EDTC generates the perception that the sites are user-friendly storehouses of health information. This storehouse quality allows the sites to maintain that they are putting users in better control of their health and treatments.

Although these sites do offer the viewer greater, or at least easier, access to educational health information, the associative power of hypertext cannot be viewed as a panacea. It is important to recognize, particularly on EDTC Web sites, that a user only has control over what corporations offer to them. These sites are user-centered, more so than weighty medical tomes found in the dusty reaches of the library, yet they are not completely malleable. As such, users should not overstate the control they have over online texts. As Clark (2004) cautions, “Despite its ideological seductiveness…the hypertext readers rarely have the same control over a text as an author does. It is not uncommon for a hypertext author to… limit the ways in which a text may be read; that is to say, a hypertext author can be every bit as dominating or controlling as the author of conventional print text” (p. 3). This limitation is at work on EDTC sites. When a user tries to exit out of a webcast, they cannot simply close the broadcast; instead, they are
immediately confronted with another screen that asks them if they want to read the transcript of the webcast or if they would like to learn about another topic. Pop-up screens also appear when users try to exit a site’s different sections, with messages asking them if they’d like to visit other related areas and the like. In other words, in terms of these sites’ visual structure, “links both are information and structure information” (Owen and Palmer, 2003, p. 17). Users learn about a variety of health developments, but they must do it in the way the web site has been designed. Users may feel that they decide what types of information they encounter, but EDTC surfing does not reach the same level of pastiche one can gain while surfing between different web communities. As Ono and Sloop (1995) explain, pastiche works by tearing information out of context, combining elements of popular culture, and pulling together bits of information to create a collage of meaning that can be liberatory. Yet, although users seeking health information are indeed likely to move in and out of different web communities, their encounter with EDTC may influence what they then expect from other health web sites. As Owens and Palmer (2003) point out then, “In terms of web media, links determine which content readers access and in what order” (p. 18). Users’ experience on EDTC sites give them access to specific types of health information that makes exercising true pastiche difficult.

The type of empowerment gained from these sites should not be viewed necessarily as hollow, however. From a management view of empowerment, the types of links these Web sites offer falls within the idea of “directed autonomy,” whereby employees do not make workplace decisions willy-nilly, but within certain guided parameters. In the workplace, employees are given an overall direction yet considerable leeway concerning how they go about following that direction (Barker & Cheney, 1994, p. 22). Pharmaceutical rhetoric on the web has a similar orientation. Although they may have the freedom to click anywhere they like or even leave the
site, while on it visitor decisions may be influenced by a certain pre-chosen amount and type of information. As visitors are interacting with medical information, there is more room for this type of guidance than would be on sites promoting fashion or restaurants, however. These sites, after all, are not offering false information concerning a particular drug; rather, they offer one perspective on it.

EDTC sites, then, rely upon the associative power of hypertext, but only up to a certain point. The corporate attempt to keep visitors on their sites and exposed to their perspectives is called “stickiness.” Instead of encouraging users to leave their site or leave a community of sites designed by an EDTC campaigns to gain other information about a particular health topic, these sites want associative linking to go only so far. In general, corporations try to maximize this principle of visitor conservation, where they seek to create sites that “encourage visitors to stay as long as possible with the goal of sale culminating in a visit” (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001, p. 270). Healthology’s visual and/or structural methods of increasing stickiness support the values expressed textually.

EDTC sites also mimic non-corporate web design strategies that encourage return visits in an effort to create relationships. As relationships require time, trust and other maintenance strategies, EDTC web sites must move beyond selling just a particular drug (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001, p. 270). By building on the idea of creating relationships with consumers they capitalize on a PR technique and foster brand loyalty at the same time. Repeat visits, for example, exposes the user to a pharmaceutical company’s other products, and increases the possibility of use. There are a number of ways web sites are designed that increase the chances of encouraging return visits. As Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) summarize,
Features that encourage visitors to return include: appealing to visitors with explicit statements inviting them to return; the announcement of regularly scheduled news forums; providing visitors with question and answer forums; offering visitors downloadable and regularly updated, information; offer visitors information that can be automatically delivered through regular mail or e-mail; and the posting of news stories within the last 30 days.” (p. 270)

EDTC sites draw on all of these techniques to build relationships with consumers. Users can click on symptom checklists that they can then print out and bring to a doctor. Links also provide pages with questions to ask a doctor. On every page of the sites, users are asked if they want to receive e-newsletter updates. Visitors can take quizzes about their level of knowledge about a particular illness. All of these devices encourage the user to visit frequently, as opposed to a site that just offers a limited set of health articles.

Visually Performing Reassurance, Encouragement, & Subtle Promotion.

Visually, the values of reassurance, encouragement, and subtle promotion are complemented through the power of association. For example, the reassurance value is expressed on the site’s homepages as well as in their general structure. Each site uses targeted images that appeal to a specific type of health consumer to reassure them that they have reached a supportive community. On the Overactive Bladder Relief site, the images are designed to appeal to the primary category of sufferers from this condition, middle-aged women. Users find images of older attractive women, happy looking older couples, and pictures of approachable women doctors. All of these images reassure older women that they have found a supportive community in which to learn about their condition.
To enhance the subtle promotion value, each webcast is linked to other related webcasts. When a program ends, a user is automatically asked what they would like to view next. As mentioned, it is difficult to exit out of a webcast. If a visitor clicks the exit button in the corner of a screen, they are automatically asked if they would like to read the transcript they were just watching or whether they would be interested in viewing other related programs. As the titles of the related programs are designed to draw in the visitor, chances increase that they may decide to watch another program and subsequently learn about a particular drug treatment.

The webcasts themselves also encourage stickiness in a number of ways. Each program is approximately five minutes in length, enough to provide a good amount of information on a topic but not so long that they risk losing visitor attention. Their formats also draw in users because they are created to mimic a news broadcast. Like a nightly news “package,” the webcasts open with a personal story or examples, move to interviewing experts about the topic, and close with another personal story or image. By viewing a number of webcasts, it is clear that they rely on similar visual strategies to support the empowerment values of reassurance, encouragement, and subtle promotion.

In a webcast on the subject of overactive bladder, textual empowerment values are visually enhanced. First, the images selected in the broadcast are appropriate for the subject a viewer wishes to explore and serve several reassurance purposes. As overactive bladder most frequently affects middle-aged women, we find images of numerous women who fit this category in the webcast. We see them going about their daily lives, suffering when they deal with the condition alone, and benefiting from their interactions with doctors. This visual strategy supports the reassurance theme that the visitor is not alone in his or her suffering that is started on the site’s homepage. Similarly, the appearance of two different doctors in the overactive bladder
webcast serves encouraging functions. Both are dressed professionally and are seated in libraries filled with books. The doctors do not look intimidating; besides their non “doctor” clothes, they address the camera with open, friendly gazes. When talking of the need to address the problem, for example, their eyes express concern that someone would live with the condition untreated. The webcasts rely on very simplistic animated images to describe how a treatment works that is encouraging also. So, for example, we see how a drug “blocks” the bladder’s overactivity through an image of a type of wall and spheres bouncing off of it. To encourage patients to visit their doctor and request the specific drug, the webcast closes with images of women enjoying life again: pushing children down slides, strolling through the park, or going about their daily activities in general. The subtle promotion value also is enhanced in this webcast. When discussing treatment, the sponsor’s product will lead a power-point style bulleted list of possibilities that is shown several times. Overall, by interacting with these visual techniques, consumers are encouraged to participate in the site’s rhetorical worldview. As Gobé (2002) explains, “on the internet, the experience is everything. Creating a climate that speaks of your brand identity without having to state it directly will contribute mightily to the experience the visitor to your Web site will have” (p. 174). These webcasts give pharmaceutical marketers this ability. The “brand” identity that is created is one of expertise, authority, support, and encouragement.

Conclusion

In certain types of organizations, workplaces are constructed to be empowering experiences. They are designed to strengthen people’s belief in their power. I have illustrated how the pharmaceutical industry capitalizes on this understanding and shifts the idea of empowerment from the workplace to the market. As discussed, control societies operate through
the sharing of information to strengthen capitalism. The market has adopted a language used previously in discussing ways to grant more power either to disadvantaged minority groups and/or powerless employees and turned it into a sales strategy that is particularly persuasive in the health context. An analysis of the textual and visual strategies used to encourage pharmaceutical empowerment shows that the adaptation of this general language offers marketers several rhetorical advantages. EDTC, in particular, provides pharmaceutical industries with opportunities to provide consumers with empowering experiences that simultaneously support corporate objectives. To highlight the discursive power of this rhetoric, I reflect on its ability to shape patient identity and language patterns simultaneously.

**Empowering Identity**

In light of the characteristics of EDTC empowerment, it seems important to examine the subjects that are produced, or constituted, by this discourse. At a general level, the consumer is guided and counseled into being a person who takes control of illness, assumes responsibility for treatment, and plays the lead position on the health care team. Pharmaceutical marketers claim that this type of consumer is in an advantageous position because, “More power has been conferred on the patient than at any point in history to help arrive at patient acceptable yet physician appropriate treatments” (Harrison, 2001, p. 301). We need to understand what this power is, however, and how it shapes consumer decisions. EDTC campaigns enhance the belief that the power that previously resided in the doctor’s realm of authority has been extended to the patient, a belief that is particularly valued by two consumer groups: younger consumers and baby boomers. These groups seek greater access to healthcare information, with younger consumers wanting to read about medications and treatments, while boomers are seeking customized healthcare attention (pgs. 90 & 301). Possibly as a result of managed care, these
groups in particular may substitute web experiences for interactions with doctors. In other words, instead of customized care and greater understandings of a variety of treatments, these sites may function as stand ins, or placebos, for these patient goals.

The potential for health information sites to fulfill this placebo function in enhanced in light of a societal trend. According to Devereux (2001), the definition of health has changed from the “absence of symptoms” to a holistic understanding that emphasizes both mental and physical health (p. 87). Devereux claims that DTC advertising fills the gaps that result in healthcare as a result of these developments. DTC can manage the gap between patient expectations and definitions of health and “the role physicians can possibly play given the constraints on their time” (Devereux, 2001, p. 87). EDTC fulfills this role more easily than traditional DTC. As discussed, the educational component on these Web sites is increased, encouraging consumers to see them as informational, not promotional, sources. Instead of relying on a doctor’s advice, then, consumers may substitute this material to “self-medicate.”

On the other hand, empowerment rhetoric may constitute parts of patient identity in a positive way. There is also an analogy between change in the workplace and the challenges of a disease that empowerment rhetoric manages. Scholars note that periods of increased organizational change result in feelings of increased powerlessness, as “changes may seriously challenge employees’ sense of control and competence as they deal with the uncertainty of change and accept new responsibilities, skills, and guidelines for action and behavior” (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 477). Illnesses, similarly, increase feelings of uncertainty and bring new responsibilities and the need for new skills and guidelines. To empower a cancer patient, then, means resolving these feelings of powerlessness and helping him or her cope with and control these feelings. In other words, when empowered, employees and/or patients gain a “can do”
attitude where they feel they can be effective in executing a desired behavior (Conger & Kanugo, 1988, 477). Both gain an attitude that they can control their decisions more effectively. As Pacanowsky (1988) notes, “Individuals come to realize that they can never fully resolve the ambiguities and inconsistencies but they can act and learn from their actions” (p. 376). In terms of disease or illness, the same logic holds true. Perhaps the consumer cannot fully manage their disease, but they can take more ownership of it.

Yet, we must be careful to attribute too much praise on this development. Full ownership of an issue or problem requires adequate resources to make informed choices and decisions. In the empowering organization, “the initiation of action would happen ‘in here,’ as a consequence of human choice because the individual would have the power to make choices” (Pacanowsky, 1988, p. 378). So far, so good. But we must be careful when extending this thinking to the pharmaceutical industry, because “for that action to be responsible, the individual would need to have information about what the consequences of that action was to the individual and to coworkers and to the organization” (Pacanowsky, 1988, p. 378). Therein lies the rub. Pharmaceutical corporate rhetoric succeeds in offering consumers more choices. What we must consider, however, is whether the choices that are offered help consumers understand the broader consequences involved in adopting a particular treatment.

**Empowering Rhetoric**

It is this notion of broader consequences that shifts us into reflecting how empowerment rhetoric shapes and reflects discursive patterns. Several scholars offer insight into how empowerment rhetoric has the potential to shape consumers, individually and collectively, in ways that do not encourage consideration of this issue. Drawing on Foucault, Barker and Cheney (1994) describe how “rules of right” structure the modern organization and contribute to the
problem of employees not understanding consequences of their decisions. Understood as “the way we do things around here,” rules of right justify everything ranging from the taken for granted power of the boss to the practice of punching in and out of a shift. Barker and Cheney (1994) argue that as Western society has developed, these rules change from justifying the power of a sovereign to rule his subjects to ways that corporate capitalism controls individual and collective action. We may not have sovereigns these days, but corporations in late capitalism discipline behavior. I suggest here that pharmaceutical empowerment rhetoric begins to create types of healthcare “rules of right.” That is, empowerment discourse subtly tells the consumer/patient the “way it is” when dealing with modern healthcare issues. As the authors state, “rules of right both shape what we know about our relations with one another and serve to maintain specific positions of power” (Barker & Cheney, 1994, p. 25).

In this way, consumers are disciplined not by overt coercion to buy a particular product; rather, they persuade themselves of the need for it. In the organizational context, Barker and Cheney (1994) have described this as unobtrusive control, where “control no longer appears to come from ‘outside’ the employee’s sphere of activity’” (p. 27). In the organization, if a manager believes “what is good for the company is good for me,” his or her actions are controlled, at least to an extent. By extension, then, a consumer who is empowered by pharmaceutical rhetoric is more likely to act in the best interests of that company, even though they are encouraged to believe they are acting in their own best interest. As sometimes these interests can be the same, this evaluation is somewhat harsh. The overarching point here, however, is that EDTC campaigns are designed in such a way that the consumers is not encouraged to explore what these corporate interests might be.
Rather, my examination of the hierarchy of values implicit in empowerment rhetoric illustrates how acceptance and forwarding of the market logic, along with gaining health information, is encouraged. Barker and Cheney (1994) note how if employees accept efficiency as a value, then assessment using this value becomes natural. Employees discipline themselves by accepting various applications of a particular standard of efficiency. As they note, it becomes normal to assess success by counting the number of hamburgers served in given time period or even to assess intimacy by the number of “interactions” (or number of drugs taken) per week (Barker & Cheney, 1994, p. 30). Consumer/patients who participate in a rhetoric of empowerment, then, are encouraged to accept and purport values that similarly guide their actions. If reassurance is an accepted value, then consumers may be more comfortable approaching a doctor about a particular treatment, instead of waiting to be told what to take. And, after all, this can be positive. But, the corporate element remains – consumers are helped to explore their choices, but may not fully explore all of the choices available to them. As the authors caution,

when such value-oriented statements function to guide individual and collective decision making in the organization, the control of action and thought can be relatively thorough and subtle. Such rhetorical ‘moves’ by organizations into the explicit use of value-based appeals and specifications for their members raises important questions about individual freedom and the nature of work life. (Barker & Cheney, 1994, p. 31)

These concerns arise equally, or perhaps more strongly, in the context of pharmaceutical empowerment rhetoric. The discipline of market begins to shapes consumers/patients in the service of the industry.
The current economic status of the health care industry as a whole facilitates the development of norms that support healthcare’s “marketization.” Devereux (2001) notes that the rise of managed care results in an increase of physicians who must maximize patient volume and use over the counter treatment options as part of the treatment process (p. 87). As Blackett (2001) says, governments and health care maintenance organizations are “anxious to transfer as much of the growing cost of healthcare (of which the cost of drugs is a significant component) to private individuals” (p. 25). Coupled with the increased number of mergers, as well as the problem of patents expiring in the pharmaceutical industry, companies are looking for ways to maximize sales effectiveness (Blackett, 2001, p. 25). As these developments pass on the cost of healthcare to citizens, it benefits the industry to “empower” individuals to take charge of their health, rather than continuing to target only doctors. Similar to managing change in the workplace, empowerment rhetoric eases the transition from one type of system to another. Management scholars note that empowerment techniques play roles in group development and maintenance and help employees adjust to change (Conger & Kanugo, 1988).

It seems analogous to apply this thinking to the pharmaceutical industry. If consumers are empowered during this time of transition, they are more likely to focus on the positive outcomes of the change, here the opportunity to obtain more health information, and less likely to challenge the problems in the healthcare system. Making consumers responsible for their own choices individualizes health care so that structural reform is not pursued strongly. If consumers are responsible, having more doctors, better training, and national health care insurance becomes less important. Health care, then, is positioned as individual issue, not a national problem. The more healthcare is individualized, the less consumers demand reform. As so many authors have noted of capitalism, individualization matters.
In this way, it becomes clear how consumer empowerment rhetoric constitutes elements of identity as well as a type of discursive norm. EDTC shapes how we feel about healthcare as well as how we talk about it. With the introduction of Prozac, for example, it became more acceptable in society to talk about treating depression, a subject once taboo. Likewise, *PR News* reports that after Paxil promotions, media references to ‘social anxiety disorder’ increased from fifty in 1998 to one billion in 1999 (in Gobé, 2002, p. 65). As people participate in the rhetoric of pharmaceutical empowerment, they are encouraged to continue to discuss healthcare options from a corporate perspective. Coping with a disease will mean working with doctors as part of a healthcare team in pursuit of particular recommended treatment. As such, this norm is not entirely problematic. Taking charge of health is a good thing. The difficulty here, however, is that consumers take charge in a very specific way. Perhaps instead of learning about a variety of different treatment options, they are encouraged to explore the ones most aggressively or frequently promoted to them. PR, indeed, does help the medicine go down.

At a broader level, we begin to see how the corporate adoption of empowerment language is not an entirely positive rhetorical development. In several arenas ranging from home improvement to caring for family members, we are told that “we can do it!” Yet we are encouraged to believe that we can do it better with the help of a given product, whether it be from the Home Depot, the Food Network, or from Martha, Oprah, or Dr. Phil. The language of corporate empowerment then, is one that can be modified to suit a variety of rhetorical contexts. As the rhetoric of corporate empowerment continues to function as a discursive norm, the “corporatization” of more than just healthcare is encouraged. This case study, then, is another example of the benefits of studying PR constitutively. Once applied in organizations, these types
of marketing tactics not only help increase profits but also contribute to discursive norms that tout the language of empowerment in more and more areas of society.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Organizations may be seen as fields of institutionalized discourse that legitimate and express particular goals, values, images, and identities.


Introduction

Speed and empowerment norms, as we have seen, legitimate and express portions of our cultural condition. By isolating these two parts of the discursive field of public relations, an understanding of how culture is created emerges. This dissertation began with the contention that instrumental studies of PR do not illuminate how this discourse promotes certain values and helps circulate them throughout culture. In this chapter, I reflect on the contributions of a constitutive approach in pinpointing this capability. I provide a review of my theoretical positions, highlighting their ability to unpack PR. I then discuss the types of discursive habits the norms I have identified encourage. Finally, I speculate on the future of the rhetorical study of public relations and organizational rhetoric in general.

Theoretical Vantage Points

Throughout this project, I have argued that there is more to PR than its ability to help corporations achieve their image management goals. PR is also a generative rhetoric, and the dominant instrumental approach overlooks these qualities. Except for the few odd studies here and there, PR criticism is limited because it does not look beyond the immediate problem facing an organization. As Jasinski (1998) notes about the drawback of such a perspective, the
instrumental approach “usually encourages critics to assess the advocate’s attempt at solving a problem or exigence. Within the instrumentalist framework, the force of a situated utterance is exhausted within the confines of the immediate situation” (p. 73). Yet the prevalence of common PR strategies suggests that rhetorical force is not exhausted or tied to a particular rhetorical PR problem. Their ubiquity reveals the broad invention cycle of rhetorical practice. Use of a strategy invites further (and perhaps slightly different) usage. In this way, the PR process is creative, as “texts invite their audience to experience the world in certain ways via concrete textual forms; audiences, in turn, appropriate, articulate, and/or subvert these textual forms in ways that release and transform their potential constitutive energy” (Jasinski, 1998, p. 75). In addition, the repeated use of specific rhetorical, or PR, strategies create frameworks that organize our worldviews. Jasinski (1998) remarks that, “the idioms of public life (e.g. liberalism, conservatism, free market capitalism, pro-choice or pro-life) and the specific concepts that organize, link, and separate these idioms are continually reconstituted through quotidian interaction as well as more nuanced textual practices” (p. 78). Interacting with PR texts also constitutes the cultural idioms discussed here.

Rhetoric, PR and otherwise, thus provides us with the linguistic resources that shape our perceptions of the world. Here, I have shown primarily how PR helps create different expectations for corporations that shape how we discuss them. Secondarily, I have illustrated that these rhetorical practices also shape the way we feel about things by influencing identity. That is, if rhetorical PR practice is enabled and constrained by speed and empowerment norms, certain perceptions are encouraged more than others. If audiences begin to value speed, they find extended debate less important. If they expect corporations to provide them with educational information, they look less for this information to come from other, less commercial sources. If it
becomes accepted that doctors work *with* consumers to remedy a condition, then audiences expect that doctors will not proceed *without* their opinions.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that these constitutive outcomes occur along with, and not in place of, the instrumental effects of a PR campaign. As John Murphy (2001) says, “we need to work out a relationship between the constitutive and instrumental elements of rhetoric” (p. 16). His observation points out an underlying assumption of this project that warrants discussion. Although a PR campaign is neither instrumental nor constitutive, using these approaches gives the critic different insights. It is useful to know how a campaign succeeded; but it is beneficial also to know how others may use this strategy and what audience values and expectations are created. Even as I point to how a particular norm is created by a campaign, I simultaneously reveal the strategy that enabled this process, thereby showing how the instrumental and constitutive combine in practice. Speed achieves as well as creates; empowerment rhetoric sells as well as molding consumer beliefs. The point is not to deny the interpenetration of these two elements of rhetoric but to balance the use of one critical perspective with another. PR criticism, in particular, needs this balance.

**Discursive Traces**

Drawing on constitutive theory, then, gives us a way to trace patterns of discourse and complements the study of public relations. As such, I want to spend a few moments providing a picture of these imprints. Although it is impossible to argue that PR norms have direct “effects” on the public that we would see in traditional media effects literature, it is possible to speculate on how the norms I identified make it easier to enact certain rhetorical behaviors. As Cheney and McMillan (1990) note, “contemporary persuasion is organizationally shaped and constrained” (p.
Thus, I examine more closely how corporations create speed and empowerment norms that facilitate particular values, goals, and identities.

In the second chapter, I argued that the corporate PR use of speed techniques constitutes a discursive norm where audiences come to expect, incorporate, and mimic these techniques in a variety of ways. Instrumental approaches to examining the role of speed in the Metabolife controversy are limited, and are able to show only how the technique protected the company from public condemnation. Study of the Metabolife case shows how corporate speed techniques encourage a shift in traditional deliberation that begins to function as a discursive norm. As speed helps companies shift the focus of kairos away from a linear progression of the rhetorical situation, it is becoming appropriate, or decorous, for companies to respond quickly, regardless of their culpability. The corporate emphasis on speed helps shift deliberation from being an exchange of arguments to jockeying for the lead position.

If it is becoming the “appropriate” for companies to respond quickly, one way to evaluate this norm is by examining coverage of the Metabolife controversy. If audiences culturally value speed, it follows that media coverage of the case would center on the company’s speedy response, rather than discussing the danger of its pills. Inspection of media attention illustrates that it did focus on Metabolife’s version of events. A search of the Lexis-Nexus news database, starting on October 6, 1999, the first day Metabolife began its advertising campaign to publicize its web site, through the 20/20 broadcast, and to the end of the month, reveals that stories consistently featured the success of the speed strategy. Articles in publications ranging from the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Forbes*, along with reports on television and radio programs such as *All Things Considered*, *Fox News Live*, and *CNN*, all featured coverage of Metabolife’s strategy, rather than the safety of its products. I found
approximately twenty-five newspaper stories about the speed strategy, while only three stories
featured the product’s safety concerns. This trend is more pronounced on radio and television.
Approximately fifty stations discussed the controversy, with only five featuring discussion of
product safety. As one teaser on a Fox News Live program announced, “20/20 has become the
story instead of finding the story” (Fox News Live, October 10, 1999).

These results highlight PR’s constitutive effects. Metabolife’s rhetorical choices
influenced media coverage of the controversy, which has the potential to influence audiences
following the stories. If the majority of news outlets feature the Internet strategy rather than the
product’s potential problems, we begin to see how speed norms shape culture. Companies who
are able to capture first the media’s attention are better able to forward their position. As Michael
Sitrick, PR consultant for Metabolife, wrote in his book about using the press for corporate
advantage, “Journalists are herd animals, and so it doesn’t take a lot to whip them up into a full-
tilt stampede” (in Elder, 1999). Sitrick’s comments pinpoint the potential of rhetorical speed
norms. It is not so much that they help rhetors achieve total control over the perception of an
issue; rather, that they cultivate an overall impression by influencing the media’s take on the
event. As Sitrick puts it, “The idea is not to change public attitudes in one fell swoop (that not
really being possible) but to influence future coverage” (in Elder, 1999) Indeed, we can move
from discussing coverage in a specific case to considering what broader values the speed norm
encourages.

One value the speed norm expresses is the importance of control over the media.
Although employment of a speed norm makes it difficult to respond to accusations, audiences
still make judgments about a controversy. Once a rhetor forwards a conclusion to an audience,
countering it successfully may be more difficult. As such, we find many examples of companies
using speed to protect themselves, rather than waiting to respond to someone else’s use of speed. The ability for targets to forward a position quickly puts an element of control back into their hands. Targets have a greater ability to have their side of the story heard first, instead of being left to grumble or protest after a particular media presentation. In other words, targets can check what Elder (1999) calls the “more sizzle than steak” presentation of many media reports. After all, “Metabolife: Who Knows?” would not be much of an attention grabbing preview (Elder, 1999). Speed gave Metabolife the ability to temper 20/20’s presentation, an ability that more generally helps rhetors even the balance of power between themselves and journalists. As PR expert Doug McLarty notes, “Media’s coverage of an organization’s response is rarely of the same magnitude or given the same prominence when correcting the record. Organizations have to be fast and potent in preempting such actions if they want to compete effectively” (McLarty Communications, 2004). The prospect of control contained in this strategy in responding to organizational threat makes it an attractive choice for others. President Clinton, for example, leaked his own bad news so that he could determine which news organizations got the news and when (Keefe, 2000). Similarly, Kobe Bryant’s PR team used a press conference to accuse the prosecutor of misconduct, instead of waiting to take this complaint to a judge. Recently, former FBI director Louis Freeh wrote an editorial for the Wall Street Journal to explain his assessment of the bureau’s pre-9/11 efforts rather than letting the media report his comments in light of the questions posed by 9/11 commission. As we see in these examples, one implication of rhetors’ use of the speed norm, whether corporate or not, is that through speed they try to dominate the media more than reacting to it.

Techniques of remediation and hypermediation support the struggle for dominance. Rhetors have always tried to provoke audiences to re-evaluate claims, but remediation is a tool
that allows them to start the audience’s evaluation rather than being left to refute a competitor’s, or the media’s, claims. By using remediation to support a kairotic strategy, rhetors shift deliberation because it makes it harder for a competitor to control perception. These techniques introduce elements of possibility into a controversy. Corporate PR’s ability to use speed to bypass media gatekeepers, as it did in the Metabolife case, circumvents the process that traditionally leaves amount and type of coverage up to editors. PR experts generate public attention through successful Web site use. Capitalizing on speed through technology, therefore, gives rhetors a way to generate control in new ways.

The norm has implications for the media too. Along with control, speed strategies contribute to a value of appearance over substance. Audiences are coming to expect speed forms of argument. These argument types push audiences to anticipate and be gratified by the quality of swiftness. Instead of a focus on content, these argument forms focus on novelty. Journalists in the Metabolife case complained that they did not want anyone shifting the journalistic process. Editors and reporters expressed concern that speed tactics encourage sloppy journalism because reporters rush to break their stories. They also feared that targets could spread information whether or not it is accurate. Yet the need to satisfy the audience’s desire for speed affects their behaviors too. The news media is affected by the rush to respond, when they are targeting a given company or just trying to be the first to break a story, in order to satisfy the audience’s need for speed. ABC illegally shipped depleted uranium from Jakarta, Indonesia, to Los Angeles for a story about weaknesses in the Homeland Security system. A decade ago, Dateline NBC blew up Nissan trucks to report “ignition problems” to the public. Recently, one media fight centered on competing to provide a story to the public the quickest. ABC News “scooped” NBC news by discussing the content of an Elizabeth Smart interview before NBC could air it.
Although the media has always been focused on speed, new technologies increase the pressure to report quickly. The media system has become, in the words of Burke, rotten with perfection.

In addition to influencing the need for the media to gratify the audience’s desire for speed, the corporate public relations use of argumentative speed forms point to a larger cultural shift. The balance of power between journalism and PR is more contested. Here, PR speed norms thus develop the value of “corportization.” Although Metabolife used speed to shift the argument from its products to an argument about media reform, at a broader level, we can theorize how PR generally impacts the newsmedia through its reliance on speed. Moloney (2000) talks about the “PR-ization” of the media. Three issues illustrate this shift. The first concerns the amount of PR materials that circulate as “news.” Instead of editors throwing press releases away, they frequently rely on them to speed up story production. Close to 50% of editorial content is generated by PR (Hallahan 2000). This practice is likely to continue and perhaps increase, as “the advent of web sites as newsgathering sources will undoubtedly accelerate this trend, leading to further institutionalization of newsgathering routines and to the subsidization of the newsgathering process” (Hachigan & Hallahan, 2003, p. 46). Maloney argues also that the increase of celebrity culture is fed by the PR industry; promotion of celebrity news fills the spaces created by 24-hour news networks. The pressure for news organizations to respond quickly entails a greater reliance on PR.

It is not just that the amount of PR material in media has increased, but that the type supplied by PR experts contributes to changes in the news landscape. PR broadly contributes to the public argument culture through its activities. There are many outlets amenable to publicity materials, ranging from talk shows like Today to the myriad weekly news and entertainment magazines. Maloney implicates this and another PR practices in the “souring” of public
argument culture. As PR experts provide the media with the polarized viewpoints it seeks for its “battle” shows and gives a variety of activist groups access to a megaphone, an angry argument culture develops. PR experts and journalists instantiate this type of culture together.

If the first type of norm encourages audiences to value the companies who are speediest in their responses to controversy, the second norm takes a different, more nuanced approach to persuading the audience that has different constitutive implications. Pharmaceutical PR strategies create a norm through which consumers are encouraged to feel empowered via corporate health information on the Web. Instrumental analyses of the role of pharmaceutical marketing are limited, with most analyses examining pharmaceutical advertising’s sales opportunity of targeting the consumer directly. In addition to increasing sales, EDTC campaigns shape consumer thinking and expression. Since EDTC draws heavily on PR techniques that stress education, these campaigns do more than get people to go to the doctor. The adoption of the language of empowerment from other areas into corporate language about health creates several tensions. When adopted as a marketing strategy, the rhetoric of empowerment conflates education with promotion, allows companies to create relationships with consumers through the promise of information access, and reinforces the general cultural value of empowerment.

Textually and visually, EDTC draws on the values of novelty, reassurance, education, subtle promotion, and encouragement to craft a detailed rhetoric of empowerment that conflates education with promotion. The use of this rhetoric encourages people to take charge of their health by learning more about a doctor’s diagnosis, preparing themselves to talk with a doctor, or just looking up their symptoms to see if they should schedule an appointment. This access to information is empowering, and was not as easily available a decade ago. Disputing a negative doctor’s opinion then would mean going to the expense and trouble of getting a second opinion
or a trip to the library in an attempt to gather information from esoteric materials. Today, some of those steps can be bypassed. Showing your doctor an article from the Internet that disputes a diagnosis may lead to condition reassessment, or at least a conversation. Most of us are familiar with the sometimes powerful stories of how friends and family have used the Web in these ways to alter a diagnosis. Empowerment norms, then, change the way that consumers are encouraged to think about their health. Although these websites encourage people to take charge of their health, they do it in a way that adopts the language of empowerment through education for promotional purposes. Consumers may educate themselves, but from pre-selected, corporately-dictated sources.

Pharmaceutical empowerment rhetoric also encourages consumers to value the doctor/patient relationship differently. Consumers may either demand a drug that is promoted on an EDTC website or substitute the information they find there for doctor interaction. The pharmaceutical company addition to the health care team, then, takes authority from the doctor and gives it to the patient; or, and perhaps more likely, it shifts power from the doctor to the pharmaceutical company. In an earlier assessment of DTC advertising, Dietz (2002) argued that advertising must balance the need to get the consumer to act with the need to persuade the physician to fill a particular prescription. What the instantiation of empowerment rhetoric facilitates is the ability for marketers to sidestep somewhat the authority of the physician. Again, if this rhetoric is successful, consumers will demand a particular drug, and find the doctor who will give it to them. The PR infused EDTC approach to marketing subtly strengthens the dominance of the pharmaceutical company in the healthcare relationship. These websites help consumers ask for a product on the basis of education, rather than on promotion. If consumers can thus present an “educated” case to a physician as to why they need a particular product, the
chances of the physician accepting that argument increase. In her study, Dietz (2002) suggested that future research should concern how “advertising has responded to consumers as they become increasingly educated” (pg. 109). One way pharmaceutical marketers have responded is by coupling PR strategies with advertising to help the value of education act as a strategy itself. Embedded in this norm, then, is motivation for consumers to talk differently about their relationships with healthcare providers. They may express a more dominant role in this relationship but simultaneously transfer control to corporations.

Creating relationships with consumers on the basis of access to information also reinforces the value of “corporate reliance” when considering healthcare. A look at how past companies have tried to cultivate consumer relationships highlights the suasive power of the empowerment approach. In the quest to create positive relationships with consumers, corporations have adopted a number of public faces over the years. In the Second World War, corporations cultivated the imagery of a nation united. To reassure consumers of its help with defense production, General Motors, for example, broadcast a radio show called Cheers from the Camps to serve “as an emotional liaison between the camps and the homes” (Marchand, 2002, p. 313). These shows featured servicemen performing their talents from a different military camp each week, and simultaneously gave GM a context to show how its corporate activities supported the boys overseas. Through these and similar activities, a variety of companies used their wartime “service” to improve their images. In the fall of 1944, GM had obtained an “all-time high” in public perceptions, and Dupont and General Electric also enjoyed highly favorable views. Through the cultivation of these images, corporations assume “a prominent role in public dialogues on family, class, community, and politics” (Marchand, 2002, p. 362). That is, if companies profess values of success or patriotism, these values become part of the
communicative field that shapes our cultural viewpoints. In explaining how this process worked through corporate wartime rhetoric, Marchand (2002) points out that, corporate America, by the mid 1940s, was certainly addicted to the rhetoric of paternal neighborliness and democratic modes. But the giant corporations were willing to fulfill that rhetoric only through certain limited gestures; they were ill-suited to set social priorities or govern people’s lives. (p. 363)

In other words, he notes that corporations carefully cultivated certain images that encouraged certain types of relationships with consumers. If a corporation is our neighbor, who like us, wants to secure democracy in the world, then certain perceptions of that company are encouraged more than others. We are likely to want to support good neighbors by helping them in times of need. In the case of wartime, then, we are more likely to buy a certain company’s product because that purchase helps support our way of life.

Pharmaceutical empowerment rhetoric, then, encourages certain types of relationships between corporations and consumers. These websites cultivate a rhetoric where consumers are in close contact with corporations, both working toward the same goal of improving health. In this discourse, corporations are benevolent educators, helping us figure out which treatment option is best and which symptoms deserve particular attention. As such, we are less likely to view pharmaceutical companies critically as we both want to “profit” from good health. Working together as part of a health care team discourages certain perceptions. We do not expect a team member to provide us with faulty information or work only in his or her best interest. As part of a team, we work together toward our goal. Like wartime metaphors, however, this understanding has its limitations when influencing people’s lives. In the way that buying a specific GM product will not win a war, buying a certain drug does not ensure good health. For instance, we are less
likely to urge for reform in our healthcare system because we are encouraged to view ourselves as part of the healthcare team.

This ability for the discourse to make it easy for consumers to have a sense of power over their health showcases how the constitutive ability of PR works more generally. Campaigns of all stripes have adopted the “you can do it” attitude. When myriad corporations offer types of support as part of an overall image campaign, for example, they play a different role in our lives. We do not just buy things; we establish relationships with them. To offer an example of how PR facilitates this consumer mindset, consider one of Ketchum PR’s healthcare campaigns. On behalf of Pfizer, Ketchum created a nationwide series of events called the “Cholesterol Low Down.” Held in cities across the country, the events offered free cholesterol screenings, encouraged Americans to know their cholesterol number and goal, and motivated "high screeners" to see their doctor. After attending the events, consumers received customized Hallmark cards from Debbie Allen and Dick Clark along with a cholesterol checklist that urged them to see their doctor. Two weeks later, participants received a recorded phone call from Dick Clark, who reminded them to see their doctor. Participants who mailed in proof of a doctor visit received a gift consisting of a fanny pack filled with a *Cholesterol Low Down* T-shirt and a copy of the *Practical Tips & Recipes* and *Fitting in Fitness* books. Ketchum’s evaluation of this campaign revealed that seventy-seven percent of *The Cholesterol Low Down* participants with high cholesterol have enrolled in the behavior modification program, of which the drug Lipitor was a part (PRSA, 2004).

As you can see, these programs create supportive experiences, which helps to establish ongoing relationships with consumers. Further, if consumers are pleased with these experiences with a specific corporation, they are more open to establishing similar relationships with others.
Empowerment norms, then, strengthen the value of substituting consumption for agency. We do not have experiences so much as we purchase them. In the same way that companies like the Body Shop, Ben & Jerry’s, and Patagonia try to create relationships with consumers on the basis of common support for the environment, using empowerment approaches must be viewed as part of a PR strategy, not as a mere expression of corporate values (see Gobé, 2002, for more information about these companies’ environmental approaches). While these businesses may indeed help the environment, or in the case of those espousing empowerment rhetoric, help consumers take charge of their lives in a variety of ways, the strategic value of this approach must be recognized. As Gobé (2002) observes about the strategic value of empowerment rhetoric:

As people have become more and more empowered, commerce, in order to succeed, has had to begin to strive to be more relevant to people’s needs and desires. A unique partnership started to evolve where corporations realized that, unless they had people as allies, their road to success would be impossible to travel. (p. xxxiii)

It is clear how empowerment rhetoric constitutes certain norms, then. For both the corporation and the consumer, this type of partnership seems to benefit both parties.

In all of these constitutive outcomes, therefore, we see that the PR norms I identify together articulate a particular sort of discourse, where corporations assume more prominent roles in their relationships with audiences. Instead of relying on more traditional marketing techniques by disseminating messages, these discourses invite audiences to participate more fully with corporate messages. Neither, for example, relies on just advertising to protest media representation or present a product. Both norms use the Web in new ways that enhances audience participation. Unlike advertising which “shrieks” from the page, PR’s more under-the-
radar orientation makes it potentially more appealing and acceptable to consumers (Moloney, 2000, pg. 3). Metabolife’s placement of the interview online and pharmaceutical companies’ creation of an interactive online medical repository draws audiences to them, rather than them only putting the message in front of consumers. For both, “creating a community and letting people come to the brand” allows them to encourage audiences to involve them in their lives beyond a single experience (Gobé, 2002, p. 200). Therefore, while it must be acknowledged that PR serves some beneficial functions in helping consumers sort through massive amounts of information and make choices, it shapes consumers and broader rhetorical activity as it does so by creating these ongoing relationships.

These norms together also articulate a difference in how power is talked about and exercised. With the speed norm, corporations shift power away from journalists. With the empowerment norm, control shifts from the physician to the pharmaceutical company. Audiences come to expect and incorporate these rhetorical behaviors. In thinking about the discursive traces of each norm together, however, we see that the claim that consumers’ access to information in each of these realms does not necessarily equal an increase of personal agency and control. Consumers are encouraged to espouse these values, but not to examine closely whether or not they locate them differently in society. These norms mean that consumer power is touted but not necessarily increased. They help articulate an identity of control without fully providing it. In effect, audiences are encouraged to substitute one form of control for another. These norms operate beyond the areas of media and healthcare, however. One way to speculate about future PR study is to explore how others could examine this relationship between PR and identity.
Speculations & Extensions

Now that we have seen how PR contributes to the development of speed and empowerment norms that entail specific audience reactions, I attempt to move beyond these two norms to discuss how and why study of PR’s broader constitutive potential should proceed. I suggest that constitutive PR study allows for the consideration of the larger rhetorical concerns of invention and ethics. First, however, it seems a natural step to call for more constitutive studies of the relationship between PR and identity.

Although this study has focused more on PR’s ability to craft discursive norms, identity issues are always present, because what we can become is dependent in part on what is offered to us by the discourse. We are offered a lot of PR discourse and will continue to be offered more. Moloney (2000) observes that PR is the result of a market-oriented, capitalistic society that will likely intensify as this societal structure evolves (p. 64). Indeed, he cites three cultural conditions that underscore why PR rhetorical behavior will continue to evolve. As the UK and the US have moved to forms of civic and commercial pluralism, promotional activity is encouraged, as more social groups push for acceptance and more businesses compete for consumer attention. For Moloney, (2000) “PR is an accessible set of promotional attitudes and techniques for survival in this competition” (p. 36). In other words, with more social groups lobbying for attention, comes more PR. With the introduction of more businesses competing for consumers, comes more PR. And, with freer markets, not surprisingly, comes more PR.

Given the pervasiveness of this promotional discourse, it seems fruitful to examine more fully how we are becoming more “branded.” Earlier, I mentioned that PR is part of a larger push toward branding, or the creation of a corporate personality to develop long-term customer relationships. As part of this personality, brands try to offer consumers emotional experiences,
almost trying to provide consumers with the qualities they expect from their families and friends. But, by allowing brands to become a larger part of our lives, so much so that Gobé claims that they play the role of religion or politics in the past, brands shape us in their image (2002, p. xxiv). We express ourselves commercially. When corporations offered the emotions of comfort and patriotism following September 11th, for example, market watchers observed the phenomenon of patriotic shopping (Gobé, 2002, p. xxix). Companies who chose not to publicly express these emotions, such as Procter & Gamble and Honda, however, received criticism for their coldness and unresponsiveness (Gobé, 2002, p. 229). Charland (1987) has argued that ideological rhetoric creates collective subjects that supercede divisive interests, that are transhistorical, and that provides the illusion of freedom and agency. Charland has explored how political rhetorics craft these ideological effects; we need to continue to explore how marketing ones do as well. Norms of speed and empowerment create the illusion of freedom and agency that Charland identifies. I am sure that PR creates other norms that affect identity in these ways as well.

PR discourse does not only craft identity, however. Another area of study that constitutive perspectives suggest is the role that PR plays in rhetorical invention. PR has become increasingly part of the public vernacular. We talk about people or groups being in a PR war, how President Clinton tried to put a “positive spin” on a policy, and how a given public figure has an “image problem” (Moloney, 2000). Fox News advertises a “no-spin” zone, and the use of words and phrases like press release, image, spinning, spin doctor, sound-bite, on and off message, prebuttal, rapid rebuttal, positioning, and relaunch fill conversation and commentary (Moloney, 2000, p. 22). Ours is as society that is aware of, and employs, PR language, even if in frequently disparaging ways.
A constitutive approach highlights how these uses of PR discourse produce subsequent discourse. Inventional studies could examine how the reliance on this rhetoric constructs particular understandings about public events. As Campbell (1998) notes, “issues about how thought develops are finessed with the concept of invention, a Latin term meaning ‘to come upon’ or ‘find’ (p. 111). In the rhetorical tradition, however, scholars mainly have explored this process by examining how marginalized groups rely on the language of those in power to erode hegemony and create new truths. Campbell argues that women, for example, rely on the inventional principle of subversion to contest and shape new understandings about women in society. Gates (1988), too, explores how African Americans relied on the inventional power of the symbolic reversal to transform racial insults into points of pride. Likewise, one avenue for critics examining the inventional qualities of PR discourse is to look at how PR has become an inventional resource for non-profit and activist groups. On what PR inventional resources did environmentalists rely so that celebrities now gush about hybrid cars?

Although these explorations are important to understand how it is that marginalized groups gradually change societal views, studying how the process works in PR also provides a different kind of opportunity. By exploring the inventional properties of PR, critics can understand how it is that systems maintain their power as well as studying how the rhetoric is inventional for those trying to change it. That is, along with exploring invention as a tool to change received wisdom, we should explore how that dominant wisdom is created. Campbell (1998) argues that the use of invention among disenfranchised groups should hold the attention of the rhetorical critic by remarking, “the rhetoric of those on the margins is more interesting precisely because the obstacles such groups confront force them to be more ingenious, to rise to the imaginative heights required of the powerful only in moments of crisis” (p. 116). Campbell’s
view on invention seems a little shortsighted in light of current society. It seems to me that not only do the powerful have to rely on invention more frequently in light of societal pluralism, study of PR’s inventional capacity aids the critic in seeing the practice not only as subversion or reversal but also as substantiation. How is it, for example, that current Administration’s use of PR’s linguistic resources facilitate acceptance for a variety of policy initiatives? How do these values become part of our overall rhetorical culture through the process of invention?

Another type of constitutive PR study would help rhetorical critics move from a system of ethics based on a single rhetor to one based collectively. This shift is important in understanding ethics as society has moved, as Sproule notes, from oratorical to managerial forms of social control (1988, p. 468). Although questions of ethics arise particularly in regards to PR discourse because we sometimes see companies directly or indirectly misleading consumers, PR studies of ethics help provide frameworks for understanding ethics in a variety of organizational contexts.

As Crable (1990) argues, “whatever else they are, organizations are inherently rhetorical; whatever else it is, rhetoric is inherently organizational” (p. 115). This statement challenges the traditional categorization of rhetorical study in some intriguing ways and highlights the importance of studying ethics organizationally. Rather than being a subset of rhetorical study, the prominence of organizations in society today makes the majority of rhetorical expression organizationally influenced. That is, as people identify with myriad organizations, their rhetoric does not just express “their” ideas, but is tinged with elements of organizational influence (Cheney and McMillan, 1990; McMillan, 1982; Cheney, 1990). Sproule (1988), for example, notes how the Wilson Administration created the Committee on Public Information to disseminate collaboratively produced governmental information. As spokespersons, rhetors
became “purveyors of a settled ideology,” in that they were cemented together in an exercise of institutional persuasion (p. 469). Similarly, Crable (1990) argues that organizational rhetoric is the fourth “great system” of rhetoric, where instead of ACTORS speaking, in Burke’s sense, actors express the perspective generated by institutions. Building on Ehniger’s (1968) three great systems of rhetoric, he posits that in the fourth system, discourse is produced by organizations, not individuals. That is, we are so influenced by our organizational associations that we miss understanding rhetorical activity if we ignore the site(s) of its origination. As Crable (1990) says, “It may well be that, living in a world of rhetorical organizations and organizational rhetoric, it matters less who the Donald Trumps, Lee Iaccoas and Jesse Jacksons of the world are, that what (organizational) rhetor they ‘appear’ to ‘represent’ (pg. 122). Our language, from this view, is not ours alone but is colored, layered, and influenced by the culture around us. This condition makes answering ethical questions tricky.

Constitutive studies of organizational discourse offer a way to think about these ethical standards. They see what changes in values and expectations an organization encourages as a whole rather than locating ethical consequences in just one representative of an organization.

More than a decade ago, scholars suggested that organizational studies concern themselves with how organizational rhetors shape the public discourse and values of a culture (Cheney & McMillan, 1990). Constitutive studies of organizations answer this call by illustrating that it is not just a particular organizational rhetor that deserves study, but the generative rhetorical potential of an organization as a whole, exemplified by particular collections of its expression.

After all, we talk about what Enron says, not just Kenneth Lay’s speeches. Although Kenneth Lay is culpable in the Enron controversy, constitutive studies would ask how it is that Enron’s corporate values created a discursive climate in which such practices become acceptable.
Studying the PR activities of corporations accused of malfeasance, then, provide one piece of the ethical puzzle. Where apologia studies discuss how an organization defends itself against ethical charges and critical studies examine the role of power in crafting an organization’s questionable decisions, constitutive PR studies see how cultural acceptance for these values is created.

By seeing how a constitutive PR approach offers critics ways to study identity, invention, and ethics as directions for future research, I suggest that this perspective enriches what has been judged as problematic subset of communication studies. Although PR scholars deem the rhetorical tradition too vague or theoretically abstract and rhetorical scholars charge PR as being pedestrian and simplistic, a constitutive perspective challenges both camps to reevaluate their assumptions. Constitutive studies respond to the PR theorists’ ponderous charge that rhetorical approaches do not address message reception (Ihlen, 2002; Hallahan, 1999). Although it is true that they do not quantitatively evaluate whether or not an audience acted specifically to a message, they do address how PR messages “hail” audiences into subject positions and discursive patterns. On the other hand, constitutive rhetorical theory helps us understand how PR “works on the street” but adds a more comprehensive understanding of the discourse that quantitative and instrumental approaches cannot illuminate. To come to terms with organizational rhetoric, particularly PR, we should attempt to understand its “full scope, functions, and power in contemporary society” (Cheney & McMillan, 1990, p. 105). Constitutive approaches give critics one way to pursue these questions.
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