Exploring the application of mission statements on the World Wide Web

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Abstract

Mission statements are considered to be one of the most popular management tools in the world – and also one of the most frustrating. To secure their success, it has been recommended that mission statements be communicated and disseminated to as many internal and external stakeholders as possible. One means for doing this is through the Internet and the posting of an organization's mission statement on its company Web site. But who is doing this? What types of organizations are using the World Wide Web to advertise their missions? Where is a mission statement typically located in a corporate Web site? And what are some of the motivations that an organization has for posting or not posting its mission? These are questions which have not yet been addressed by previous research and which this preliminary study sought to answer.

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Introduction

Mission statements seem to be just about everywhere these days. In fact, a study by Boston based Bain & Company (1999) suggests that mission statements are one of the most popular management tools ever used on our planet. However, when one understands the motivation for and benefits from having a mission statement, it becomes easy to understand their popularity. In their most basic form, a mission statement is a formal written document intended to capture an organization's unique *raison d'être*. It should answer such vital questions as: why do we exist, what is our real purpose and what are we trying to accomplish (Bart, 1996a; 1996b; 1997a; 1997b; 1998a; 1998b; 1999; Bart and Baetz, 1998; Byars, 1984; 1987; Campbell, 1989; 1993; Campbell and Yeung, 1991; Daft and Fitzgerald, 1992; David, 1989; 1993; Germain and Cooper, 1990; Ginter *et al.*, 1998; Higgins and Vincze, 1989; Ireland and Hitt, 1992; Klemm *et al.*, 1991; McGinnis, 1981; Medley, 1992; Thompson and Strickland, 1996; Gibson *et al.*, 1990; Bryson, 1995).

When an organization works diligently at finding the answer to these questions, the result is supposed to be a more focussed and inspired organization. There is less organizational confusion and contradiction because scarce organizational resources, such as money and management attention, are aligned to suit the dictates and requirements of the mission. The needs of all-important "stakeholders" (i.e. customers, employees, suppliers, communities and shareholders) are also addressed and well balanced. Employees, especially, feel a greater degree of comfort as their actions and behaviors are directed towards and enthused by a set of common organizational goals. They have a "sense of mission". Thus, as hyper-competition, increased specialization and waves of consumerism have forced firms to reevaluate their competitive position, mission statements have become an important first step for developing and implementing new strategic

thrusts, serving as a focal point for management and other employees to rally around.

Considerable research has already been done on the use and implementation of mission statements in a variety of organizational circumstances – such as, the use of mission statements in high-tech firms, industrial organizations, airlines, hospitals, and innovative versus non-innovative companies. The nature and characteristics of big business (*Fortune* 500, Forbes 400, etc.) and other private sector firms have been increasingly investigated in order to discover and evaluate the relationship between effective mission statements and success. More recently, there have also been some pioneering research initiatives that have both examined and established the connection between various mission statement characteristics (i.e. content, process of development and dissemination, rationales for creation, organizational arrangements for implementation) and organizational performance (Bart, 1998a; 1998b; 1999; 2000; Bart and Baetz, 1998; Bart *et al.*, 2001).

One of the major findings concerning ways to make a mission more effective was the discovery that a positive relationship existed between the total number of methods used to communicate and disseminate a mission and firm performance (Bart, 2000). Communication methods included: annual reports, posters/plaques, employee manuals, company information kits, word of mouth (verbal one-on-one explanations), seminars/workshops, newsletters, advertisements and other internal documents. One reason to support this conclusion is that mission statements become more effective when they are easily remembered – especially by employees. Consequently, high visibility – with postings in many locations – helps aid the development of mission familiarity and recognition.

Another reason supporting the communication-performance connection, however, appears to be that the more effort that is put into disseminating a mission statement, the more all stakeholders will believe in and identify with it. Thus, Bart (2000, p. 61) has recommended that senior managers should use as many methods as possible in disseminating their organization's mission "since it would clearly and unequivocally demonstrate ... that the mission is being taken seriously". Employees may also be more sensitive and committed to an organization's mission when they know that customers are aware of the promises contained in the document.

Mission statements and the World Wide Web

One area of mission communication that has not been previously examined is the nature and extent to which organizations are using the Internet to inform various stakeholders about their mission. This area is worthy of investigation because the Internet provides a means for organizations to communicate an enormous amount of information to their relevant stakeholders (i.e. customers, employees and investors), as well as to large numbers of other interested parties (e.g. students) and organizations, for relatively insignificant costs. Millions of people and organizations have access to the Internet and use it (in its many forms) every day. As a result, most organizations are coming to the realization that the Internet can be a powerful business tool for providing mass amounts of information at the click of a mouse.

While most firms are still currently undecided and inexperienced on methods of adding value by using the Internet, it is nevertheless fascinating that firms have begun to disseminate and communicate their mission, vision and values through postings on the World Wide Web. A simple query using only one search engine can produce hundreds of thousands of mission statements. But who exactly is posting their mission statements on the Web? Where are mission statements being posted (i.e. what is their relative position at a particular organization's Web site)? What are the motivations of those organizations that have chosen to post their mission statements through the Internet on the Web? And why are still others choosing not to list their mission statements (given that they have one in the first place) on their Web sites at all?

These are fairly big questions. The purpose of this paper is to try and make some progress in answering them through a preliminary and exploratory study. The results obtained will hopefully provide a useful starting point for further research into mission statements and their effectiveness when promoted on the Internet.

Research method

Why study missions on the Web?

The Internet is one form of electronic communication through which an organization could disseminate its mission. Other methods include intranets and extranets. It would certainly be interesting to observe to what extent organizations use these more private networks to disseminate their missions. However, obtaining access to them is usually extremely difficult, with admission typically restricted to approved users (such as employees, selected customers and others). For this reason, it was decided to restrict our investigation of mission statements to only those available and accessible through the Internet – and to further limit our inquiry by analyzing only those missions which had been posted using the World Wide Web. To what extent organizations are using the Internet's electronic mail capabilities to disseminate their mission is a topic that will be left for another study.

What types of mission statements are on the Web?

In addition to its many uses and capabilities, the Internet provides a quick and efficient way to gather intelligence on almost any organization. To determine what types of organizations are using the Web for communicating their mission statements, we utilized the Google search engine (www.google.com) since this is considered by many industry experts to be the number one ranked search engine. We put the words "mission statements" into the query box. No order other than a delivery of best-suited matches using the phrase "mission statements" (assigned by the automatic browser) was employed. The first 100 listings (out of 782,000 found) were then examined as a matter of convenience and because they represented the "top picks" of the search engine.

Based on our analysis of the results, it appeared that there were six categories into which the individual listings could be sorted and uniquely categorized: for-profit corporations, educational institutions, religious institutions, government agencies and departments, not-for-profit associations and "other listings". These categories were created when it came time to sort the mission statements (and not a priori) since there were

no reference points to guide their development at the start of this project.

In taking this approach, it must be pointed out that the sample generated is not completely random since the probability of selection for each mission statement is not equal and is biased by factors such as "newness of listing", "popularity of listing", and the key "search engine words" chosen by the Web site designers. Moreover, since we are only examining mission statements using only one search engine, our findings cannot be said to be representative of the kinds of mission statements that are generated by search engines – since each search engine tends to have significantly different databases of indexed Web pages. Nevertheless, the results provide a glimpse, at a "snapshot" in time, into the kinds of organizations that are posting their mission statements onto the Internet. They also hold the potential of identifying additional research questions and thrusts.

Where exactly are "for-profit corporations" posting their mission statements within their Web sites?

To determine the answer to this question, it was decided to investigate the Web sites of 100 corporations listed in the *Fortune 500* company rankings for the year 2000. Corporations with the revenue rank from 1 to 50 and from 101 to 150 were selected for detailed examination. (Examining the Web sites of 100 for-profit corporations generated by the Google search engine was rejected since a preliminary examination revealed them to be quite small in size and unresponsive to follow-up inquiries.)

While this sample is not random, it provides some insights into the Internet practices of 100 of the largest and most watched "for-profit organizations" in North America. The Web site of each firm was then visited using Netscape 4.5 and a search was initiated at each site to find a document that could be called a mission statement.

The position of the mission statement within each company's Web site was measured by determining the "page number" of the mission statement. The Home Page was identified as page number one. And each subsequent "click follow through" was assessed as another page. Thus, if it took three "follow through clicks" to find the mission statement, the mission statement

was identified as being on page 4 (e.g. P1 = company Home Page; then (click on icon on p1) to get to P2 = company information; then (click on icon on p2) to get to P3 = our strategy; then (click on icon on p3) to get to P4 = our mission).

If no mission statement could be found (after utilizing the site's internal search engine as well as our own sleuthing activities), a message was sent to the Web master for each site requesting that she/he direct us to the Web location of their corporation's mission statement. If no reply was received, the site was categorized specifically as one where no mission statement could be found. A different category, however, was created to identify those companies (when a corporation's Web master made it known) that had – for various reasons – no mission statement listed at all.

Rationales for posting/not-posting a corporation's mission statement

Depending upon the results obtained regarding the existence and location of an organization's mission statement, the Web master for each company was asked to respond indicating (A) the rationale behind his/her corporation's decision to post – or not post – the mission statement on their Web site and (B) the rationale for the posting location.

Results

Who's putting their mission on the Web

The results of our investigation into the types of firms that post their mission statements on the Web can be found in Table I. Of the 100 mission statement sites examined, only 69 appeared to belong to the various kinds of for-profit and not-for-profit organizations/associations that were of interest and relevance to this study. The mission category dominating these listings was educational institutions (38 per cent) and the

least frequently mentioned ones were religious organizations (10 per cent) and government agencies (9 per cent). For-profit corporations and not-for-profit associations represented the middle of the survey standings with 23 per cent and 20 per cent respectively. The 31 "other listings" comprised sites devoted principally to articles giving advice on why a mission statement is or is not needed and how to create a mission statement.

Who's on first? Where mission statements are found within Web sites

Table II shows the results of our analysis of the mission statements' location within the sample of Web sites. Interestingly, the findings indicate that most of the *Fortune* 500 firms investigated did not appear to post their mission statements (or have them readily identifiable) anywhere within their Web sites. Only 45 mission statements were identified within the 100 company sites explored. The reasons for listing – or not listing – the corporations' mission statements on the Web are identified in the next section.

Of the mission statements found, Table II also indicates their relative position. The most frequently used location for placing a mission statement seems to be page 3 (or after the second click through) with a score of 19 per cent. The next most popular location was page 4 (11 per cent), followed by page 5 (7 per cent) and then page 2 (4 per cent). The Web page position getting the least frequent use in our survey (for the placing of the company's

Table I Google search engine results

Mission category	n	Per cent
For profit corporations	16	23
Educational institutions	26	38
Religious organizations	7	10
Government agencies and departments	6	9
Not-for-profit associations	14	20
Other listings	31	n/a
Total listings	100	100

Table II A mission statement's location within its company's Web site

	n	Per cent
Front page – page one	2	
After first click through – page 2	4	
After second click through – page 3	19	
After third click through – page 4	11	
After fourth (or more) click through – page 5+	7	
Companies with a mission statement officially posted to their Web site		45
No mission statement listed (official Web master response)	12	
No mission statement could be found (with no response from Web master)	43	
Companies with no mission posted to their Web site		55
Total Web sites investigated		100

mission statement) was page one (2 per cent) – which was also the company's home page. When asked for the reasoning behind each mission's particular location, the only response obtained from the Web masters was:

> Because it seemed to be the most appropriate place.

Why mission statements are posted – or not?

Those that do

Only five Web masters (out of the 45 companies with mission statements) responded to our inquiry concerning the reasons for posting their company's mission on the Web site. While the response rate was low, the answers provided seem to cover a fairly broad range of rationales. Home Depot, for instance, responded by saying:

> It is important to put our mission statement on the Web site because our Home Depot values are beliefs, principles and standards of the company that do not change over time. Values are the foundation of our behavior because they guide our decisions and actions. We are in the home improvement business and our goal is to provide the highest level of service, the broadest selection of products and the most competitive prices. We are a "values-driven" company and our eight core values include the following: excellent customer service, taking care of people, giving back, doing the right thing, creating shareholder value, respect for all people, entrepreneurial spirit, building strong relations.

For Fedex, the rationale for posting their mission was put as follows:

> We feel it is important for our customers or general public [possibly potential customers] to be well informed of our philosophy. It is the backbone of our company which makes it successful.

The Web master at Johnson Controls responded by saying:

> The Web site is no different than everything else. We post [the mission] on everything, even in every building we have worldwide. [The] mission statement is our prime management tool. It is for all employees to follow. The CEO can't be everywhere to do everything, so all must follow the mission statement.

For Cisco Systems, the rationale given for posting the company mission was as follows:

> [We] want to ensure that anyone who has contact with Cisco can see and understand our Mission Statement clearly and that it truly represents what Cisco is committed to do.

Finally, for Toys-R-Us, the response received from the company's Web master stated:

> We feel that it's important to put our mission statement on our Web site because we feel it's important for customers to know what our goals are. Just as in any store, there is a goal and a path the company chooses to reach that goal. Our goal is said in our mission statement.

Thus, based on the limited response received, it appears that some of the possible rationales for posting a company's mission on its Web site are: to reinforce the importance of (non-changing) company values (Home Depot and Johnson Controls); to give broad exposure to the mission (Johnson Controls and Cisco Systems); to publicly state (and be held accountable for) the company's "commitments" to all important stakeholders (Fedex and Cisco Systems); and, to attract and reassure customers (Fedex and Toys-R-Us). Future research (conducted with a larger sample and delivering a larger response rate) should help to confirm or deny the representativeness of this response set.

Those that don't

Of the firms in our sample, 55 were identified as having a Web site in which the company mission statement was either not listed or could not be found. When the Web masters were contacted and questioned on this, 43 did not respond or indicated that it was their company policy not to respond to requests for "research assistance". However, 12 responses were received (representing a 22 per cent response rate among those Web sites with no mission posted). Their answers (and response frequencies) for not having a posted mission statement were categorized as follows:

- Company does not have a mission statement at all: 4 (33 per cent).
- Company is in the process of revising its mission and/or updating its Web site and plans to post the mission: 3 (25 per cent).
- No reason other than a "company oversight" and the decision has now been made to post it: 2 (17 per cent).
- Company does not feel that it is important to post its mission on the Web site: 3 (25 per cent).

Again, it must be pointed out that these categories of response represent only a preliminary and tentative classification scheme that needs to be confirmed or challenged by future, broader-scale research.

For the four companies that did not have a mission statement at all, it was interesting that none of the Web masters could give an explanation for this. But what was particularly intriguing from the remaining responses received, however, were the three from the organizations that were deliberately choosing not to post their mission. For instance, Eastman Kodak's reply was simply that they felt that it was not necessary to post their mission statement and that other items (e.g. environmental policies and history of the company) "would be of the most interest to our visitors". Both Hartford Financial Services and Rite Aid, on the other hand, gave a different response indicating that they regarded their "mission statement as an inspirational internal promise" only. Interestingly, the Web master at Rite Aid added:

> At some point in the future when we feel we have made the strides necessary to our mission, we may add it to our Web site.

And this appears to be exactly what was happening at the five companies who told us that they were in the process of posting their mission or that the omission was simply an oversight which would soon be corrected.

Discussion

Look who's posting now ...

Corporate vs non-corporate
The data in Table I shows a wide discrepancy in the posting of mission statements between for-profit corporate entities (23 per cent of the total listings) and all other types of organizations – especially educational. One logical explanation for these findings appears to be linked to the history and origins of the Internet itself. The Internet started as a means to keep government organizations (e.g. military) in constant contact while minimizing costs. Later, educational (mostly not-for-profit) facilities adopted the technology to keep researchers in contact with one another on projects that were often co-developed at different locations. Thus, it may simply be that the legacy of the Internet's meager beginnings can be used to explain the observations that we obtained.

But there may also be other forces that have been at work shaping the observations that we obtained. For instance, one possible rationale for

the higher use of the Internet by some organizations can be found in the way they use information technology. Educational institutions, for example, tend to be both heavy users and quick, first adopters of information technology – and they have been credited with achieving many advances in the field. Such "cultural differences" (or advantages) may make the transition to the Internet and the World Wide Web simply more natural and less painful.

The high occurrence of mission statements posted by not-for-profit associations might also be attributed to the astuteness of those organizational leaders who recognized early the benefits which can be gained from participating in this new electronic medium. After all, the Web provides an excellent means to access a relatively young and curious audience (who wants to know for what particular values an organization stands) at a very low cost. Thus, for-profit organizations are not the only ones to have recognized the "business opportunity" that the Internet provides.

Notwithstanding the preceding comments, however, for-profit corporations represent the second largest group found to post their mission statements of the Web. And yet, the results in Table II also indicate that large numbers (55 per cent) of the world's leading corporations still do not see a need for using the Web to communicate or advertise their mission. We speculate that as more for-profit organizations begin to see some the advantages that can accrue to them from having the widest possible dissemination of their mission as possible (Bart, 2000), there will be a significant increase in the number of firms that use their Web sites for this purpose. Moreover as more corporations "work-the-Web" with electronic data interchange (EDI) and/or Web-based databases, they will also probably just "think it up on their own" to use their Web sites for posting all types of company information – including their mission statements. When this happens, we hypothesize that corporate postings of mission statements will probably come to dominate all other categories.

It should be noted, though, that all of the above comments are highly speculative and more research is necessary to prove or disprove their validity.

Location, location, location

Our investigation into the actual location for posting a company's mission statement proved to be very revealing. First of all, we had to search separately for a company's mission statement in 94 per cent of the cases because it was not easily recognized or locatable from the first page. And, in the end, only 45 of the *Fortune* 500 companies were identified as having a mission statement located somewhere within their Web site. Of these, only 25 (or 55 per cent) had the location of their mission statement "identifiable" within the first three pages – either though the placement of the mission statement itself (i.e. on page 1) or through a special "mission statement icon/button" (located on pages one, two or three). The median mission location was page 3. Given that few of the Web sites in our sample went deeper than five pages (based on a follow-up survey), our mission's typical location suggests that most of North America's leading corporations still do not consider them to be sufficiently important to give them high visibility.

Unfortunately, none of the Web masters in our survey was able to provide any particularly enlightening answers with respect to our inquiry regarding the choice of their mission statements' specific location. Previous research by Bart (2000), however, has demonstrated that the more effectively a mission statement is disseminated, the greater the positive impact on organizational performance. Consequently, we hypothesize that the higher the profile – or the closer the location to the home page – that a mission statement has in the Web site of any company, the greater its visibility, the more effective the Web site will be perceived to be as a medium for communicating the mission, and the greater its impact on employee behavior and attitudes. Validating these hypotheses, however, is a matter that will have to be left to future research.

To post or not to post? – that is the question!

As indicated above, 45 per cent of the *Fortune* 500 firms in our sample made the conscious decision to post their mission statement somewhere on their company Web site. When the reasons given for this decision are reviewed, it appears that they reflect and give additional validity to those rationales that have often been referred to by previous writers for having any mission statement at all. The "classic rationales" for having a mission statement are typically stated as:

- to motivate and control organizational members in pursuit to common organizational ends;
- to balance the interests of competing stakeholders (internal and external); and
- to guide the resource allocation decision (Bart, 1999; Ireland and Hitt, 1992; King and Cleland, 1979; Campbell, 1993; Collins and Porras, 1991; Daniel, 1992; Javidan, 1991; Klemm *et al.*, 1991; El-Namaki, 1992; Wilson, 1992).

The responses of the five Web masters who responded to our inquiry concerning their companies' motivations for posting the mission can be conveniently assigned to one or more of these categories.

What was particularly surprising, however, were the large number of major, global corporations (i.e. 55 per cent of our *Fortune* 500 sample) that appeared to have no mission statement posted at all. Sadly, for most of them (43 firms), we were unable to determine their particular motivations in making the decision not to post their mission statements since they would not respond to our inquiries. However, the Web masters from 12 firms provided a unique glimpse into, at least, some of the possible reasons as to why no mission statements were evident on their Web sites.

Of these latter responses, there were three distinct opinions expressed. One was relatively benign, i.e. Web masters in five of the companies indicated that their Web site was "in transition" and that the mission statement was soon to be posted (to correct for its omission or to post a new or improved version). The remaining two opinions, on the other hand, were somewhat disturbing (given recent advances in mission statement research). More specifically, the Web masters in four companies indicated that the reason for not posting their company's mission statement was that such a document simply did not exist. And Web masters in the three remaining companies stated that, while a mission statement did in fact exist, posting it to the Web site was considered to be simply not necessary.

Determining the reasons for not having a mission statement at all was a topic which we felt

went beyond the scope of our research investigation – besides which, no reason was offered by any of the Web masters for this situation. Nevertheless, we feel compelled to state, for the record, that there is considerable evidence today to suggest that those organizations that have a mission statement enjoy significant performance benefits from so doing. For instance, mission statements (when properly formulated and implemented) have been known to provide a greater sense of direction which, in turn, helps focus the activities and behaviors of all employees. When mission statements are used to promote a set of shared values, it generally leads to greater employee job satisfaction and motivation. In addition, good mission statements help organizations allocate scarce resources much more effectively because they clearly isolate and articulate organizational priorities.

More recently, though, there has been some groundbreaking research that now shows the connection between mission statements and financial success (Bart and Baetz, 1998; Bart *et al.*, 2001). Consequently, those organizations in our study that did not have a mission statement at all appear to be ignoring an important management tool for which the evidence is now starting to mount in support of its positive performance impact. Any company would be well advised to reconsider its motivations for not having one.

And then there are those organizations that have a mission, but have chosen not to post it on their Web page. Given the comments from the Web masters in this study with posted mission statements, it would appear that choosing not to list a mission statement costs an organization considerable benefits (see discussion above). In addition, in some related research, Bart (2000) was able to demonstrate that the more methods an organization uses to make its mission statements known to all stakeholders (especially internal ones), the greater the "mission effect™"[1] i.e. there were significantly higher levels of satisfaction with and commitment to the mission – as well as other performance advantages.

Unfortunately, we were not able to specifically test for the mission effect™ in the present study and so we leave it as a future research initiative. Nevertheless, based on Bart's highly related work in this area, we hypothesize that there is a significant and positive relationship between the use of a company's Web site for communicating its mission and firm performance. Until the results of this research are available, it is our considered opinion and recommendation that for those corporations that have not done so to date, they should use their Web sites to promote and communicate their mission statement – provided it is one which has proven to be well conceived and designed.

Some final thoughts

The posting of mission statements on the World Wide Web appears to be a prevalent phenomenon. Organizations of all types appear to be using their Web sites for this purpose. But there is still very little guidance on how Web masters should best present them.

This research study was developed as a preliminary investigation into the role that the Internet plays in a mission statement's communication and dissemination. While it is obvious that much more research is needed, a number of salient features have been discovered about their use. In particular, this paper has identified some of the categories and mix of organizations that post mission statements on the Web and has briefly speculated on the state and future of that composition. Further, our analysis has revealed some of the ways in which for-profit corporations are communicating mission statements on the Web and we now have a better understanding of the motivations for posting or not posting them.

More work, though, is needed to better understand the relationships between mission statements and the Internet as a whole. For instance, how does the posting of mission statements on the World Wide Web compare with other forms of electronic communication (i.e. e-mail, extranets and intranets)? It would be interesting to know if the location of a mission statement within a Web site varies with the type of organization (i.e. corporate, for profit, not for profit, educational, government, etc.) as well as the reasons for any variations. Another fascinating question would be to explore the performance advantages and disadvantages that might be associated with a mission statement's particular location in a

Web site. Further questions should also address the success of organizations (in both financial and qualitative terms) that post versus don't post their mission statements on the Internet.

The more we discover about how organizations use, develop and disseminate their mission statements (and the rationales for their choices), the more we will better understand the exact role that this extremely popular management tool plays and the effect that it can have – when properly used – on future performance success.

Note

1 "mission effect^TM" is a trademark of Christopher K. Bart, all rights reserved.

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