TRENDS

WHAT ARE CONSORTIA DOING TODAY? (MORE SURVEY RESULTS)

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Introduction: One way to assess the success of consortia is to review what the organizations themselves think is noteworthy. Whether a reader ultimately agrees with the value of the claimed accomplishment, it is not likely that she will conclude that an organization's actual accomplishments exceed its own claims. For most organizations, the significant news (as internally perceived) is packaged for broader consumption in that most venerable of all promotional devices - the press release. Hence, surveying the raw press release output of the worlds' consortia and SDOs in any given period is likely to give a reader a fairly accurate picture of what the global standard setting infrastructure is up to, and why it thinks it matters. At the same time, the reader can form her own judgment as to how much, and what, is truly significant.

As noted in the previous article (How do Consortia Tell the News: A Survey of Over 150 Consortia), we visited the websites of 159 consortia and SDOs to compile data on some of the ways in which these organizations disseminate news. As part of that survey, we also examined every press release which one of these organizations had issued in the thirty-day period beginning on February 19, and ending on March 22, 2003. As we reviewed this output, we assigned each press release to one of the categories which appear in Table 1 below. The following article summarizes the quantitative and qualitative results of that exercise.

Methodology: A number of categories were created which were intended to be sufficiently discrete to represent the various types of information which consortia report, while few enough to provide meaningfully interpretable results. Each press release was assigned to only the single most appropriate category. The results are as follows:

Category	Number of Releases
What We're Doing	47
Industry/Niche Promotion	17
Completed Standards and Specifications	11
New Initiatives	10
Meeting Announcements	9
Training Programs and Other Education	8
White Papers, Studies, Guides, etc,…	7
Advocacy	7
Interoperability Demonstrations	6
Issues (IPR, privacy, etc,…)	3
Social Responsibility	2
Total:	**127**

The following summarizes the principal types of information in each category:

What We're Doing: This category includes a wide variety of information, such as the announcement of newly elected directors, the addition of new members, presentations made at trade shows, awards given, tributes to individuals and similar reports of what are, in fact, ordinary course of business events.

Industry/Niche Promotion: These press releases usually reported the results of statistical surveys, member responses, current events and other data intended to present either the need for, or success of, the organizations' standards or other goals. Not all information reported in these press releases was internally generated, or exclusively involved the organization's members.

Completed Standards and Specifications: These are the evidence of the completion of the core deliverables of consortia.

Meeting Announcements: These releases largely comprise announcements of regular meetings or forums being presented by consortia.

Training Programs and Other Education: These press releases related to training and similar activities other than regular membership meetings.

White Papers, Studies, Guides, etc.: This category includes those press releases which related to work product which we regarded as furthering the goals of the organization, other than standards and specifications.

New Initiatives: This category captures the announcements of new processes or collaborations, including new specification work groups, liaisons with other organizations, commissioning of new studies, and so on. It does not include updates on existing processes which (for purposes of this study), were included in "What We're Doing".

Advocacy: A minority of consortia take an active interest in influencing public policy or public (as compared to purely customer) perceptions. These press releases comment on proposed laws and regulations, or the adverse effects which might result from the failure to endorse standards or other supported activities.

Interoperability Demonstrations: One traditional way of convincing the marketplace that completed standards are effective is to arrange a demonstration of networked systems of diverse vendors which "plug and play" through use of the standards, usually at a trade show.

Issues: This category was created to address matters of internal policy: how to manage intellectual property, privacy issues and other matters which are important for a consortium to grapple with.

Social Responsibility: This category relates principally to SDOs, whose charters obligate them to be responsible to constituencies beyond their commercial membership.

Findings: The sampling was sufficiently large that some findings may be made with confidence. In addition, a number of interesting observations can be made which would require a longer sampling period to conclusively establish.

Is this News? The first, and most obvious, conclusion is that a very significant percentage of the press releases issued by consortia and SDOs are not likely to be viewed as "news" by the press or by analysts. As a result, no actual stories are likely to be written based on these releases, and their issuance is largely a result of the public relations process going through the motions to little actual result. Virtually all of the releases in the "What We're Doing", "Meeting Announcements", and "Training Programs and Other Education" fall into this category. The combined total of 64 press releases destined to fall into a PR black hole therefore is a minimum of **50%** of the total. And, of course, many of the remainder are no more likely to attract the attention of the press.

Reportable Accomplishments: Arguably the most newsworthy information which a standard setting consortium can announce is the completion of a standard, or some other work product which

directly furthers its mission. In the sample surveyed, there were 11 announcements of standards, and an additional 7 releases relating to studies, supporting guides and other deliverables directly relating to the mission of the organization. The combined total of 18 represents **14%** of the total number of releases. **11.5%** of the surveyed organizations therefore announced a completed process or the release of another significant work item, equating to an annualized completion rate of 216 deliverables (**1.38** deliverables per organization). However, this substantially under-represents the actual work product per organization of the entities in the sample set that actually set standards, given that many of the included organizations are purely promotional.

Pipeline: While the categories just noted represent the completion of projects, the "New Initiatives" category indicates the measure of new activities being commenced. The survey indicated that only 10 new initiatives were commenced, or **56%** of the number of projects completed. However, a thirty day period is not likely to be statistically significant, and it would therefore be necessary to track this ratio over at least a three or six month period before drawing any conclusions as to whether there is an overall decrease in the volume of standard setting in process.

Nature of Activities: Only a very small number of consortia appear to be engaging in any activities other than pure standard setting and promotion. While a thirty-day period again is too short to draw definite conclusions, six of the seven organizations issuing press releases in the "Advocacy" category fell into certain categories: SDOs (ANSI and ISO) - which have a broader charter than consortia; a regulated industry (telecom - three organizations); and a national standards organization (BSI - the British Standards Institute). Advocacy, therefore, appears to be something which is not included in the game plan of most consortia (at least to the extent of this data).

Promotion: A surprisingly small number of press releases were dedicated to promoting the industry, technology, demand or effectiveness of the standards or other concerns of the sampled organizations. Only 17, or **13%**, of the press releases were so categorized, and seven of these were issued by a single organization (DSL Forum, which reports extensively on the growth of DSL usage). While some of the press releases included in the "White Papers, Study Guides, etc." are also promotional, only 7 releases fell into that category. Accordingly, while much effort was presumably spent by the sample group on promotional activities, few of these efforts were thought to merit the issuance of a press release (notwithstanding the low news threshold indicated by the number of "What We're Doing" press releases issued). Perhaps more of these efforts (if indeed more were in process) should have been more strongly promoted, at least at the websites.

Summary and Conclusions: The fact that comparatively little reportable news may be generated in a thirty day period by 156 consortia and SDOs is not surprising. In point of fact, such organizations, by their nature, are only capable of generating certain types of information which is likely to have significant appeal beyond their memberships. The fact that they are dedicating as much of their slim resources to producing so many press releases which cannot be expected to earn a return on the time invested is more surprising.

The press releases reviewed indicate that SDOs and consortia are continuing to do what they have traditionally done, with little indication of new methodologies or innovation. They also indicate that their activities are primarily inward-looking, which is doubtless appropriate, although it might be asked whether such organizations should attempt to play a role on a broader stage, as do trade associations in traditional areas of business. Certainly, there are legislative, regulatory and other processes and events which have an impact on members and their common businesses, and it is somewhat surprising that more collective action is not seen in these areas.

While consortia may be all about innovative technologies, they do not appear to be about innovation in collective action. Perhaps that is just as well, when one is engaged in a process that is as exciting as watching the grass grow.

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