

Guide to Best Practices in **PR Measurement**

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When It Comes To Measurement, Fortune Favors the Bold

These days, measurement—at least as it relates to communications and business—has nothing to do with rulers or yardsticks. Nor does it relate to counting—clips, eyeballs or otherwise (though wouldn't it be nice to reduce it to that, if only for a moment?)

Thanks to major shifts in communications, both in terms of channels and general practices, measuring the value of PR's contribution to bottomline business results has never been harder—or more necessary. And, while there is no one-size-fits-all solution, there are many lessons to be learned from the trials and errors, successes and failures, of your fellow communicators.

In the following pages of *PR News*' Guide to Best Practices in PR Measurement, you will find just that—insights, strategies and tactics from the foremost thought leaders in the communications discipline, many of whom have taken huge risks to explore revolutionary measurement techniques, and reaped the benefits accordingly.

Whether you want tips for new media measurement, ways to impact your bottom line or best practices in quantifying the results of integrated marketing efforts, these articles will break down any measurement conundrum into actionable steps, thus enabling you to take the reins in managing your organization's reputation, messaging and engagement with stakeholders.

We hope you learn from these executives' lessons and find inspiration in their hard-won battles on the measurement front.

Go forth and measure.



Courtney Barnes
Editor
PR News

➤ A Practical Introduction to PR Research

By Mark Weiner

Mark Weiner is a research-based consultant and the author of “Unleashing the Power of PR: A Contrarian’s Guide to Marketing and Communication” (Wiley, 2006).

1 Senior executives have begun to demand a measurable return on their investment in PR. Unfortunately, many PR professionals are unprepared to respond, and so we often hear things like, “For years, we’ve needed to more proactive and strategic in our ability to plan and measure our public relations . . . and I want to. Our executives are beginning to require it. But what is the best way to proceed? Will the results prove the value of PR? And what if the research shows that PR isn’t performing?”

If these questions resemble your own, look at it this way: Without the proper research-based underpinnings, you may never fully quantify the extent of your accomplishments in a way that will allow you to reinforce and merchandise your success. And without a measurable, systematic approach to public relations objectives-setting, strategy development and evaluation, you may never know enough about your performance to introduce improvements when needed. And finally, without a scientific approach to cataloguing, understanding, and applying what you learn to future endeavors, success will be fleeting rather than sustainable, and failures are bound to be repeated. The inevitable, unfortunate outcome of such an indeterminate state is that, while you’re in it, the world accelerates without you.

So much can be gained when the rigor of science is married to the art of public relations: meaningful and positive business outcomes, market supremacy, and professional advancement. Companies that dominate their world because they understand and master their environment generate higher profits, attract and keep the best talent, and enjoy other forms of overall business success. The world’s most admired companies didn’t earn their reputations

without carefully studying themselves in the mirror and then acting on what they saw—the ugly as well as the sublime.

Those companies and public relations professionals who enjoy the benefits of PR research and evaluation begin by embracing the process fully: They relish their victories because their wins are validated and can be merchandized more credibly to those who fund PR programs. They also understand that uncovering shortfalls is a natural result of the process, especially in the beginning, but at least such shortfalls can be isolated and corrected. As a result, these well-informed practitioners lead with confidence and certainty.

So why don’t more people use research and measurement?

PR people have many reasons for not conducting proper research. Some of the more common objections follow along with my responses.

➤ The costs will outweigh the benefits. What will we find that we didn’t already know?

Sure, a level of investment is required to undertake a serious and rigorous public relations research program. But the better question might be, “What is the cost of not proving and improving your value when your competitors are proving and improving theirs?”

Several years ago, Ford and Firestone had a very raw public debate as to who was responsible for tires that tended to explode on hot Texas roads. During the debate—and maybe because of it—Ford lost roughly 40% of its market capitalization while Firestone-Bridgestone lost about 50% of its stock value—the tally was in the billions of dollars. What might those companies have learned by analyzing

the past performance of companies who engage in very damning arguments through the media?

Then there is the case of P&G who found that by applying media content analysis through sophisticated marketing mix models, the positive return-on-investment of PR could be quantified. The ROI far exceeded expectations and P&G, arguably the greatest marketing power on the planet, adjusted its marketing and PR approach to generate an even better ROI.

If you could avoid a billion-dollar market-cap drop or add millions of dollars in sales in exchange for spending only 2% of your annual PR budget to provide the required guidance, the question wouldn't be "Why do it?"—the questions would be "How often can I do it?" and "How soon can I get started?"

As for only being able to learn what you already know, it is true that research often reflects your hunches. But there is value in validating what you know because even if your PR victory is obvious to you, it may not be obvious to those funding your PR programs. And you never know what you might learn that is surprising and transformative.

❖ **This will be a lot of work for senior management: setting research criteria and measurement definitions, selling it in, and so on.**

It's true that instituting a research-based public relations program can be time-consuming and has to be undertaken at relatively high levels within the organization. But the definition process is one that provides an enormous opportunity to learn and prioritize, and once the criteria are defined, they won't change very often. And within large organizations with multiple divisions, some metrics are applicable across all units, especially those tied to the overall goals and objectives of the organization.

❖ **We have only limited control over the results. Why should we be held accountable for things we can't control?**

While it's true that certain aspects of the public relations process are not completely controllable, much of it is manageable and, as a result, PR departments should be held accountable for delivering quality results that improve over time. If you believe

that PR can't be measured and managed, you'll be watching from the sidelines—marginalized, minimized, and living in limbo—or you should be in another line of business.

❖ **The results will be used against us.**

Sure, some wrongheaded bosses may use the results to punish the department just as it may be true that poor results may yield unpleasantness. But can you imagine the boss who'd rather that you not endeavor to improve or who would fault you for trying? If you're stuck in a company where your efforts to quantify and thereby improve performance is given no respect, it maybe time to find an employer who respects you and what you do.

Also keep in mind that using the results as a scorecard isn't what PR research and measurement is about: It's about having the feedback you need to do a better job and to support your efforts. What would be most harmful would be not having any results to show at all. Better to ask about ways to gain resources and recognition from your internal clients and to clearly show them the consequences of your efforts. And, yes, sometimes the results will reveal failure—but it's better to learn and improve than to ignore the results altogether. Successful organizations enjoy enormous advantages: Take the necessary steps to be a member of that elite club.

❖ **Management will misinterpret the results.**

Rather than providing a basis for misuse or misunderstanding, the research-based public relations process translates the insular language of public relations into the language of business, a lexicon that executives understand. And with a common vernacular, the results can be understood and validated by a much broader spectrum of marketing and communication investment decision-makers.

Also keep in mind that the main purpose of the research-based public relations is to deliver the power of PR against the organization's overall goals and objectives rather than as a scorecard of individual performance. Nonetheless, when executed properly, the research-based PR process will allow for departmental and individual performance

evaluations so that results at the lower levels can be aggregated to the organizational level.

➤ **Management and even colleagues lack the interest and expertise to support the research we need to prove ROI.**

A 2004 IABC membership survey found that almost 85% of all respondents agreed with the proposition, “Lack of internal and budgetary resources is the biggest obstacle when attempting to demonstrate communications ROI.” The answer to how one sells research internally can be surprisingly straightforward (and you can find it for free at www.instituteforpr.org):

➤ Advocate ROI thinking for PR within your organization

➤ Speak to internal clients once each year about the PR activities, professional attributes, and measures they value

➤ Constantly and consistently communicate with internal clients to document success and demonstrate a commitment to improvement.

➤ Develop learning experiences to equip staff and internal clients with the insight and knowledge they need to understand what public relations ROI means.

➤ Set the pace in emphasizing the need for good research and evaluation and others will get the message. Having a practical expert on staff can jump-start the initiative

➤ Don't perpetuate the myth that PR can't be measured. CEOs and other senior executives know better.

Turning around long-standing practices may not be quick and easy, but it can be done.

➤ **They will hold us to inappropriate or unfair standards.**

If you properly initiate the process, you will have as much to say about the standards as anyone else. Having these metrics set in advance almost eliminates the risk of being unfairly or inappropriately evaluated later on, at which time there is little or nothing you can do about it.

➤ **This is too complicated for us.**

As a judge in many prestigious PR awards programs, my experience is that while some of the profession's award-winning programs are built around complex research and evaluations, most of them are not. Simply put, it doesn't have to be complicated. What is needed is a minimum basic set of measurements that cross various business objectives and are aligned with your objectives and strategy. The purpose of the research and evaluation, after all, is to provide clarity and understanding, not intricacy and confusion.

➤ **It's too expensive. We can't afford it.**

Many paths lead to the summit, but all of them begin with a single step: It would be much better to start small than to never begin. You can find many low-cost and even do-it-yourself approaches that provide insight and guidance, and it's better to be partially right than totally in the dark. And what's the cost of not making the investment? It's not just the potential for lost sales or lower market cap. In most cases the costs are much more routine: wasted resources going toward initiatives that could easily have been avoided.

WHY WAIT?

In an environment defined by tough economic times the question of ROI is as critical to answer as it can be difficult. But make no mistake: It is becoming more important than ever for communications professionals to ensure—not just measure—PR's positive return on investment. You may not be able to do anything about the past, but there's still much you can do to affect the outcome of the future. And you can begin today to ensure a positive return on PR investment. PRN

➤ Does Pumping Up The Volume Pump Up Business?

By Frank Ovaitt

Frank Ovaitt is the President and CEO of the Institute for Public Relations.

It's one of those things you think you know, but you've probably never seen proven. Does pumping up the volume of media coverage really pump up the business?

A paper published on the Institute for Public Relations' Web site (<http://www.instituteforpr.org>) has some answers. The paper, by Angie Jeffrey (vice president, editorial research, VMS), David Michaelson (president, David Michaelson & Company), and Don Stacks (professor, University of Miami) is entitled "Exploring the Link Between Volume of Media Coverage and Business Outcomes."

Methods of measuring the reach and impact of media relations efforts have grown more sophisticated and varied. Yet this field is like a natural history museum where all of the species on display can also be seen in daily life.

Many practitioners still depend on the "thud factor," counting and stuffing clips into hefty binders to impress clients. One *PR News* survey discovered that 84% of respondents cited clip counts as their main method of media measurement.

From there, some practitioners have moved on to measuring audience impressions—print circulation, broadcast gross impressions and Internet visits, with or without multipliers to estimate pass-along rates. The authors of this paper cite research showing that, if you're trying to correlate media coverage to business results, audience impressions are 12% more accurate than story counts.

Still more complex methods may rely on media value (if the same space or time were purchased) and indices incorporating factors like tone, accuracy and target-audience reach to connect media

coverage to mission accomplished. This has been shown to improve correlations to business results by another 12% over impressions, and almost 25% over story counts.

In our living museum of methodologies, these authors have the advantage of an advanced linguistics program that can analyze huge numbers of digitized articles. They can draw on new insights and three case studies to inform the work of media relations professionals.

THE IMPACT OF PURE VOLUME

CASE 1: A healthcare organization sought to get women to see their doctors and ask about a mammogram. That was the desired outcome. They extensively publicized the importance of mammograms for early detection of cancer in a campaign that included no paid media or other promotional activity. But did all that coverage matter?

Based on 47,000 articles that appeared over five quarters, the researchers were able to show that the desired business result unmistakably climbed and fell with the number of articles. The correlation level was very high at .89 - on a scale where 1.0 would indicate perfect correlation.

This was a simple situation where the message itself was essentially factual and resonated with the media. There were no competitors trying to counter with their own messages or introduce negatives. Real life is rarely so sweet.

NEGATIVE NEWS VOLUME: IS BAD PUBLICITY BETTER THAN NO PUBLICITY? (NO.)

CASE 2: In January 2006, the American College of Chest Physicians said that cough medicines are ineffective at relieving coughs, though allergy medicines help due to their drying effect. The

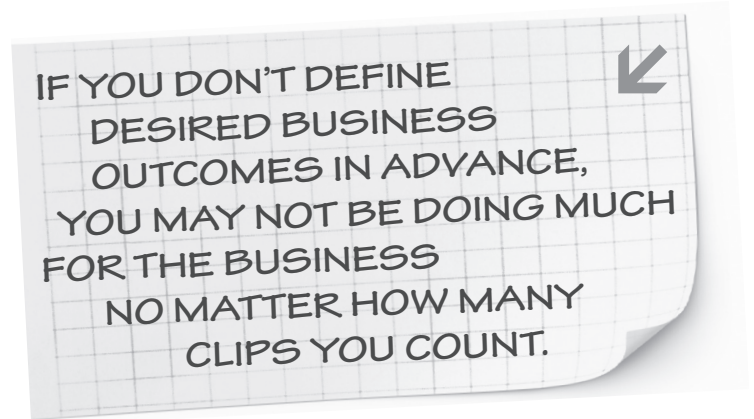
news hit all the major TV broadcasts and most daily newspapers. Cough syrup sales dropped at an unprecedented rate, with the downward trend reversing only when the negative coverage eased. The measurement metric for this study was tonality-qualified clips of several hundred stories.

Of course, one person's bad news may be another's good news. These same stories correlated to a 12% surge in physician visits for respiratory illnesses, and allergy medicine sales soared. Whether tone is positive, negative or neutral, it appears volume links tightly with business results—though the desirability of those results may be another matter.

MEANINGFUL MESSAGE DELIVERY: A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE?

In the third case study, the product in question was a medicine for overactive bladder ("going and going..."), with prescription volume as the desired business outcome. Again, the product was promoted solely through unpaid media.

An analysis of 3,000 articles showed a modest .51 correlation between coverage volume and prescription volume. A number like that suggests that volume alone won't produce desired business results. But the link between coverage and prescriptions soared to .97 (near perfect correla-



tion) when at least one key message made it into the story.

What are we to learn from this research?

First, if you don't define desired business outcomes in advance, you may not be doing much for the business no matter how many clips you can drop on the desk.

Second, you'd better consider negatives as well as positives if you want an accurate picture of the impact of media coverage on the business. If you don't see that clearly, how can you manage it effectively?

And third, it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that message. You need to have messages crisply defined and work like crazy to get them accurately reflected in as many stories as possible. PRN

Building the bridge between PR and the bottom line.

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