Volume 5

PRNews

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barcelona principles • influencer measurement tools •

word of mouth • engagement surveys • monitoring conversations •

quality vs. quantity • managing ongoing measurement systems • message analytics la

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EDITOR'S LETTER

The True Measure of Storytelling Skills

Inspiration, creativity and storytelling are hallmarks of effective and memorable public relations initiatives, yet this truth can be a double-edged sword. Many PR practitioners are blessed with terrific writing skills and are naturals when it comes to interpersonal communication. And if they don't feel gifted in these areas, then they devote years to becoming expert storytellers—and to making it look easy. But making the case that their work contributes to an organization's health and well-being and to opportunities for future growth has never been easy. Telling the C-suite that storytelling skills should always be part of a business plan can be like telling one's parents that you want to major in English or art history.

The migration of public relations work to social networks has not made measuring these efforts in terms the C-suite can understand and appreciate any easier. The transition has happened so fast and the learning curve is actually getting steeper as communicators get more sophisticated at using their skills on Facebook and Twitter. Daylong conferences and workshops on social media have sprung up just so PR pros can learn from their peers (we've been part of these educational efforts at *PR News*). This has only intensified the need to measure the success of these efforts so organizational leaders will continue to budget for them.

That's where this latest edition of *PR News*' *PR Measurement Guidebook* comes in. In this book you'll find the latest best practices, strategies and tactics on PR measurement from some of the top thinkers in the field. You'll get insight on the Barcelona Principles from one of the measurement experts who actually helped craft the principles; you'll learn about a "message analytics" approach to measuring the quality of comments about your brand so you can better monitor reputational issues; you'll develop skills at finding your most important influencers and actually measuring their influence; and you'll learn how to keep your social media measurement and evaluation approach and tools simple so you can more easily build measurable, desired outcomes into your PR initiatives.

We thank all the measurement experts who contributed their hard-earned insight to Volume 5 of the *PR Measurement Guidebook*, which we hope will help tie PR pros' storytelling abilities to the science of measurement. These contributors know that PR measurement continues to be a series of experiments, contradictions and breakthroughs, and that we all benefit from a mix of voices and a healthy debate. And your voices need to be part of this advancement as well. Please let us know about your own successes in PR measurement—this is a story that has no end.

Sincerely,

Steve Goldstein
Editorial Director, *PR News*
sgoldstein@accessintel.com

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Index of Companies & Organizations

Keep It Simple: How Streamlining Evaluation Tools Can Yield Best Results

By Julie O'Neil

Increasingly sophisticated measurement and evaluation tools and metrics continue to emerge in response to demands for accountability and demonstrated financial returns from public relations activity and programs. Marketing mixed modeling programming can isolate the contribution of public relations to sales relative to other communication functions. Digital conversations can be analyzed for influence and conversion to action. Automated content analysis programs can highlight prominence and valence of key messages.

Although these emerging metrics and measurement tools are admirable and necessary to keeping abreast with changes occurring in the public relations profession and digital landscape, it's important to not lose sight of the forest amid the bountiful trees.

I've witnessed the fear and, in some cases, near paralysis that results when one has to choose from the plethora of available metrics and tools to assess public relations activity. Yet, as I frequently remind my students, no tool should be selected if it doesn't alter and/or improve public relations activity. More specifically, measurement and evaluation efforts should help public relations professionals with at least one of the following objectives: 1) secure greater cost efficiencies, 2) more effectively achieve an organizational objective, 3) guide future initiatives and planning and 4) retain clients and earn more business.

Evaluate Your Approaches by Considering the Potential Payoff

Another useful way to conceptualize approaches to measurement and evaluation is to consider the potential payoff relative to the amount of time and money involved. These three approaches are briefly described below:

- **Outputs: the Easiest—But Least Useful—Way**

  This approach, sometimes referred to as measuring outputs, entails measuring and counting immediate public relations results. For example, a public relations practitioner might capture the number of Facebook fans or Twitter followers, volume of media coverage within a designated time frame, quantity of impressions and the number of people in attendance at an event.

- **Outtakes or Outgrowths: Middle Road**

  This approach entails determining whether key constituents actually saw the message, understand the message and/or retained this message.

- **Outcomes: the Hardest—But Most Useful—Method**

Some PR professionals opt to measure outputs due to the ease involved in capturing and counting the available data. Yet, data derived from this approach is not particularly meaningful.

This approach measures changes in attitudes, opinions or behavior as a result of public relations activity or program.

Some PR professionals opt to measure outputs due to the ease involved in capturing and counting the available data. Yet, data derived from this approach is not particularly meaningful. For example, assume that an *American Idol* candidate has 3,000 Facebook fans and 9,000 Twitter followers. While the number of fans and followers are certainly impressive, they mean relatively little to the *American Idol* candidate unless those fans and followers actually do something. Assume that 40% of those Facebook fans go directly to the candidate's Web site to learn more about his background; an example of an outtake or outgrowth as it indicates a viewing and understanding of the message.

However, the ideal way to assess effectiveness of the digital strategy would be to determine how many of the Facebook fans or followers actually vote for the *American Idol* candidate during the show, an outcome measurement indicator, because it measures a change in behavior.

Measurement of both outgrowths and outcomes typically require some qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, can help PR professionals determine how or why constituents think or behave the way that they do. Quantitative research, such as surveys, content analysis, or experimental design, can enable PR pros to analyze the relationships between variables or to predict a dependent variable, i.e., changes in opinion about an issue, sales, donations or another behavior.

The scenarios described next will illustrate how three different types of organizations devised some relatively straightforward measurement and evaluation tools to respond to their respective challenges. Although the scenarios are based on real examples, some of the information has been modified to maintain confidentiality for the organizations.

University Evaluates Its Media Relations Program: Example of Measuring Outputs

One university sought to understand the volume and type of messages being communicated to external and internal audiences. To determine the answer, key branding messages that were strategically aligned with the university's goals and mission statement were first identified. Second, a relatively simple, although tedious, content analysis was conducted. All stories published both internally and externally were coded for key branding message, the respective unit/program that was promoted in the story, type of story, tone (positive, neutral, negative), prominence of the medium and whether the competition was mentioned.

A dashboard detailing some of these measurements is provided in Figure 1 (see next page). The data captured from this simple content analysis was particularly compelling for the public relations department. The audit revealed that certain messages—academics and experiences—were being clearly communicated in earned external media and internal communication outlets, while other branding attributes were lacking. The content analysis also revealed which academic programs and types of stories were receiving the bulk of impressions.

Armed with this information, the public relations department determined to develop and write more stories about particular programs and with

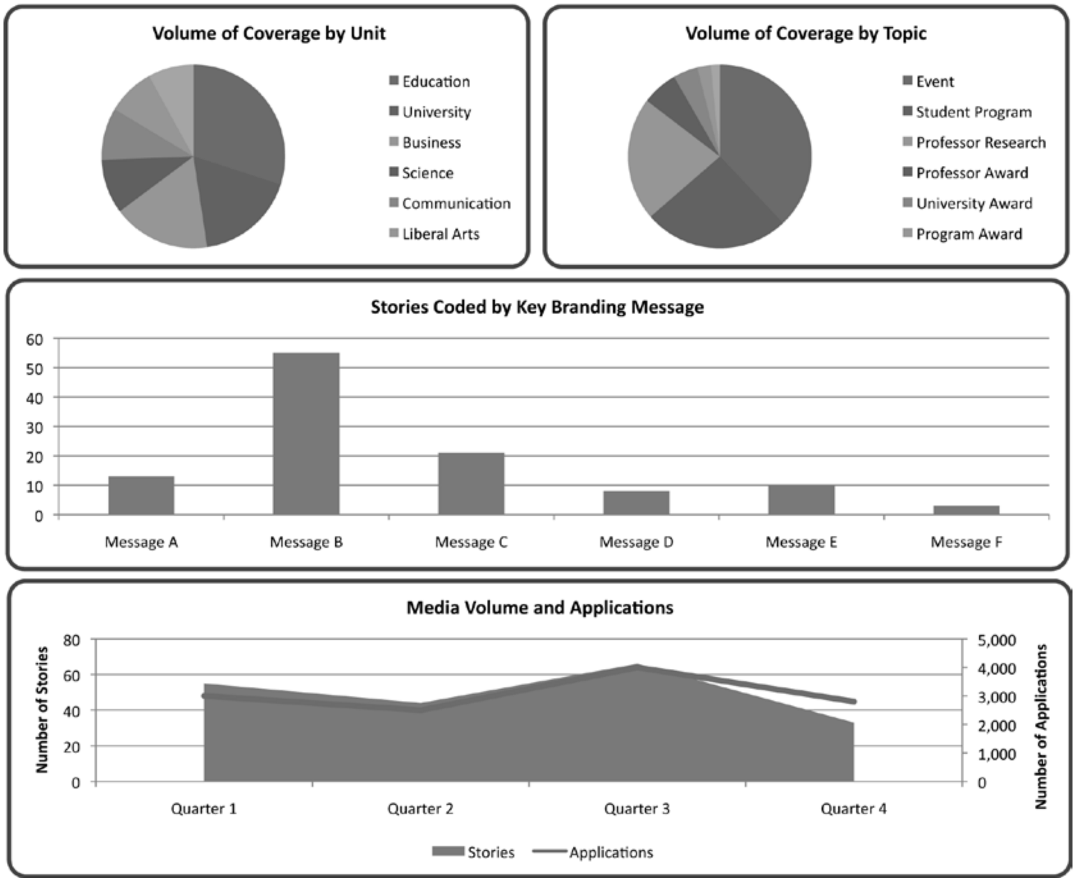
Remember to K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple and Strategic)

The three case studies mentioned demonstrate how measurement and evaluation approaches can be used to improve the effectiveness and cost efficiency of public relations programming. Regardless of the type of organization or scenario, PR practitioners should:

1) Ensure that their public relations objectives help to contribute to organizational goals and objectives.
2) Identify the best approach for measuring public relations activity.
3) Measure and evaluate whether they're achieving their objectives.
4) Adjust public relations programs based upon results. The key is to keep the measurement and evaluation process simple, but strategic.

—Julie O'Neil

Figure 1: University Public Relations Dashboard



This content analysis dashboard was used to illustrate the volume and type of messages being communicated by a university to external and internal audiences.

increased attention to certain branding messages.

Corporation Analyzes Employee Understanding of Goals and Objectives: Example of Measuring Outgrowths

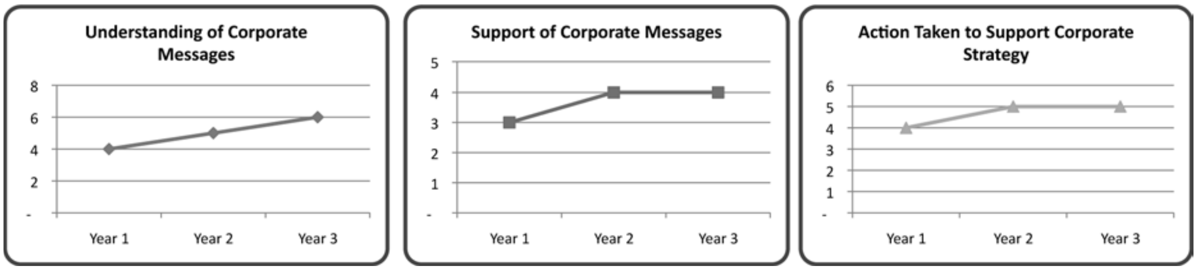
This international firm faced the challenge of communicating important, rapidly changing information to its 100,000-plus worldwide employees. After debuting a newly designed intranet to share information, the communication function sought to understand the effectiveness of its intranet in engendering employee understanding and support of corporate strategy and priorities and other industry information. To accomplish this goal, the communication unit implemented a benchmarking and follow-up survey to measure employee understanding and retention of goals and objectives as well as action taken by employees in support of that knowledge. The outgrowth measurement (because it measured understanding and retention) enabled the communication unit to assess the efficacy of its employee communication activity.

After noting some weaknesses and mostly strengths, as indicated in Figure 2, the corporate communication department asked for an increased budget from senior management to further support the evidence that its intranet strategy was working. The communication unit was also able to streamline some of its intranet infrastructure and recommend process improvements to increase employee message retention in certain parts of the world.

Nonprofit Seeks to Build Trust and Satisfaction for Increased Donations: Example of Measuring Outcomes

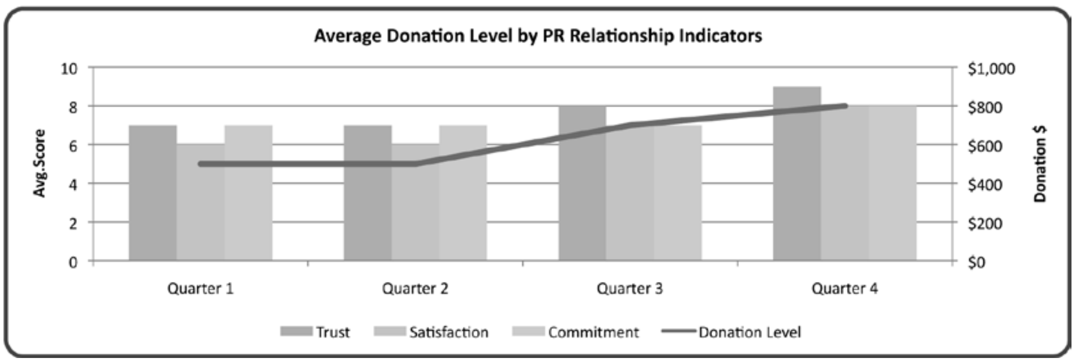
This nonprofit sought to increase the frequency

Figure 2: Employee Understanding of Messaging



The communications team at an international firm benchmarked employee understanding and retention of company goals and objectives.

Figure 3: Nonprofit Public Relations Measurement



Donors' trust, satisfaction and commitment were measured at a nonprofit organization as part of an effort to increase donations.

and level of its donations from its 5,000-plus donor base by 10%. The PR professionals working at this nonprofit had altered some of their communication tactics in hopes of improving the relationship it had with its top donors. To measure the relationship, the nonprofit communicators used some of the survey questions contained in Linda Hon and James Grunig's 1999 Relationship Scale (available for free at the Institute for Public Relations' Web site) that is designed to measuring trust, satisfaction, and commitment, as indicated in Figure 3.

A survey was then implemented with a randomly selected group of donors. Results indicated that the level of trust and commitment differentiated the bottom level of donors from the top level. The nonprofit's PR practitioners were then able to use this information to alter future communication and stewardship tactics that were specifically designed to build trust and commitment.

None of the measurement and evaluation programs described in these three scenarios was expensive, time consuming or complex. All three were useful, however, in adjusting public relations activity for better efficiencies and effectiveness. The best measurement and evaluation programs can be relatively simple, but powerful. It's better to measure only a few things and change public relations as a result, than to use a plethora of tools and not do anything with results. PRN

Julie O'Neil, PhD, is an associate professor and chair of the strategic communication division at Texas Christian University. She is a member of the Institute for Public Relations' Commission on PR Measurement & Evaluation. She also consults with organizations to create and implement measurement and evaluation programs.