
Evaluating Public Relations Effectiveness

Too many public relations programmes have been eliminated or severely cut back because no "value" could be attached to them. The harsh realities of corporate existence make it necessary for public relations practitioners to demonstrate the worth of what they do. Every aspect of organisational activity, particularly in difficult economic situations, is measured by its relative benefit to the firm. A public relations department that cannot demonstrate value to the organisation will not be in a position to influence the policy decisions that affect its own fate. Evaluation permits the practitioner to assess the effectiveness of the effort, demonstrate that effectiveness to management, and plan for future efforts.

Measurement Strategies

Because public relations is by nature intangible, assigning a value to its activities is difficult. Often the problem leads practitioners into the use of erroneous measures of measurement incorrectly applied.

Like every aspect of public relations practice, evaluations need careful planning. Ideally, the evaluation effort should be planned from the inception of the programme. An evaluation attempt that is tacked on after a programme is completed will produce incomplete and generally inappropriate data. When evaluation is part of the overall plan, each component can be constructed with an eye toward later measurement of its success.

Measurement-by-Objectives: The use of management-by-objectives (MBO), or any similar planning process, will alleviate the measurement problem facing public relations. Although MBO is most frequently used for evaluating individual employees, its basic elements can also be applied to programmes, projects, and work groups. The object is to prepare advance statements, usually during the planning phase, concerning legitimate expectations from a given effort. These statements must be mutually agreed on by all those involved before the action occurs. When the set time for evaluation arrives, objectives can be compared to accomplishments to assess the degree of success. The basic MBO steps include the following:

1. *Working group involvement:* If more than one person will be working on the project, the entire group should be involved in setting the objectives. This ensures that no portion of the task is overlooked and each contributor feels committed to the effort.
2. *Manager-subordinate involvement:* Once the group's objectives are established, each subordinate should work with the project manager to define a set of individual objectives. These keep the project moving by making certain that everyone understands his or her role.
3. *Determination of intermediate objectives:* This step defines a series of objectives along the way toward the overall target. Setting intermediate objectives permits more precise in-progress evaluation and makes it possible to consider mid-course corrections before the project gets out of hand.

4. *Determination of measures of achievement:* The point at which the effort will be considered complete should be specified in terms of either a time element or the achievement of a stated objective.
5. *Review, evaluation, and recycling:* Because no objective can be defined with absolute precision nor achieved perfectly, it is important to use information gained from each evaluation process to improve the planning for the next public relations effort.

Impact Analysis: Measuring the impact or results of the public relations effort is always difficult and never totally objective. However, the more public relations practitioners can quantitatively measure the results of their work, the better they will be able to plan future efforts and demonstrate their value to organisational decision-makers. Let us consider four dimensions of measurement that can be applied to assess the impact of any public relations campaign, regardless of its size. These are *audience coverage, audience response, campaign impact, and environmental mediation.*

- **Audience Coverage**

Perhaps the first point that must be addressed in any evaluation is whether or not the intended audiences were reached. Other questions that should be answered in the initial phase are: To what extent was each target audience exposed to the various messages? Which unintended audiences also received the messages?

Two basic measures are used to help answer these questions. First, accurate record keeping must detail what messages were prepared and where they were sent. Second, a system must be employed for tracking which releases were used and by whom. While the first measure is the easiest to obtain, it is worthless without the second for comparison. Massive amounts of publicity have no value unless some of it actually reaches the intended audience. Therefore, some method must be devised to measure accurately the use of publicity and the coverage of events.

Essentially, such measurement can be accomplished if the practitioner and/or other staff members keep a careful check on target media and maintain clipping files. This process, of course, is easier for print than for the broadcast media, but clipping services that monitor broadcast media are also available.

The measurement of audience coverage involves more than just the ratio of releases sent to releases used. The practitioner must also be able to specify what audiences (both intended and unintended) were reached through which media. Data of this type are available from **readership surveys** and audience rating information obtainable through media advertising sales departments. Audience profiles for each publication or broadcast station can be calculated with the amount of space or time used to yield a complete measure of audience coverage. Such data can be reported in terms of total column inches (for print media) or amount of airtime per audience (for broadcast media) for each release or event. For more of a bottom line effect, however, many practitioners translate media time and space into dollar values based on prevailing advertising rates.

- **Audience Response**

Once it is determined that a message has reached its intended audience, the practitioner must evaluate that audience's response. Frequently, this type of information can be obtained through various message pre-testing methods. Samples of each target audience are exposed to various messages before they are released. The resulting data helps predict whether the message will elicit a favourable or unfavourable reaction. It can also determine if the message attracts attention, rouses interest, or gains audience understanding. With good sampling techniques and questionnaire design, accurate predictions are possible, and problems can be corrected before messages are released. Some messages, however, such as spot news or stories written from releases, cannot be measured in advance because the practitioner does not control them. Thus, it is necessary to measure audience response using the survey techniques. Frequently, the practitioner can predict audience response by tracking media treatment of stories in terms of favourable, neutral, and unfavourable tendencies.

Messages can also be pretested using **readability studies**. The basic premise of these tests is that written copy will be ineffective if it is too difficult to read. Most methods for measuring readability generate an index score that translates to an approximate educational level required for understanding the material. For example, *Time* and *Reader's Digest* are written at what is termed an 11th- or 12th -grade level. This indicates that their readers are primarily persons with education at least through high school. However, a great deal of controversy surrounds which formula is the most accurate and what factors are necessary to compute readability. Readability tests may be useful in public relations efforts to tailor writing styles for target publications. The index score of a news release compared to the score of the publication for which it is intended should indicate whether or not the two are compatible.

Remember that the simplest writing is not always the best. Meaning may be lost through oversimplification as easily as through complexity. Abstract or complex concepts cannot be adequately expressed in simple, short sentences using one- and two-syllable words. The important point is to match the written message to the publication and audience for which it is intended.

- **Campaign Impact**

In addition to considering audience response to individual messages, the practitioner must be concerned with the impact of the campaign as a whole. In this case, the whole is not equal to the sum of the parts. If a campaign is correctly researched and planned, its elements will interact to produce an effect that is much greater than the sum of the response to the individual messages. If the mix is not right, however, the combined elements of the campaign, no matter how individually excellent, may fall far short of the goal.

For this reason, it is important to measure the cumulative impact of a public relations campaign, keeping in mind the goals developed in the planning phase. This measurement can be made only after the campaign has been in progress long enough to achieve some results. If one campaign goal is to maintain or increase favourable attitudes toward an organisation among

members of certain publics, research methods such as image surveys can be used to gauge success. Usually this calls for both pre-tests and post-tests or for a series of surveys to track attitude trends. In addition, the practitioner can measure certain actions by members of a public like complaints, inquiries about services, and requests for reprints.

- ***Environmental Mediation***

Public relations campaigns do not exert the only influence on the attitudes and behaviours of their publics. Any campaign exists in an environment of social processes that can have as much or more effect on the attainment of its goals as the prepared messages do. Therefore, the measured results must be interpreted in light of various other forces. Failure to reach a goal may not be failure at all when unforeseen negative conditions have arisen. Likewise, a striking success may not be entirely attributable to the public relations campaign.

One method the practitioner can use to monitor environmental influences, even with a modest budget and a small staff, is focus group interviewing. Focus groups are composed of individuals randomly selected from a public who meet to discuss the campaign. The group should be presented with the elements of the campaign and then directed through a discussion of its effects and the causes of those effects. A skillful interviewer will keep the discussion on the subject without compromising candour or disrupting the free flow of ideas. Focus groups should be asked to discuss their reactions to the elements of the campaign and assess the campaign's overall effect. They can also help interpret data obtained in the campaign impact stage in relation to historical, social and political events that may have had influence.

These four stages of measurement can help a public relations practitioner further assess the results of a campaign and plan effective future efforts. These stages of measurement also yield the kind of real-world data that managers in other areas of an organisation use to support their activities.

Sources of Measurement Error

Some common mistakes in the measurement of public relations effectiveness include:

1. *Volume is not equal to results.* Too often, the working assumption is that if one press release is effective, three will be three times as effective. A large stack of press clippings may be proof of effort. But results in terms of the effect of those clipping on the publics for which they were intended cannot be measured by volume. Even audience measurement devices designed to count the number of people exposed to a message do not show whether or not those exposed actually paid any attention or, if they did, what effect the message had on them.
2. *Estimate is not measurement.* Relying on experience and intuition to gauge the effectiveness of public relations efforts is no longer acceptable as objective measurement. Experts know that appearances,

even to the trained eye, can be deceiving. Guesswork has no place in a measurement system. When it comes to budget requests, managers demand hard facts.

3. *Samples must be representative.* Many wrong decisions about the future of a public relations campaign have been based on a few favourable comments that were either volunteered or collected unsystematically. Several pitfalls exist: Only those with positive (or negative) comments may volunteer them; some people, when asked, tend to give the response they think the interviewer wants to hear; or the selection of interviewers may be unintentionally biased. Samples must be selected scientifically and systematically to avoid such errors.
4. *Effort is not knowledge.* One of the most common public relations objectives is to increase the public's knowledge about a particular subject. Sometimes practitioners assume a direct relationship between the amount of effort they expend in communicating a message and the amount of knowledge a public acquires. This erroneous assumption leads to a problem similar to the volume error discussed earlier. The study of human learning suggests that after a certain level of knowledge is reached the rate of learning is slow in most people. Therefore, in spite of any communicator's best efforts, all publics will eventually reach a knowledge plateau at which very little additional learning occurs.
5. *Knowledge is not favourable attitude.* Communications is often deemed successful if the public has gained knowledge of the message content. However, even when pre-test and post-test results indicate an increase in knowledge, it cannot be assumed that more favourable attitudes have resulted. A high degree of name recall or awareness is not necessarily an indication that the public relations effort has been effective. Familiarity does not necessarily lead to positive opinion.
6. *Attitude is not behaviour.* While positive public opinion may be a legitimate goal of public relations, it is incorrect to assume that favourable public holds favourable attitudes toward a client or organisation. They will probably not consciously oppose that person or group. On the other hand, they still may not actively support the goals of the public relations campaign. Practitioners must be aware of the need to predict behaviour, or at least potential behaviour, when measuring public opinion.

Closed-System Evaluation

Two models of public relations research exist into which most measurement efforts can be categorized: open and closed evaluation systems. **A closed-system evaluation** limits its scope to the messages and events planned for the campaign and their effects on the intended publics. This is the model of public relations evaluation most frequently employed. Its purpose is to test the messages and media of a public relations campaign before they are presented to the intended publics. This pre-test strategy is designed to uncover miscalculations that may have gone unnoticed in the planning stage. The post-test evaluations are conducted after the campaign has been

underway long enough to produce results. Post-test data can be compared to pre-test results and campaign objectives to evaluate the effectiveness of the effort. These results also provide input for planning the next campaign.

Pre-test/Post-test Design

Factors normally considered in the standard pre-test and post-test evaluation design are as follows:

- 1. *Productions:*** The evaluation includes an accounting of every public relations tool used in the campaign (press release, press kits, booklets, films, letters, etc.). The amount of material actually produced and the total cost of production yield important cost-effectiveness information. The amount of time and money devoted to each segment of public relations efforts can be reassessed with this type of data.
- 2. *Distribution:*** The evaluation examines the channels through which the messages of the campaign are distributed. Clippings collected by professional services are often used to measure how many stories were actually printed. The number of radio and television stations that picked up the story can be important information. These kinds of data are perhaps most frequently used to evaluate public relations campaigns. Note that although distribution data provide a reasonable measure of the campaign's efficiency, they do not really address the issue of effectiveness.
- 3. *Interest:*** Reader interest surveys determine what people read in various types of publications. A representative sample of the total potential reading audience is surveyed for a quantitative measure of which items attract more interest. These surveys are relatively good measures of what readers actually consume, but they do not measure comprehension or the effect of the message on the reader. Television and radio use similar survey methods to determine what programmes and times people prefer.
- 4. *Reach:*** Reader interest surveys not only reveal whether or not a story was read but also describe the people that read it. This information can be valuable because messages frequently reach publics other than those for whom they are intended. The efficiency of a message is the extent to which it actually reaches the intended audience. A reasonably accurate measure of which audiences are being reached by which messages is imperative to any evaluation effort. Television and radio rating services provide information concerning the characteristics of audiences at various times of day.
- 5. *Understanding:*** While it is important to determine whether the target audience is being reached, it is equally important to know whether or not the audience understands the message. A public relations campaign cannot be considered successful if the public does not get the point. Frequently, readability tests are applied to printed messages to measure their accessibility.

6. *Attitudes:* Creating and maintaining positive attitudes or changing negative ones is a central purpose of all public relations activity. Therefore, measurement of attitudes, or preferably of attitude change, is a highly prized form of evaluation. Frequently a pre-test/post-test measurement is conducted to determine the degree of change in the attitudes of target publics that can be attributed to the public relations campaign.

Attitude measurement is a sophisticated behavioural science technique that presents many opportunities for error. Few practitioners attempt major attitudinal studies without the help of professionals who specialize in this type of measurement. Professional research organisations frequently provide attitudinal measurement. Many factors, ranging from the need for a scientifically selected sample to the construction of a questionnaire that will not bias results, make attitude measurement a difficult task for most practitioners.

Disadvantages of the Closed-System Method

While closed-system evaluation is the model most widely used by public relations practitioners, it has two major drawbacks. First, the fact that a message was transmitted to the intended audience in an understandable form and that it produced favourable attitudes does not mean the campaign goals were reached. Second, the likelihood that desired results would occur, especially in terms of actual behaviour changes, is influenced by a number of factors external to the campaign. Failure of a public relations effort to achieve its goals may not mean that the elements or the plan of the effort were faulty. A number of environmental factors such as economic, political, and social change can nullify what might otherwise have been positive results.

During the early 1970s, oil companies caught in the grip of an embargo that caused escalating prices, shortages, and long lines at the gas pumps experienced losses in favourable public opinion in spite of massive public relations efforts. The effectiveness of their messages was undermined by events outside the control of any public relations campaign. Therefore, these events had to be factored in when the public relations efforts were evaluated. While the companies experienced losses rather than gains in positive public opinion, the campaigns may still have been effective. In the absence of a workable public relations plan already in place, the losses in factorable public opinion could have been even more devastating.

Open-System Evaluation

Although a pre-test/post-test design may be appropriate for evaluating short-range projects, many public relations programmes are too complex for simple before-and-after measures. Continuing or long-range programmes, such as changes in organisational policy, require an evaluation method that can provide feedback throughout the process, before the end results are available. **Open-system evaluation** models attempt to account for factors outside the control of the public relations campaign when assessing its effectiveness.

The open-system model emphasises the extent to which the public relations function is encompassed by numerous other aspects of an organisation and its environment. Factors like unintended audiences and organisational administration effectiveness are also included.

Environmental monitoring and social audits as data-gathering methods yield valuable information for evaluating effectiveness in public relations campaigns. The impact of public relations efforts on various environmental factors can be one useful measure of results. In turn, environmental data can help explain the effects of a campaign. Because most of these factors are outside the organisation's control, they may operate as confounding variables in a closed-system evaluation. Economic conditions, for example, can have a significant effect on consumers' attitudes toward an organisation. Thus, results from a public relations effort that do not seem positive when viewed alone might really be significant when the negative effects of certain economic conditions are considered.

Internal data are also useful for evaluating public relations campaigns. Public relations messages should be expected to have as much effect on the managers and employees of an organisation as they do on other publics. It is useful for organisations to research their internal climate for public relations planning information, and the same holds true for evaluation. Public relations practitioners should look inside and outside their organisations to measure the effects of their efforts. Like environmental factors, the internal climate of an organisation can help explain the effect of public relations effort. Union activities, management perceptions, and changes in company policy can all affect the results of a campaign.

Many of the factors included in the open-system evaluation model are difficult to measure accurately. Nevertheless, recognizing these factors is itself an important step toward evaluating public relations efforts. The value of open-system evaluation is that it considers public relations efforts. The value of open-system evaluation is that it considers public relations within the broader context of overall organisational effectiveness.

Summary

Frequently, evaluation is assumed to be the final step in the public relations process; however, it is really best described as a new beginning. Measuring the effectiveness of a public relations effort frequently provides new direction and emphasis for an ongoing programme. Even when the project being evaluated does not continue, the lessons learned concerning its effectiveness will be useful in numerous future activities. Knowledge gained through careful evaluation is an important payoff to prevent future mistakes. Careful measurement of successful efforts will help reproduce positive elements in future programmes.

Public relations can no longer afford to ignore the question, "But what's it all worth to us?" Practitioners must be ready to respond

with appropriate methods, solid data, and accurate predications.

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