Taking the Measure of a PR Campaign

A QUICK GUIDE TO DEVELOPING A MEDIA MEASUREMENT STRATEGY
Imagine the chaos that would ensue if a chief executive tried to run a business without knowing the company’s sales figures or profitability on a regular basis. It’s like driving blindfolded down Madison Avenue during rush hour. Best business practices demand a complete, ongoing understanding of the impact of decisions.

So it is with business disciplines such as public relations. Best practices in PR – from campaign strategy to creative to execution – have always been based on insights gained through painstaking research and the rigorous monitoring of results. As contention increases over how marketing resources can best be deployed – and as the new, globally connected media make news coverage even more critical to analyze and difficult to manage – demands from the C-suite have never been clearer:

► Give me real data on the impact of my public relations campaign.
► How is it supporting our business goals?
► How is it affecting the behavior of our publics or moving the needle upward for our corporate reputation?
► How can we make better decisions going forward?
► What is the ROI?

In this white paper, K.C. Brown and Wayne Bullock of Cision, describe how companies can develop and evolve a media measurement strategy; the metrics that should be established; and best (yet basic) practices in media measurement.

THE MEASUREMENT IMPERATIVE

The language of the modern executive suite isn’t English, or Japanese, or Esperanto. It’s data. Senior management demands understandable, reliable, actionable numbers that measure and reflect performance and create a roadmap for continuous improvement. After all, management is hired – and fired – based on metrics such as sales, profits and financial performance. So it’s natural to expect critical functions such as marketing and corporate communications to use data to accurately reflect performance and offer accountability and transparency.

Advertising effectiveness has been measured for decades, using metrics – Gross Rating Points, for example – that have become established standards, despite their weaknesses. For almost as long, managers have been clamoring for accurate measurement of public relations activities. In 1968, the management bulletin of the American Marketing Association wrote:

An inability to speak in professional management terms has often created a barrier between PR people and senior executives. But public relations has become an important management staff function in this computer age, and measurement is required of all management functions... Such measurement, even with its many intangibles, is the only way to demonstrate the value of PR to the organization, and is probably more important to public relations than to many older, more established management functions.

Fast-forward 36 years. In a 2004 report titled “Ten Patterns of Success in Public Relations,” Heyman Associates noted that the absence of widespread metrics was still limiting management’s understanding of the power and value of PR:

Nearly half (45 percent) of those interviewed said the most significant limitation on public relations practice and influence is the inaccurate or incomplete perceptions of the function’s role and value by other organizational executives... We think it is significant that PR executives at the highest levels report that their bosses don’t fully understand and appreciate what PR can do for their organizations. This places a high professional priority on developing convincing metrics to better explain and justify the role and value of PR.

It’s important to note that during the almost 40 years between these two reports, “direct communication” – from direct mail to Internet-driven email blasts and, of course, Web-based marketing and e-commerce – has become an increasingly important, and often dominant, element of the marketing mix. They have, in many cases, eclipsed both advertising and PR in dollars spent in driving revenue, market share and shareholder value. This success is partly due to the inherent measurability and accountability of direct communication vehicles. The sophisticated analysis of response rates and audience research, and the ability to refine and evolve messaging as you go, often drive even more effective campaigns that can, in turn, be analyzed and optimized in future activities.
THE GROWING POWER OF PR

Yet it’s also crucial to remember that – despite the ongoing demand for better measurement – public relations has also experienced an exponential rise in strategic importance during this period. The advent of the Internet has made PR even more crucial, creating the 24-hour, global news cycle. Hyperlinking coverage from outlets that range from citizen journalist blogs to national news organizations can elevate the impact of small- to medium-scale PR efforts and news coverage to the level of substantial advertising campaigns. What’s more, PR often is now effectively used in integrated marketing as a multiplier of advertising campaigns – for example, to draw even greater attention to multi-million-dollar Super Bowl television commercials.

It’s a given that public relations should be treated on par with all strategic marketing activities. But even this ranking may understate the importance of PR’s facets – marketing/corporate/investor communications and government relations. To many people, public relations transcends marketing: it is a strategic management function over and above advertising, for example, or direct mail or online communication. Why?

► It requires a comprehensive understanding of corporate goals and objectives
► It is fluid and responsive to the day-to-day state and needs of the organization
► It owns the feedback loop that keeps executives informed about their total environment (industry, government, employee, community affairs, etc.)
► Uniquely, it owns bad news.

So, it’s clear: public relations must apply reliable metrics and language everyone in the organization understands to demonstrate – and, most importantly, to continually improve – its impact and value. Then why have far too many organizations, corporate PR departments and agencies, not fully embraced media measurement?

TYPICAL BARRIERS TO MEDIA MEASUREMENT

To start with, public relations activities must be hard-wired to strategic business objectives. These objectives may be tangible, such as increasing market share, generating sales leads or profits, providing relief from burdensome regulations, and improving customer or employee retention rates. They may also be less tangible, gauged in survey-driven metrics like greater customer satisfaction and public trust, or heightened brand awareness. In any case, they should be clearly articulated and understood at the outset of both the campaign itself and any measurement effort related to it.

Alignment with business goals may seem elementary to those who understand PR to be a management function. But in some environments, PR is called upon to address relatively trivial issues – settling internal turf wars, closing individual business deals, etc. – that may be considered tactical at best. Also, public relations effectiveness is too often judged by outputs – for example, the number of clips or the gross number of impressions exposed to a broadcast report – rather than outcomes. An outcome is a change in opinion or behavior that directly impacts and supports a business objective.

Using non-strategic activities as a basis for measurement, or indeed for a campaign in the first place, can provide a useful indicator that your tactics are getting the intended results in the form of outputs, but the measures will not indicate whether the tactics themselves are producing the desired strategic business outcomes. Therefore, ignoring outcomes in favor of easier-to-tabulate outputs often is self-defeating, especially when it is difficult to answer the question, “Yes, but has the PR program actually increased sales or shareholder value, and if so, by how much?”

Ideally, Return on Investment is defined as the dollar value of a business outcome divided by the cost of the ROI instrument. Such a measure requires an agreement on how outputs are driving outcomes, and which outcomes are most important in determining overall success.
NEEDED: AN OBJECTIVE MEASUREMENT OF HOW PR DRIVES BEHAVIOR

Perhaps the greatest difference between metrics like Gross Rating Points, Nielsen or Arbitron numbers and PR metrics lies in the nature of public relations practice itself. Advertising analytics measure controlled communication – everything from the messaging to the scale of the ad (or commercial) to its placement is determined when the advertisement is bought.

But public relations functions in an environment that ranges from somewhat to completely uncontrolled. A PR “output” must pass through a filter: the journalist. Acting in the readers’ interest, elite journalists (and those who aspire to be among their number) judge the worthiness of every news story; test the validity of each claim against their domain experience; weigh the opinions of third-party experts and competitors; often rephrase those claims in different language; and place them in contexts they deem most meaningful.

This lack of control creates wide latitude in how messages are understood and filtered, and how a journalist translates those messages to the audience. But PR can deliver the greatest credibility (and the greatest impact) of all marketing or corporate communications vehicles if those messages pass the journalist’s test. Determining the extent of this impact – or refining strategies that can lead to a more effective communications program – demands implementation of appropriate and sound media campaign measurement programs.

The “Holy Grail” is to understand in quantitative terms the performance of a PR campaign, and to identify the attributes of media coverage and assess their relative weight in influencing the awareness, recall and behavior of the people who are exposed to it. Which raises the question, “How do I do it?”

How to start:

A FIVE-STEP GUIDE

1. Start now. Sir Tom Stoppard, the prolific playwright, recently was asked how his creative process begins. “I start by starting,” he replied. “It’s a very odd thing: you can’t start a play without knowing a lot about it, but you don’t know anything about it until you’ve started it.” This applies to beginning a do-it-yourself media measurement program, too. Starting is all. You don’t need to measure every media outlet; begin by selecting top-tier media, for example, and concentrating on coverage in that smaller cohort. Define and apply common media measurement variables including objective (reach/audience, media type, news item type, competitive coverage, etc.) and subjective (tone, key message penetration, etc.) variables.

2. Publish and share your findings. The mere awareness that a measurement program is in place can have an immediate, positive impact on the performance of both communications staff and upper management. So don’t hesitate to put forth your findings, even at the earliest stage. Perfect is the enemy of good: don’t expect a bulletproof result at the outset. Even if your initial findings are incomplete, sharing data can help you come to important insights about your campaign’s effectiveness, identify and close the gaps in your research, and build internal support for additional resources that can provide a clearer picture.

3. Speak the language of business: data. Present findings in quantifiable form, whenever possible. Use spreadsheets, charts and graphs, such as these examples:
4. Be consistent. Report findings on a regular basis; ideally, report them according to the accounting period of your business – be it weekly, monthly, or quarterly.

5. Be credible. Be open about all aspects of your report, from the results of the overall program to the state of your measurement methodology. Commit to evolving and continuously improving your methodology.

ELEMENTS OF A PRACTICAL MEDIA MEASUREMENT PROGRAM

All practical measurement programs have three elements in common:

► They have a realistic media monitoring and collection process. In other words, monitor what’s most important, and measure what you monitor.
► There is agreement on which measures are most important. The PR industry has not yet set standard measures of the type used in advertising and direct marketing, where there is general agreement on commonly used measures; therefore success measures must often be customized, and successful programs always obtain consensus in advance on which measures will be used.
► Results are published and widely distributed; initial benchmarks are set and progress is measured on a regular basis.

While there are numerous competitive tools and techniques that are commonly used to measure and evaluate overall PR effectiveness, here is a snapshot of one straightforward method that companies can implement and use as the basis of a best-in-class program. You also can use this simple process to measure your company’s performance in context with its competition. This process uses two bases of evaluation: Prominence and Tone.

Prominence factors are attributes of news coverage that have been tested via audience research to verify the likelihood that someone will be exposed to and remember news about a company or product. There are six key Prominence factors:

1. News item placement: where is your article positioned in the media outlet?
2. Headline: is your news subject mentioned in the headline or sub-head?
3. Initial mention: where is your news subject first mentioned in the body of the story?
4. Extent of mention: what is the scope of coverage of your news subject?
5. Dominance: to what degree is your news subject covered exclusively?
6. Visuals: are there photos or graphics included?
An eye-catching location of the story position and your initial mention, your subject’s degree of presence in the headline and the story itself, and the use of attention-grabbing visuals are all positive factors in assessing the impact of a story. Once you have evaluated each piece of coverage based on the Prominence factors, patterns will emerge that will be helpful in evaluating how successful your efforts have been based on your initial goals.

Tone is the editorial attitude conveyed in news coverage. It’s sometimes measured against a simple scale, from very positive to neutral to very negative. In addition, you may review coverage content based on the inclusion of key messages and data points, either paraphrased or verbatim. Combining a summary assessment of both Tone and Prominence provides a strong foundation for a useful report on results of your program.

Once you have assembled your analysis, it is important to publish and disseminate your results as widely as possible. As we urge in How To Start, express your findings in the language of business: numbers, charts and graphs. Set benchmarks, and then show trends, progress and challenges on a regular basis. Merchandise and promote your success internally – but don’t shy away from publishing shortcomings; they are expected in business and lend credibility to the measurement. Finally, integrate your success metrics into your budget planning/budget request cycle.

**TAKING MEASUREMENT TO A NEW LEVEL**

This straightforward process creates a foundation that can lead to a basic understanding of the impact and value of public relations activities. But the “Grail” – assigning a precise dimension expressed in quantifiable or numerical form to the impact of news coverage, and better knowing how people may behave after exposure to that coverage – requires a further step. Media analysis experts such as Cision assign weighted values to a story’s Prominence and Tone to satisfy that requirement.

This weighted analysis is driven by studies of factors that motivate people who read about, see or hear news coverage to recall critical details of the news story and on drivers that impact their desire to transact business with the subject of the story. It also requires analysts who are highly trained in objective measurement of news story content.

For example, Cision’s weighting of Prominence factors and Tone assessment is based on extensive media and audience research. It began by identifying more than 40 possible attributes (or Prominence factors) that may indicate “quality” in a news story. Then a representative sample of coverage was selected from a variety of sources. Media analysts coded and rated Prominence factors of the story, some on a scale (such as the degree of exclusivity of coverage) and others on a binary basis (such as presence, or not, of a photo or graphic). Each attribute was scored for each article.

The analysts then assessed the positive, neutral or negative Tone of each article. They expressed Tone as a positive or negative numerical value by which Prominence attributes could be multiplied to produce consistent, reliable results. In other words, “an exclusive positive story with a photo” produces a positive number that is symmetrical to the negative result of a story with identical Prominence factors, yet correspondingly negative in Tone.

Then the experts used audience research to better understand the extent to which each of the possible attributes drives awareness and recall. They distributed copies of the news stories to people in a controlled environment, asked them to read the coverage, and then surveyed them to determine their ability to recall stories and story themes. Further data collection and analysis identified the most memorable stories, the attributes that made them memorable, and the “weight” to assign each Prominence factor.

Using this research, Cision calculates an Impact Score, a positive or negative value (based on Tone) that ranges from -100 percent to +100 percent, through a proprietary algorithm. Multiplying the Impact Score with the reach (audience size) of the coverage medium delivers the Net Effect. Unlike Gross Ratings Points or broadcast ratings, Net Effect measures people and behaviors, rather than simply media output. Multiple companies have compared it against actual consumer behaviors to validate accuracy. Global Fortune 500 businesses have adopted Impact Score and Net Effect as a standard numerical measure of public relations contribution to business objectives. The metrics also have been incorporated into Six Sigma process quality control analyses. (While Cision research in the past focused on print coverage, it has been extended to broadcast and Web.)
REAL-TIME MONITORING AND ANALYSIS

The only constant in the world of public relations is change. Nowhere is this maxim more relevant than in the realm of measurement. Just as many sophisticated public relations teams are adopting more rigorous and sophisticated measurement protocols for their traditional media programs - the new world of social media, the blogosphere, 24-by-7 online news operations, and user-generated content - is crying out for better monitoring, measurement and evaluation. Many global corporations and non-profits today have developed daily news monitoring and reporting operations that also include real-time evaluation and analysis of media coverage. Centrally-located global newsrooms monitor all news feeds from around the world, distill and summarize coverage in key media outlets (including broadcast, print and online), translate summaries into all the languages required by the global organization, and disseminate concise daily updates with links to complete coverage.

The more sophisticated of these electronic news briefing groups assigns experienced news analysts to monitor and filter coverage. Analysts assess results in real time and provide immediate evaluation of prominence and tone. The daily reports include these up-to-the-minute assessments, which are tabulated and compiled on a weekly, monthly and/or quarterly basis to provide comprehensive reports quantifying results over time. In essence, real-time monitoring and evaluation compress the best practices in measurement into a daily routine, including:

- A realistic media monitoring and collection process.
- Ongoing measurement of what’s monitored, with agreement on which measures are most important.
- Publication and wide distribution of results; with progress against initial benchmarks noted on a daily basis.

The new best practices in measurement will include real-time monitoring and evaluation of the entire media environment. With online and social media creating an environment where results are less controlled than ever, the ability to monitor those results, assess them and understand their importance will be a “must-have” capability in conducting a communication program where ROI is clearly defined and achievable.
CONCLUSION: WHAT MEDIA MEASUREMENT CAN DO FOR YOUR COMPANY-AND YOU

Peter Drucker said it best: If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it. Media measurement enables you to demonstrate the impact of strategic public relations campaigns to support your organization’s business goals and bottom line, in a language that senior management understands. That helps drive greater participation by upper management in the PR process – they are driven to win, and they will devote more resources (in terms of their own time and attention, as well as budget) to the function.

Remember that a little data goes a long way: you will be surprised at how much attention your media measurement program gets, no matter how basic it may be. And, over time, as your measurement methodology improves and as you cycle the insights you gain into new PR efforts, your data will become increasingly credible with management. As you speak the language of business by communicating your results with the right kinds of data, you will be well positioned to get your fair share of the marketing pie.

Whether you choose to implement a straightforward “DIY” measurement system, or engage a strategic partner to provide more detailed and sophisticated analysis, media measurement is a win-win for you and your organization. Your organization gets a PR program aligned with and supportive of business objectives; and you get more recognition and a seat at the strategy table.
Case History 1

USING MEDIA MEASUREMENT TO QUANTIFY PR’S VALUE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH ADVERTISING

COMPANY
► Multi-billion-dollar global telecommunications company

CHALLENGE
► Understand how news coverage and advertising combine to change attitudes of primary consumer targets
► Use data to develop optimal integrated communications strategy
► Prove conclusively the value of public relations to senior management

SOLUTION/METHODOLOGY
► Engage outside measurement experts to conduct an advanced media content analysis of general-interest and special-interest print, broadcast and Internet coverage
► Identify and survey consumer target audiences and poll them at regular intervals
► Analyze the full range of news coverage – from positive to negative – and map it to audience polling data and advertising activity

CONCLUSIONS
► News coverage has great impact on consumer attitudes and interacts with advertising
► During times of positive and widespread news coverage, advertising’s additional impact is minimal
► During negative/widespread news coverage, advertising is undermined and can damage corporate reputation

Case History 2

USING MEDIA MEASUREMENT TO IMPACT PUBLIC POLICY AND IDENTIFY NEW GOVERNMENT RELATIONS STRATEGIES

COMPANY
► Major trade industry organization

CHALLENGE
► Bring to bear existing popular pressure in support of the organization’s position
► Blunt potentially damaging regulatory change planned by a federal agency

SOLUTION/METHODOLOGY
► Engage outside measurement experts to analyze and quantify the organization’s news coverage and articles specifically related to the potential regulatory change
► Determine how the organization was being portrayed; which journalists were covering its position on the issue; and how its messages were portrayed

CONCLUSIONS
► Proved the efficiency of the campaign and overall PR efforts
► Developed new PR tactics tailored to focus public pressure on legislators to oppose the regulatory change
► Legislation was proposed in the U.S. Congress that forced the federal agency to withdraw the proposed change
A GLOSSARY OF MEDIA PERFORMANCE EVALUATION TERMS

BYLINE The reporter, or other author name, attributed to a news item.

FREQUENCY The total number of news items appearing within a specific time period.

IMPACT SCORE In the Cision methodology, a composite of Prominence and Tone (which determines whether the Impact Score is a positive or negative number) that becomes an overall “score” on a scale of −100 percent to +100 percent. Prominence is a research-based estimation of the likelihood that someone will be exposed to and remember news about a company. Prominence factors are weighted according to their contribution to potential audience awareness and recall of a news item.

KEY MESSAGE A proposition in the form of a statement or phrase that a company wishes to communicate to its target audience via media coverage. Key Message Penetration represents the percentage of total news items including one or more key messages. Key Message Reach represents the total potential audience (measured by Impressions) produced by each key message appearing in a news item.

MEDIA CATEGORY Broadcast (TV/Radio), Internet (Web-based sites such as blogs, or Web versions of traditional print media), print, wire service.

MEDIA SOURCE The name of the media outlet in which the news item appears, and the date of its publication or appearance.

NEWS REPORT TYPES
- CORPORATE NEWS Coverage of current or timely events/issues that are not directly related to a company’s product or services (e.g., quarterly earnings and other financial news, alliances, executive appointments and other management news, union actions, employee relations, philanthropy, etc).
- PRODUCT NEWS Coverage focused on a company’s products or services (e.g., product reviews/comparisons, new product launches/introductions, pricing changes, product-specific marketing initiatives, etc.).
- INDUSTRY OVERVIEW Coverage of a company in a discussion of industry-wide events, issues or themes not specific to a single company, partnership or alliance.
- INTERVIEW Q&A featuring a company representative or mentioning a company during the discussion.
- EDITORIAL A statement collectively authored by the editorial board of a news organization expressing an official position on an issue.

NET EFFECT In the Cision methodology, the result of the Impressions of an individual news item multiplied by its Impact Score. Results are added to determine an overall Net Effect for a specific period of time, or surrounding a particular issue or event. Net Effect can be positive or negative and is a “summary” measure of overall media performance.

PROMINENCE A research-based estimation of the likelihood that someone will see, absorb and recall news about a company. Factors include Placement, Headline Presence, Initial Mention, Dominance, Extent of Mention and Visuals. Reach. The total potential audience produced by news items within a specific time period – measured by Impressions (print circulations and broadcast audience figures).

REPUTATION DRIVER POSITIONING Editorial “messaging” conveyed in a news item that positions a company favorably or unfavorably on Reputation Drivers. These drivers include Stakeholder Relations, Financial Management, Quality of Products and Services, Organizational Integrity and Organizational Strength.