

# Evaluating PUBLIC RELATIONS

A BEST PRACTICE GUIDE TO PUBLIC RELATIONS  
PLANNING, RESEARCH & EVALUATION



TOM WATSON & PAUL NOBLE

## HALF TITLE PAGE



## **TITLE PAGE**

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# Principles of public relations practice

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**In this chapter, evaluation is introduced and set in the historical perspectives of public relations' evolving practice. The nature and extent of public relations theory are explored and definitions of public relations are discussed. Definitions of evaluation and description of key practices complete the chapter.**

Ask any group of PR practitioners around the world to list the major issues facing their discipline, and it is almost certain that evaluation of PR activity will be ranked very highly, if not the number one topic. The measurement of activity and outcomes has many facets which will be described throughout this book. To set the context of evaluation, the theory and debate over the discipline of public relations need to be explored. For some practitioners, theory is 'stuff' that gets in the way of 'doing PR'. Yet theory is developed from observed practice and helps predict outcomes. This, in turn, gives greater strength to practitioners in developing robust campaigns. Evaluation helps them define campaigns, monitor their progress and provide evidence of outcomes. So theory and sound evaluation practices can and should go hand-in-hand.

## **THE ROLE OF THEORY**

Public relations is a relatively new professional activity that is still developing its body of knowledge and theoretical approaches. At present, the role that theory plays in public relations practice is limited. As practice expands worldwide, the demand for greater agreement on concepts, embodied in models and theory, is expected to grow, if only for reasons of clarity of communication from one nation to another.

The adoption of the scientific research process for the study of public relations issues and problems offers many advantages to practitioners in the creation of effective campaigns and other public relations activities. Robustly researched theories offer prediction, understanding and replication. Prediction gives greater assurance to planning and execution of activities and a practitioner could, therefore, buttress his or her professional experience with the application of relevant theory to explain that, if a certain course of action is followed, it is likely that certain consequences may follow. That a practitioner can apply proven theory will help in the making of 'intelligent practical decisions'. When there is a lack of theory, it is exceedingly difficult to create a consistent decision-making methodology for use in planning and evaluation, let alone make predictions on outcomes of public relations activities.

Public relations practice is in the humanistic, social science framework and therefore unlike the more precisely measured natural sciences. Because public relations activity uses a multiplicity of communications techniques, it does not operate in isolation (as would a natural science experiment in a laboratory) from other communications influences and so concepts and theories are likely to be based on observed practice. However, predictive understanding has already been identified as an important value of theory for use by the practitioner. Whether objective knowledge can be obtained, in the style of natural science, is a challenge for future research programmes. At present, it is most probable that understanding based on observation is likely to create the path forward for public relations theory as it has done for much of social science (see, in particular, the discussion of action research in Chapter 4).

Practitioners are often closely involved in the mechanics of their activities and need to develop a structured understanding of the issues they are influencing in order to understand the attitudes of others. They also need the rigour of predictive understanding to verify logically the phenomena (such as publics, communities and media) with which they plan to communicate.

Replication is another attribute of theory that has value for planning of public relations programmes. If theory provides clear guidance to 'explain and predict phenomena of interest to us', the theory should be applicable in many similar situations. It can thus be replicated in practice and in future research activities.

For public relations, the methodology of the scientific research process in its social sciences form offers the opportunity to create model theory that can be applied to current practice. Practitioners of public relations are active in an industry that has evolved rapidly by borrowing concepts from a wide range of other disciplines. There is an increasing opportunity to develop theory that is relevant to practice.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Public relations practice, as it is observed today, has developed from press agency and publicity since the turn of the last century. The US academics James Grunig and Todd Hunt consider that 'public relations-like activity' can be traced back to 1800 BC among Greek rhetoricians, but the direct line of descent from the Aegean to today's public relations industry is difficult to detect (Grunig and Hunt, 1984).

It is seen by many as having evolved from the United States and practitioners there claim descent from Phineas T Barnum (of Barnum and Bailey Circus fame). More likely, it comes from a governmental base in the major combatant nations during World War I. The need to control information and to motivate the populations of Great Britain, France and the United States led to the formation of government propaganda organizations. An example given is the US Committee on Public Information, which conducted informational communication programmes to induce changes in public opinion.

This one-way informational concept of public relations as the practice of persuasive publicity continued as the dominant mode throughout the 20th century. It was epitomized in the United States and the UK by the role undertaken by press agents who offered to get clients' names in the press in return for payment based on the lineage that appeared.

A significant contribution to the development of public relations came from Edward Bernays in the 1920s. He promoted a more sophisticated one-way approach to communications by contending that public relations attempts to engineer public support through the use of information, persuasion and adjustment.

For many public relations practitioners, persuasion is the desired outcome of their activities, whether it is to change the attitude of government towards a client, promote an employer's point of view or create awareness of a product or service and thus support sales. It is also the judgement applied by clients who ask whether the 'PR effort' made changes that were both beneficial and made an impact on profits. Yet Bernays did not simplistically advocate crude, one-way communications. His aim was to apply social science methods first to research the situation and then to create the most effective methods of communication.

Absent from these early approaches was a developed concept of two-way communication, of strategy and of feedback applied to the programme of activity (as discussed later, very much evaluation in a formative role). Bernays and other leading US practitioners, some working closely with advertising agencies, were more methodical in their research and strategy, but press agents and publicity people remained short term in their approach. They concentrated on gaining column inches of copy in newspapers and magazines, not defining strategies to meet client objectives.

From the 1950s onwards, notions such as 'mutual benefit' and 'goodwill' became more widespread and public relations began to move away from its roots in publicity towards a more planned approach. While significant progress has been made, this issue remains a major concern. In 2004, a research study conducted for the UK's IPR (Institute of Public Relations) and CDF (The Communication Director's Forum) concluded with a series of recommendations including: 'The PR industry should place more emphasis on the technical understanding required to conduct proper planning, research and evaluation (PRE).' Chapter 9 discusses this study in more detail.

## **PRACTICE PARADIGM**

James Grunig has defined four descriptors of public relations activity: press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric. Press agency/publicity has already been described. Public information is the distribution of positive information undertaken by 'journalists in residence'. These are both one-way models in which the practitioner does not seek information from the public through informal feedback or research.

His two-way asymmetrical model uses research to identify messages most likely to produce the support of publics without the organization's behaviour changing. Grunig says 'the effects are asymmetrical because the

hoped-for behavioural change benefits the organization and not publics'. This model is closest to the Bernays mindset defined many decades before and remains the epitome of modern, sophisticated public relations practice.

One of Grunig's main contributions to public relations theory is the symmetrical model of public relations. He described it as 'benefiting both organization and publics'. It is public relations with a social conscience and is closely linked with some of the more altruistic definitions of public relations. Indeed, in 2003 a report jointly funded by the UK's Department of Trade and Industry and the IPR identified one of the current issues in UK public relations practice as: 'Public relations must increasingly be seen in the context of longer-term strategic relationship management and engagement on emerging trends such as corporate social responsibility.' (See Chapter 9.)

## DEFINING PUBLIC RELATIONS

What is Public Relations? For many, the simplistic answer is getting their name (company, client, self) into newsprint or on air in a report or article; for others it is publicity that attracts response through name recognition or rising sales. Governments see it as dispersal of information, for example in a health promotion campaign.

Measuring the results of these one-way (outward only) processes is usually done by accumulating press cuttings and broadcast transcripts and giving a value to the mentions (such as advertising equivalent cost), column inches and airtime. These may be descriptions of some everyday public relations activities, but they do not define the public relations process nor explain the meaning of the term 'public relations'.

The management function of public relations is most frequently expressed in definitions. One of the most widely taught, especially in the United States, is that of Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000: 4): 'Public relations is the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends.'

There are several phrases to note in this well-known definition. They first describe public relations as a 'management function' which implies it is a deliberate, planned action that has an outcome in mind. This is reinforced by 'identifies, establishes and maintains', which demonstrates research and a continuum of activity. 'Mutually beneficial relationships' relates to a two-way communication process through which the organization will act in the interests of both itself and the groups or publics with which it interacts. This

definition goes one stage further than others do by defining publics as those 'on whom its success or failure depends'. This verges on tautology as publics by their very nature are of central importance to an organization by giving it a reputation and a commercial, governmental or other organizational *raison d'être*. However, this is a comment that queries an aspect of this definition, not its central thrust of being a managed process of two-way communications.

In the UK, the common definition is that proposed by the Institute of Public Relations. It embodies many of the aspects of the US definitions but notably omits the management function and says: 'Public relations practice is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics' ([www.ipr.org.uk](http://www.ipr.org.uk)).

It does share the continuum element of 'planned and sustained effort' with objectives of establishing and maintaining goodwill and understanding, also an aspiration for two-way communications. As in the Cutlip, Center and Broom definition, there is a strong aspirational element that presupposes there is a nirvana of perfect communications which could be reached, if only 'goodwill and understanding' were established.

By contrast, in an earlier era Bernays emphasized the persuasive element in his definition that 'Public relations attempts to engineer public support.' This is a one-way definition and is probably closest to commonly found practitioner attitudes. Bernays developed his theories of public relations from his interpretation of social sciences and psychology, in particular. He considered that knowledge of psychology was important because practitioners had to understand the diversity of human behaviour. By understanding behaviour, public relations programmes could be designed to meet the needs of both client and the target publics. There is no aspirational element offered because Bernays' definition is action-oriented. Not surprisingly, his contribution to public relations theory has been strongly criticized as encouraging the manipulative and being anti-democratic.

US academics Botan and Hazleton (1989) observed that: '[Public relations] serves as the definitional label for the process of attempting to exert symbolic control over the evaluative dispositions (attitudes, images) and subsequent behaviours of relevant publics or clienteles.' This is one of the few definitions that offer a conceptual approach to the process as opposed to the majority which describe the objectives of public relations practice. It also firmly places public relations in the persuasive, asymmetric model because of its emphasis on controlling communications to meet an organization's objectives.

Two conclusions can be drawn from these many definitions of public relations. One is that there is a clear gap between the two-way communication models advocated by academics, such as Grunig, and the reality of one-way models adopted by practitioners. This is a divergence that runs parallel throughout comparisons of academic research and actual practitioner behaviour. The second, referred to above, is the debate between the managerial view of public relations practice, which is not confined to one-way or two-way definitions, and the altruistic approach that is exemplified by many two-way definitions. This separation is not as clearly reflected in the theory of public relations, although an important challenge to the primacy of the symmetrical model is currently being mounted. With the emphasis on promoting altruistic values or at least those that are of mutual benefit, public relations theory appears to have taken a different path from other communication and marketing disciplines by emphasizing legitimacy at the expense of applied functional research.

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS THEORY**

There is considerable debate as to whether there is a broad base to public relations theory. Theory is a term loosely applied by many commentators on public relations issues to a wide range of professional axioms or, to use the summary offered by American writer Ray Simon, 'the broad range of "how to" skills with which it (public relations) is practised' (Simon, 1984).

Despite a welter of text, theoretical development is limited. Most research and writing is concerned with the management and methodology of public relations and observation on the culture of public relations. US academic Jim VanLeuven has acidly commented: 'Much of what passes for theory in public relations comprises a loose collection of professional axioms that pull together divergent perspectives in public relations practice to further establish public relations as a necessary management function' (VanLeuven *et al*, 1988).

Grunig and Hunt commented more than 20 years ago that 'public relations is an infant scholarly field'. James Grunig in a more recent article says of the nature of public relations theory: 'One can think of many theories that apply to public relations but it is more difficult to think of a public relations theory (one that has not been borrowed from another discipline). Public relations as a scholarly discipline, therefore, appears to be fragmented and not unique as a discipline.'

## **GRUNIG'S PRIMACY**

Grunig's four models of practice and his situational theory of public relations have been in development for over two decades (Grunig, 1984). In that time, there has been little competition to these models, although some elements, notably his reliance on the symmetrical model as the 'excellent' form of public relations practice, are increasingly debated. Grunig's four models do not in themselves add up to a theory of public relations because they are essentially observations which have been processed into a classification of practitioner behaviour and attitudes.

From this base, however, Grunig has developed his situational theory, using the symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig, 1994). This theory seeks to explain why people communicate and when they are most likely to communicate. He says it explains how predicted communication behaviour can be used to analyse the mass population into publics. Grunig says this theory provides a means of segmenting publics in a manner similar to theories of market segmentation. It aims to predict the differential responses which are most relevant to the planning of public relations activity: namely, responsiveness to issues; amount of and nature of communication behaviour; effects of communication on cognition, attitudes and behaviour; and the likelihood of participation in collective behaviour to pressure organizations. Grunig continues to develop this theory and it is also used by others to study other concepts such as the interaction of publics, the media and public relations practitioners.

## **EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES**

The European approach to public relations research differs strongly from the anglophone tradition. It is more sociological and rhetorical in nature, unlike the US research which is rooted in managerial theory as well as borrowing from concepts of communication and public opinion. The Europeans are thus more distant from public relations practice and management. British academics Toby MacManus and Danny Moss, commenting on Europe's first PR research symposium in 1994, noted: 'The contrast between different research traditions was marked. The Dutch and German contributions emphasized theoretical and normative issues, whereas the UK and US papers were more empirically based' (MacManus and Moss, 1994).

European approaches have made little impact on mainstream public relations practice and the internationalization of public relations through the

expansion of major US- and UK-owned consultancy networks throughout Europe may reduce their influence further. The reverse case of US-sourced theory's influence on European researchers is demonstrable by the broad acceptance in academic writing of Grunig's four models of practice and his situational theory. The primacy of American theory has been admitted by the Dutch academic Betteke van Ruler who commented: 'Most of the thinking about public relations theory comes from the United States' (Van Ruler, 1992).

European scholars have interpreted sociologists and communications theorists such as Weber, Habermas, Foucault and Bourdieu when setting public relations in a social perspective. German academic Manfred Ruhl says that the failure to appreciate the potential role of public relations by practitioners and their clients/employers is due to lack of interest in constructing concepts, especially of public relations' 'social dimensions' (Ruhl, 1992). The theoretical and historical evolution of public relations described in this chapter shows that public relations has moved in a mainly managerial direction. By its very nature, management has demands for reporting, measurement and planned outcomes, and so evaluation should be an integral part of public relations practice which mainly follows informational one-way or asymmetric two-way models, as described by James Grunig.

### Questionnaire responses

#### *Evaluation questionnaire for industry leaders*

To get a worldwide view of attitudes to public relations evaluation, industry leaders around the world were surveyed on key questions.

**Q: Typically, how do you or your organization evaluate public relations activity?**

There is no one typical way: evaluation depends on types of programmes – appropriateness, clients – their needs and means, time – availability, and imagination – how to go beyond tradition. **Dejan Verčič, PhD, partner, Pristop Communications, Slovenia**

Using a suite of tools that might include internal reviews, surveys and external procurement of media evaluation. **Alison Clarke, Group Business Development Director, Huntsworth plc, UK**

1. In-house media monitoring, external service for TV, radio.

2. Evaluation team evaluates all organizational programme areas. These all (seven in total) have communication strategies.
3. For short campaigns, external pre and post surveys. Mid-campaign surveys for those longer than 12 months. **Fran Hagon, Senior Manager, Corporate Public Affairs and Marketing, National Prescribing Service Ltd (NPS), Australia**

We prefer to evaluate our outputs against pre-determined business and communications objectives agreed with the client. So if a client wants to move from number 2 to number 1 in the market the measurement criteria are clear to all. Some clients invest in media analysis services – which have some value if share of voice in a small press community is important. However, we find these tools lack the sophistication to be tailored to individual client needs and therefore can give a false picture of achievement and definitely have limited value in the broader PR remit. **Crispin Manners, Chief Executive, Kaizo, UK**

There isn't a typical approach. We sit down with clients at the start of every campaign and decide what the best way to evaluate is. It ranges from outside research for a government department to coverage analysis and the estimated advertising equivalent for a manufacturer. Every report is different but we have some standard templates. **Loretta Tobin, Deputy Chief Executive, Harrison Cowley, UK**

Mainly through media monitoring and assessment of the level of interest and focus on the client company. **Ray Mawerera, Managing Consultant, Words & Images Corporate Communications, Zimbabwe**

The answer is very simple. 'We achieved our targets, or x per cent of the target.' Of course, this relies on having clear targets in the first place. These come back to the inputs, outputs and outcomes elements which can be measured in various ways. Measuring inputs/outputs provides clients with interim confidence in the programme, while measuring outcomes is the only measure of effect. **Annabelle Warren, Chairman, Primary Communication, Australia**

Various ways are used – media use of key messages, placement, desirable publication, etc. Functions – analysing attendance by 'right' audience and outcomes thereof, depending on the aim of the function. **Clara**

**Zawawi, Director – Client Relationships, Professional Public Relations, Australia**

Ideally by conducting pre and post research to measure changes in opinion, perception, knowledge base; factual accuracy and tone of news stories; modified public behaviour, or altered position of the opposition.

**Tom O'Donoghue, President, O'Donoghue & Associates, Canada**

A software package is used to evaluate the volume, quality and value of coverage (equivalent advertising value  $\times$  3). It also measures the penetration of key messages against those set at the beginning of the campaign. **Laurna O'Donnell, Board Director, Beattie Communications, UK**

Mostly it is at a basic level of measuring media hits and undertaking some basic analysis – linked to messages, audiences, volume of coverage, etc. **Mike Copland, Chairman, Brodeur Worldwide UK**

On a variety of levels, but the best ones start with established benchmarks up-front and well-defined objectives. That's easier said than done. From there, it really depends on the nature of the programme. **Matt Kucharski, Senior Vice President, Padilla Speer Beardsley Public Relations, USA**

Evaluation has been the actual, not media coverage or attitudinal, outcomes of this organization's activities. **Richard Offer, Head of Publicity, Police Complaints Authority, UK**

Throughout our policy-making and communication processes, evaluation takes place. This includes evaluating our member needs, developing the Association's policy stance, implementing the PR campaign, and following the completion of the campaign, evaluating the results, which entails monitoring legislative change, media coverage and subsequent membership levels. **Adam Connolly, (formerly) General Manager – Government Relations, NSW Farmers' Association, Australia**

Clients like advertising equivalency. **John Bliss, Principal, Bliss, Gouverneur & Associates, USA**



# Evaluation and communication psychology

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As early as 1920, US public relations practitioners were discussing the role of evaluation of public relations activity. Forty years ago, writers predicted that evaluation practices would move from informal judgement to scientifically derived knowledge. At the beginning of the next century, evaluation is still earnestly discussed. This chapter looks at evaluation theory and its link with psychology.

Like most studies of humans, there is considerable and continuing debate among psychologists on behaviour. The causes and responses are never simple and often unpredictable. Yet for the purposes of communication public relations practitioners seek some characteristics or certainly something upon which they can base their campaigns.

Because of the continuing discussion of behavioural and mass communication theory, it is not possible to offer simple verities. However, this chapter will review the main themes among theorists and then link them with evaluation theories.

In the 1930s, there were studies that argued that the mass media had a powerful and continuing ability to influence public behaviour. The reasons put forward were based on rising literacy, the immediate impact of radio

broadcasting and the rise of mass movements in many European countries. An example often cited was the 'War of the Worlds' radio broadcast by Orson Welles, which convinced many thousands of listeners that Martians had attacked the east coast of the United States, whereas Welles had enhanced a well-known story by the science fiction writer HG Wells.

During the next two decades, there was a swing to the reverse argument that mass media did not have a persuasive impact, the so-called 'minimal effects' theories. From these theories, the genesis of many current attitudes and public relations practices can be found.

Some of the key concepts, outlined by McCoy and Hargie (2003), are:

- Interpersonal influence is very strong and opinion leaders play a vital role in spreading and interpreting information (Lazarsfeld *et al*, 1948).
- Among the barriers that limit campaign effectiveness are: *selective exposure* – the tendency to attend to messages that are consistent with prior attitudes and experience; *selective perception* – the tendency to interpret a message in terms of prior attitudes and experiences; and *selective retention* – the tendency to remember messages that are consistent with prior attitudes and experience (Hyman and Sheatsley, 1947).
- Contrasting with this 'cognitive consistency' was Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance that said attitudes can be changed if they are contrasted with a dissonant attitude, which is inconsistent with the existing viewpoint (Festinger, 1957).
- While Festinger's theory said that changes in attitudes could come via dissonance, it has become evident over time that people select information because it is relevant to them, rather than because it reinforces existing attitudes (McCoy and Hargie, 2003).
- Over time, discussion moved from the impact of mass media to the influence of interpersonal networks. Social learning theorists have pointed out that we create, modify and retain attitudes in discussion with other people in all the social networks. For example, we may see a story in the media but our attitudes towards an issue, ethical stance or product may be formed when discussing it with others in our family, workplace or other social environment.

There have been many theories and models to explain attitude and the ways in which we receive, retain and act upon information. There are domino models that show that step A leads to step B and so on until the message

recipient acts in a predictable way. The domino model is often found in communication strategy documents which propose that a particular approach will almost certainly result in a specific outcome. However, we humans don't think and act in a mechanistic manner. If we accept that models are only illustrative and not predictive, they can be of assistance for the development of public relations campaigns.

The dominant paradigm of practice is the equation of public relations with persuasion. In order to discuss models of evaluation, the nature of persuasion should be reviewed. From communications psychology, there are schemata and models that offer processes which public relations practitioners can apply to the evaluation of their own models. Among the frameworks that have been proposed, McGuire's Output Analysis of the Communication /Persuasion process has attributes that can be considered for persuasion-based public relations evaluation (McGuire, 1984). It can be summarized in six steps as:

PRESENTATION	Getting the message to the target.
ATTENTION	Target pays attention.
COMPREHENSION	Target processes messages. [The target does not necessarily understand the message or understand it correctly or as intended, but does acquire an understanding.]
ACCEPTANCE	Target incorporates message as understood and cognitive/affective state is changed as a result. [This can include boomerang effects.]
RETENTION	Target retains message for a specified time. [The message may, however, be changed as a result of retention and is not therefore the same as acceptance.]
ACTION	Target behaves in the manner desired by the originating communicator.

McGuire's model is not a domino model, as he outlines the likely problems at each stage that may result in attitudes that are not the ones sought. However, it does show that distribution of information, the most evaluated element of public relations activity, is only the first Presentation step in a

communication process. To concentrate on that step only is of little value to monitoring the campaign's progress and judging its outcomes.

This six-step process of the model can be further condensed into three major stages of OUTPUT (Presentation), IMPACT (Attention, Comprehension, Acceptance and Retention) and EFFECT (Action). The implication for public relations evaluation arising from this stepped process is that judgements should encompass the full range of the communication process from OUTPUT to EFFECT.

It can be argued that models or evaluation actions which measure Output are ignoring the full (and sometimes difficult to judge) persuasion process. They view only the first major stage and omit Impact and Effect. Yet it is in the interest of the client/employer to assess whether public relations effort (expressed in terms of time, budget and staff resources) has been effective in attaining the desired goals of Acceptance or Action.

In the discussion of current public relation practice by academics, there is often criticism that campaigns propose unattainable behavioural change. McCoy and Hargie (2003: 309–10) argue that 'PR practitioners must first break away from reliance on behaviouristic domino models, secondly accept more conservative expectations of effects and, thirdly, aim for alternative potential outcome. Event researchers who have investigated the communications effects of campaigns and have found positive results acknowledged it is simplistic to believe that PR creates awareness which in turn leads to knowledge, which in turn leads to the formation of a favourable attitude, which result in a behaviour change.'

US researchers Dozier and Ehling (1992) have written that PR campaigns have a 0.04 per cent chance of achieving behaviour change. So McCoy and Hargie (2003: 311) propose that practitioners should set alternative and more realistic objectives which could include agenda setting and the stimulation of interpersonal discussion, which as we note earlier is one of the most likely sources of attitudinal and behavioural change.

As Australian commentator Jim Macnamara (1992) says: 'This... does not imply that communication has no effect. But it does indicate that it is dangerous to make assumptions about (behavioural) communication outcomes.'

## NUMBER ONE PRACTITIONER TOPIC

In a Delphi study among UK practitioners and academics of research priorities conducted by White and Blamphin (1994), the topic of evaluation was ranked at number one in the development of public relations practice and research. It was important for self-esteem and reputation that methods of evaluation were devised to measure the effectiveness of campaigns.

Yet what is evaluation of public relations? Is it measuring output or monitoring progress against defined objectives? Is it giving a numerical value to the results of programmes and campaigns? Is it the final step in the public relations process or a continuing activity?

When discussing the topic of evaluation, there is considerable confusion as to what it means. For budget-holders, whether employers or clients, the judgements have a 'bottom line' profit-related significance. Grunig and Hunt have written of a practitioner who justified the budgetary expenditure on public relations by the large volume of press coverage generated. He was flummoxed by a senior executive's question: 'What's all this worth to us?' In the UK, articles in the public relations and marketing press refer to evaluation in terms of 'justifying expenditure', which is similar to Grunig and Hunt's example. White (1991) suggests that company managers have a special interest in the evaluation of public relations: 'Evaluation helps to answer the questions about the time, effort and resources to be invested in public relations activities: can the investment, and the costs involved, be justified?'

The definitions by many experts emphasize effectiveness, for example: Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000) - 'systematic measures of program effectiveness', Pavlik - 'evaluation research is used to determine effectiveness', Blissland (cited in Wilcox *et al*, 2000) - 'the systematic assessment of a program and its results' and Lindenmann (1993) - 'measure public relations effectiveness'. Developments of these definitions are those which are related to programme or campaign objectives, a reflection on the management-by-objectives influence on public relations practice in the United States. Wylie (cited in Wilcox *et al*, 2000) says, 'we are talking about an orderly evaluation of progress in attaining the specific objectives of our public relations plan'.

The term evaluation is a broad one and this breadth gives the potential for confusion. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000: 432) both illustrate the scope of evaluation and argue that evaluation is a research-based activity: 'The process of evaluating program planning, implementation, and impact is called "evaluation research".' Public relations uses research for a variety of purposes. Dozier and Repper (1992: 186) argue that a distinction needs to be drawn between research designed to analyse the situation at the beginning of the planning process and

research designed to evaluate the planning, implementation and impact of the programme. However, they themselves blur this distinction by stressing that the first type of research acts as the benchmark for programme evaluation. In short, a research-based culture is an evaluative culture and vice versa.

If evaluation is an integral part of programme planning (rather than a separate and optional extra activity tacked on to the end), which is itself a circular process with outputs continually feeding back to fine-tune implementation, then the distinction between research to assist implementation and research to measure results becomes increasingly hazy.

## OBJECTIVES OF EVALUATION

For effective evaluation to be undertaken, starting points have to be set out, a basis of comparison researched, and specific objectives established. Dozier (1985) has commented that 'measurement of programs without goals is form without substance; true evaluation is impossible'. Weiss (1977) says the 'purpose (of evaluation) should be clearly stated and measurable goals must be formulated before the questions can be devised and the evaluation design chosen'. This is an argument endorsed by many commentators.

The start point and the objective must be defined as part of the programme design, then waypoints can be measured and the effectiveness or impact assessed. White (1991) argues that 'setting precise and measurable objectives at the outset of a programme is a prerequisite for later evaluation'. This is often easier said than done, but Swinehart (1979) says that the objectives of a campaign or programme should be closely related to the research design and data collection as well as the campaign methods and strategy used.

He says that there are five areas of questioning that should be applied to objectives:

1. What is the content of the objective?
2. What is the target population?
3. When should the intended change occur?
4. Are the intended changes unitary or multiple?
5. How much effect is desired?

By posing these questions, it can be seen that simplistic media measurement or reader response analysis only considers output – volume of mentions – and not effects. Objectives of, say, more mentions in the *Financial Times*,

which may be sought by a quoted industrial company, are little more than a stick with which to beat the public relations (more correctly, press relations) practitioner. Dozier (1985) refers to this approach as 'pseudo-planning' and 'pseudo-evaluation'. Pseudo-planning is the allocation of resources to communications activities, where the goal is communication itself, and pseudo-evaluation is 'simply counting news release placements, and other communications'.

Swinehart (1979) divides evaluation into four categories: process, quality, intermediate objectives and ultimate objectives. He suggests that there is more to evaluation than impact. He also paves the way for effects-based planning theories:

1. Process is 'the nature of the activities involved in the preparation and dissemination of material'.
2. Quality is 'the assessment of materials or programs in terms of accuracy, clarity, design, production values'.
3. Intermediate objectives which are 'sub-objectives necessary for a goal to be achieved', eg placement of news.
4. Ultimate objectives which are 'changes in the target audience's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour'.

This analysis points out the need for planning and evaluation to be linked. The simpler approaches such as those undertaken by 'media-mentions' calculators separate planning from the campaign and subsequent evaluation.

## **COMPLEXITY OF EVALUATION**

Patton (1982: 17) makes the same point in the context of evaluation in general when he describes the move towards situational evaluation which requires that evaluators have to deal with different people operating in different situations. This is challenging because: 'in most areas of decision-making and judgement, when faced with complex choices and multiple possibilities, we fall back on a set of deeply embedded rules and standard operating procedures that predetermine what we do, thereby effectively short circuiting situational adaptability'. The natural inclination of the human mind is to make sense of new experiences and situations by focusing on those aspects that are familiar, and selectively ignoring evidence that does not fit stereotypes. Thus the tendency is to use existing techniques and

explanations, selectively ignoring evidence that indicates a fresh approach might be required.

Situational evaluation not only takes into account the environment in which the programme to be evaluated is operating, but also considers the audience for whom the evaluation is being undertaken. Fitz-Gibbon and Morris (1978: 13–14) explain: ‘The critical characteristic of any one evaluation study is that it provides the best possible information that could have been collected under the circumstances, and that this information *meets the credibility requirements of its evaluation audience*’ [italics added]. Evaluation is not undertaken for its own sake, but for a purpose, and that purpose requires the audience for whom the evaluation is being undertaken to regard the evaluation process and methodology as relevant and reasonable.

Another aspect of the complexity associated with public relations evaluation is the large number of variables with which public relations practice is concerned. White (1991: 106) explains the point when comparing the disciplines of public relations and marketing: ‘Marketing is a more precise practice, which is able to draw on research as it manipulates a small number of variables to aim for predicted results, such as sales targets and measurable market share.’ However, public relations remains a more complex activity: ‘Public relations is concerned with a far larger number of variables.’

A further dimension of public relations’ complexity, which is associated with all forms of mediated communication, is the introduction of an additional step and/or a third party. ‘But appraising communication becomes more complicated as soon as the media steps in’ (Tixier, 1995: 17). However, when public relations is used in its principal tactical incarnation of media relations, then the lack of control over this mediated communication muddies the waters even further. For example, when comparing publicity-generating media relations with advertising, one market researcher (Sennott, 1990: 63) explains:

I just saw a press kit from which nobody wrote a story. Good kit. Looked good. Nothing happened. So in public relations we have an extra phase to look at. That leads to some interesting problems in trying to determine how what we do is linked to our success in getting placements.

## METHODOLOGY PROBLEMS

There are some intrinsic methodological problems that make the evaluation process difficult. These include:

1. Campaigns are unique and are planned for very specific purposes. It is therefore difficult to evaluate the reliability of a unique event or process.
2. Comparison groups are difficult. A client would not be sympathetic to leaving out half of the target population so that one could compare 'intentions' with control groups.
3. Control of other variables, such as those outside the control of the public relations practitioner. These may impact on the campaign's target publics and may include campaigns run by competitors, the clutter of messages on the same subject from advertising, direct mail, word of mouth etc.
4. Timescale can affect the process and the results. For methodologically sound evaluation, a 'before' sample is needed as 'after' data. This, however, means implementing the evaluation process before the campaign.
5. The probity of the person or organization managing the campaign also being responsible for audit or evaluation. There is a danger of subjective judgement or distortion of result.
6. The plethora of techniques for evaluation of varying effectiveness.

## **EFFECTS-BASED PLANNING**

To develop a more complete approach to planning (and subsequent evaluation) is the purpose of the 'effects-based planning' theories put forward by VanLeuven *et al* (1988). These are closely associated with management-by-objectives techniques used widely in industry and government. Underlying VanLeuven's approach is the premise that a programme's intended communication and behavioural effects serve as the basis from which all other planning decisions can be made.

The process involves setting separate objectives and sub-objectives for each public. He argues that the planning becomes more consistent by having to justify programme and creative decisions on the basis of their intended communication and behavioural effects. It also acts as a continuing evaluation process because the search for consistency means that monitoring is continuous and the process of discussion needs evidence on which to reach decisions. Effects-based planning, says VanLeuven, means that programmes can be compared without the need for isolated case studies.

The search for consistency is one of the most difficult practical issues faced by the public relations professional. A more disciplined approach will allow the parameters of the programme to be more closely defined and for

continuous monitoring to replace a single post-intervention evaluation. It will also bolster the objectivity of the evaluation process.

## DEFINING EVALUATION

In contrast, evaluation as a practice is firmly rooted in social scientific research methods. As Noble (1994) points out: 'Evaluation as a means of assessing communications effectiveness is nothing new.' Rossi and Freeman (1982: 23) traced the origins of evaluation as a social scientific practice back to attempts in the 1930s to evaluate Roosevelt's New Deal social programmes. However, Patton (1982: 15) argues that evaluation did not emerge as a 'distinctive field of professional social scientific practice' until the late 1960s, about the same time as evaluation began to emerge as an issue in public relations. Public relations evaluation and evaluation as an identifiable social scientific activity have – separately – come under scrutiny over about the same timescale and can learn lessons from each other.

For example, Patton (1982: 15) confirms the broad nature of evaluation with his definition:

The practice of evaluation involves the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs, personnel, and products for use by specific people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions with regard to what those programs, personnel, or products are doing and affecting.

In commenting on this rather convoluted definition Patton makes the important point that: 'the central focus is on evaluation studies and consulting processes that aim to improve program effectiveness'. This places emphasis on evaluation as a formative activity: that is, obtaining feedback to enhance programme management.

Public relations, in particular, frequently embraces evaluation in a defensive, summative guise: assessing final programme outcome. For example, Blissland (cited in Wilcox *et al*, 2000: 191) defines evaluation in summative terms: 'the systematic assessment of a programme and its results. It is a means for practitioners to offer accountability to clients – and to themselves.' Broom and Dozier (1990: 17) criticize this style of public relations evaluation (which they confusingly describe as an 'evaluation-only' approach) because research is not seen as essential for planning, but limited to tracking and assessing impact. It encourages the view of evaluation as a separate activity undertaken at a distinct, late stage in the programme. The implication,

frequently made, is therefore that programmes can be implemented without evaluation.

In contrast, Wylie (as cited in Wilcox *et al*, 2000: 193) presents a more balanced view. He reverts to Patton's emphasis on formative evaluation, but without excluding summative thinking:

We are talking about an orderly evaluation of our progress in attaining the specific objectives of our public relations plan. We are learning what we did right, what we did wrong, how much progress we've made and, most importantly, *how we can do it better next time*. [italics added]

After a short review of what the term evaluation means in public relations, Watson (1997: 284) confirms that there is indeed 'considerable confusion'. He asserts that definitions of evaluation fall into three groups: 'the *commercial*, which is a justification of budget spend; *simple-effectiveness*, which asks whether the programme has worked in terms of output; and *objectives-effectiveness*, which judges programmes in terms of meeting objectives and creation of desired effects'.

While all these three groups of definitions display a summative ('evaluation only') focus, at least the third group introduces the concept of relating evaluation to the objectives set and therefore – by integrating evaluation into the planning process – at least establishes a formative foundation. It is also possible to argue that an evaluation process that establishes that the public relations programme has achieved the objective(s) set, by definition justifies the budget spent.

Wilcox *et al* (2000: 193) are among many authors who confirm the close link between planning, objectives and evaluation: 'Before any public relations program can be properly evaluated, it is important to have a clearly established set of measurable objectives. These should be part of the program plan'.

## PRINCIPLES OF EVALUATION

In summarizing current thinking on public relations evaluation, Noble (1999: 19–20) has set out seven principles of evaluation:

1. **Evaluation is research.** Evaluation is a research-based discipline. Its purpose is to inform and clarify and it operates to high standards of rigour and logic. As the orbit of public relations extends from publicity-seeking media relations to issues management and corporate reputation,

research will play an increasingly important role in the planning, execution and measurement of public relations programmes.

2. **Evaluation looks both ways.** Evaluation is a proactive, forward-looking and formative activity that provides feedback to enhance programme management. It is also a reviewing, backward-looking summative activity that assesses the final outcome of the campaign/programme. By so doing it proves public relations' worth to the organization and justifies the budget allocated to it. Formative evaluation is an integral part of day-to-day professional public relations practice and aids the achievement of the ultimate impact with which summative evaluation is concerned. However, public relations loses credibility – and evaluation loses value – if formative techniques are substituted for measurement and assessment of the ultimate impact of public relations programmes.
3. **Evaluation is user and situation dependent.** Evaluation should be undertaken according to the objectives and criteria that are relevant to the organization and campaign concerned. It is a function of public relations management to understand the organization's expectations of public relations activity. Having managed those expectations, the activity then needs to be evaluated in the context of them. It is also a management function to assess the objectives level appropriate to the campaign concerned and to implement it accordingly.
4. **Evaluation is short term.** Short-term evaluation is usually campaign or project based. Such campaigns are frequently concerned with raising awareness through the use of media relations techniques. There is not usually sufficient time for results to feedback and fine-tune the current project. They will, however, add to the pool of experience to enhance the effectiveness of future campaigns. Short term in this context definitely means less than 12 months.
5. **Evaluation is long term.** Long-term evaluation operates at a broader, strategic level and usually concerns issues management, corporate reputation, and/or brand positioning. It is here that there is maximum opportunity for (or threat of) the substitution of impact evaluation methodologies with process evaluation. The key issue is to ensure that evaluation is undertaken against the criteria established in the objectives. Direct measurement, possibly in the form of market research, is likely to form part of the range of evaluation methodologies employed. Because the communications programme is continuous and long term, regular feedback from evaluation research can help fine-tune planning and implementation as well as measuring results.

6. **Evaluation is comparative.** Evaluation frequently makes no absolute judgements but instead draws comparative conclusions. For example, media evaluation frequently makes historical and/or competitive comparisons, as well as comparing the messages transmitted by the media against those directed at journalists. The purpose of process evaluation is frequently to encourage a positive trend rather than hit arbitrary – and therefore meaningless – targets.
7. **Evaluation is multifaceted.** Public relations has been established as a multi-step process, if only because of the additional stepping stone represented by the media. A range of different evaluation methodologies are required at each step (or level), with process evaluation, for example, being used to enhance the effectiveness of impact effects. The concept of using a selection of different techniques in different circumstances has prompted the use of the term toolkit to describe the range of methodologies available to the communications practitioner.

The reaction of practitioners to the evaluation debate has included emphasis on the role that the setting of appropriate objectives plays in enabling effective evaluation. In the UK, a *PR Week* campaign has called for at least 10 per cent of public relations budgets to be assigned to research and evaluation. Theorists who have long argued in favour of careful objective setting echo these exhortations. Similarly, they have called for public relations to become more of a research-based discipline.

In an ideal world, the setting of specific, quantified and measurable objectives would indeed be the panacea for effective evaluation. However, public relations is rarely – if ever – able to achieve substantive objectives by itself, certainly in the marketing environment where the evaluation spotlight shines brightest. Evaluating public relations by comparing outcomes with objectives set then becomes meaningless if public relations is only one element of the mix, however important. Similarly, allocating 10 per cent of public relations budgets to research and evaluation, however laudable at first sight, implies both that research and evaluation are separate (if closely connected) entities, and that evaluation is a highly desirable added extra rather than an integral part of professional public relations practice. There is a seductive argument that public relations activity which cannot (or will not) be evaluated should not form part of professional practice. (This issue is explored in detail in Chapter 8.)



# Practitioner culture – why we do what we do

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There is a considerable gap between the academic desire for a social science-based approach to public relations evaluation and the ‘seat of the pants’ methods used by the vast majority of practitioners. Although some researchers claim that practitioners are becoming more sophisticated, the evidence is that there are barriers to widespread acceptance of systematic evaluation and its techniques across the world.

## HOLY GRAIL OR REINVENTING THE WHEEL

Evaluation is a subject widely written about at academic and practitioner level. John Pavlik (1987) has commented that measuring the effectiveness of public relations has proved almost as elusive as finding the Holy Grail. Until the mid-1990s, most studies found that public relations practitioners and their employers/clients had ignored evaluation. Tom Watson’s studies of UK practitioners in the 1990s showed many areas of movement on attitudes. By the latter part of the decade, the attitude in the profession towards evaluation and its integration into campaign and programme planning had changed. Nonetheless, there remains work to be done. The IPR/CDF (2004) study included this statement among its recommendations: ‘A significant change in the culture of the PR industry is required towards more sophisticated

PR measurement as opposed to the “magic bullet” approach that so many PR practitioners appear to desire.’

The culture of public relations practitioners is a fundamental issue when considering attitudes towards evaluation and the methodology used. In textbooks and articles about public relations, writers and academics are almost unanimous in their advice that programmes must be researched during preparation and evaluated during and after implementation. Many researchers, however, have found that a minority of practitioners used scientific evaluation methods. Only recently have methodical studies been undertaken in other countries to explore the experience of practitioners and attitudes of different nationalities and cultures. James Grunig (1984) has a celebrated *cri de coeur* on the subject:

I have begun to feel more and more like a fundamentalist preacher railing against sin; the difference being that I have railed for evaluation in public relations practice; just as everyone is against sin, so most public relations people I talk to are for evaluation. People keep on sinning, however, and PR people continue not to do evaluation research.

Glen Broom and David Dozier’s research on evaluation over a 20-year period in the United States encompassed local (San Diego), national (PRSA) and international (IABC) samples. A consistent finding of their studies was that evaluation of programmes increases as the practitioner’s management function develops, whereas it either plateaus or falls away if he or she has a technician role (writing, media relations, production of communication tools). Dozier (1985) says:

Some practitioners do not engage in any program research, others conduct extensive research. Practitioners vary in the kinds of research methods they use from intuitive, informal ‘seat-of-the-pants’ research to rigorous scientific studies. Although little longitudinal scholarly research is available, the best evidence is that – over time – more practitioners are doing research more frequently.

There have long been indications of the lack of self-confidence in the UK public relations profession, with some commentators arguing that the need of some practitioners to evaluate activities was ‘partly a matter of professional insecurity’. Taking a different tack, another prominent practitioner, Quentin Bell, a former chairman of the UK’s Public Relations Consultants Association, said: ‘Unless we can get clients to insist on evaluation, there will not be a PR consultancy business in 25 years’ time’ (Bell, 1992).

## **‘BEAN COUNTERS’ V CREATIVITY**

At the heart of the debate is the belief among some practitioners that evaluation is stripping away ‘creativity’ and replacing it with a ‘bean counter’s mentality’. The argument goes that evaluation is an accountant’s attitude that is not forward looking, only historical. Buttressing this, typically among older practitioners and those from a journalistic background, is that public relations is not a profession or a science but is an art or a craft that defies definition or measurement. Evaluation is thus perceived as potentially threatening because it may transform this ‘black art’.

The US public relations pioneer Ivy Lee believed that his work was not definable because it was an extension of his personality. It had no existence other than through him. A common attitude found by all research was that output in terms of media coverage and anecdotal evidence would pass for evaluation. Two examples quoted in an article in *Public Relations Journal* are: ‘there are still plenty of clients who are satisfied with the warm fuzzy feeling they get from counting their media clips’ and ‘Memories! Two or three months after the program, the PR practitioner notices there is still talk about the program. It’s one of the best gauges.’

Other writers have argued that the desire for evaluation could restrict practitioners to do that which can be measured at the expense of that which is ‘best’. A failing in this argument, and in the practitioner comments above, is that there is no way of knowing whether the ‘warm fuzzy feeling’, the ‘memories!’ and the ‘unique and excellent’ are effective in reaching the objectives of the programme or campaign. All public relations campaigns need ‘bright ideas’, but they can be a disaster if they don’t work.

## **LARGE-SCALE STUDIES**

Although there have been many small sample studies, the main extensive national and international studies have been conducted by David Dozier among PRSA and IABC members, Walter Lindenmann among a selected group of targets in the United States (Lindenmann, 1990) and Tom Watson among Institute of Public Relations members in the UK (Watson, 1994 and 1996). In Australia, Gael Walker in the mid-1990s (Walker, 1994 and 1997) and Tom Watson and Peter Simmons (2004) have conducted extensive studies.

In early work, David Dozier (1984) found that practitioners in San Diego were using quantitative measures in documenting programme activities and

**Table 3.1 Evaluation methods found by Dozier in US national survey**

Method	Mean rate (1–7 scale)
Informal ‘seat of the pants’ observation	5.0
Clip file evaluation	4.4
‘Scientific’ evaluation	2.4

media placements (ie output measurements). By comparison there was little empirical research used in planning programmes or evaluating impact.

Because of their educational background, practitioners whom Dozier studied did not generally have a good knowledge of research techniques that can be applied to evaluation of public relations programmes. Dozier found there was a correlation between the practitioners’ college education and their use of techniques. Most had little exposure to social science statistical techniques and many (43 per cent in one study) had come to public relations practice after initial experience in journalism (an average of 3.5 years), which left them predisposed to measurement by media coverage. At the time of this study, objective, scientific evaluations of public relations programmes were the least frequent method of analysis. On a seven-point ‘never to always’ Likert differential scale, 22 per cent said they never used a scientific approach while none said they always used it. The median score of 2.4/7 indicated that ‘scientific’ evaluation was infrequently undertaken. The most popular technique was ‘seat of the pants’ informal observational methods that had a median of 5.0/7 and were closely followed by clip file evaluation at 4.4/7. Said Dozier, ‘the more scientific the style, the less frequently it is used’.

In his third international study, Dozier (1988) reported on a study of members of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) in the United States, Canada and the UK (Table 3.2). It found again that the most common approaches were informal (median of 4.3 on a seven-point

**Table 3.2 Evaluation methods found by Dozier in an international (IABC) sample**

Method	Mean rate (1–7 scale)
Informal ‘seat of the pants’ observation	4.3
Clip file evaluation	4.1
‘Scientific’ evaluation	2.9

scale), mixed 4.1/7 and scientific 2.9/7. The samples were different in the IABC study (in that there were non-US practitioners and the population was largely in-house practitioners, whereas the US sample had been nationals from all areas of practice) but the gap between informal and scientific remained large.

An earlier long-term study by Dozier with Glen Broom had found that managers of public relations activity who had expanded their role over a six-year period were more likely to take a more scientific approach, whereas those whose job content had remained static were less inclined to do so. The implication was that managers who aspire to a greater involvement in their organization are likely to use more advanced planning and measurement techniques. Technicians appeared to use little or no evaluation techniques for judging their output and its impact.

## **LINDENMANN'S RESEARCH**

One of the most prominent US non-academic commentators on evaluation has been Walter Lindenmann. In the late 1980s, Lindenmann undertook a nationwide survey 'among public relations practitioners in the country as a whole' on public relations research, measurement and evaluation (Lindenmann, 1990). The survey methodology was a mailed self-administered questionnaire comprising 53 items. It was sent to 945 potential respondents. The sample was created from five categories: major corporations, large trade and professional associations, large non-profit organizations, the 20 largest public relations consultancies and academics. The key findings were:

- 57.4 per cent believed that outcomes of public relations programmes can be measured; 41.8 per cent disagreed;
- 75.9 per cent agreed that research is widely accepted by most public relations professionals as a necessary part of planning programmes;
- 94.3 per cent agreed that research is still more talked about than done (54.2 per cent strongly agreed with this);
- research was undertaken for the purposes of planning (74.7 per cent), monitoring or tracking activities (58.1 per cent), evaluating outcomes (55.7 per cent), publicity polls (41.1 per cent) and tracking of crisis issues (36.4 per cent). (Multiple responses were sought for this question.)

The expenditure on research and evaluation showed wide variations. Many respondents, principally in large corporations, utilities, trade associations and non-profit bodies, claimed that it was included in budgets, but they were almost equally balanced by those who claimed not to have budgets for this activity.

Lindenmann found that the 89 respondents who did allocate funds for research indicated that the sums were small: 22.5 per cent said it was less than 1 per cent of the total PR budget; 31.5 per cent said it was between 1 and 3 per cent; 21.3 per cent between 4 and 6 per cent and 12.3 per cent said it was 7 per cent or above. Many respondents complained of a lack of money as the main reason they were not carrying out as much research as they wished. Among the verbatim reasons given by respondents were 'tight budgets mean that the dollars go for "bread and butter" programmes'; 'to do it right is expensive and it isn't a top priority when you are working in a down market'.

As for future developments, three issues had strong support. Some 54.2 per cent believed that evaluation would grow in importance; 50.2 per cent agreed that public relations research needed to become more sophisticated; and 58.5 per cent said that public relations professionals needed to be educated in research techniques and applications. Lindenmann says that more than nine out of ten respondents showed some level of agreement that the importance of evaluation would grow. The issues that he considered negative were:

the acknowledgment by better than nine out of every ten PR professionals that research is still talked about in PR than is actually being done. Also of concern was the finding that, in the view of seven out of every ten respondents, most PR research that is done today is still casual and informal, rather than scientific or precise.

Lindenmann's conclusion was that the public relations field has made considerable progress in adopting research and evaluation techniques, but that it still has 'a considerable distance to travel'. He added: 'It is very encouraging that those in the field feel strongly that PR research, measurement and evaluation projects will almost certainly grow in importance...'

When Lindenmann's research can be compared with Dozier's studies, it seems that there is a common thread of greater acceptance of research and measurement and a desire to play down the 'seat of the pants' approach that Dozier has found prevalent. The Lindenmann study sample was made up of practitioners in large organizations who would be expected to have better

access to resources and who may be playing a leading role in their organization's policy development.

The word 'may' is chosen deliberately because it was not obvious as to the job titles of those to whom the surveys were sent. The responses came from public relations executives (74 per cent), public relations counsellors or suppliers (15 per cent) and academics (7 per cent). The term 'public relations executive' covers a multitude of responsibilities and job titles, ranging from those who are policymakers in the dominant power coalitions of their organization through to communications technicians to whom the survey may have been passed by a superior.

An indicator that Lindenmann's observations of higher standards in research and measurement may be over-stated lies in the response to two statements – the 94.3 per cent who agreed that research is still more talked about than done (with echoes of James Grunig's *cri de coeur* above) and the 41.8 per cent who agreed that trying to measure public relations outcomes in precise terms is 'next to impossible'. Interestingly, 63.7 per cent of the small sample of academics (18 only) agreed with this but, more importantly, so did 49.3 per cent of the largest sample, which was corporate executives.

Other data which also questions claims of higher evaluation standards is that most research, when undertaken, is done by individuals trained in public relations and not in research techniques (61.8 per cent) and that most research is 'casual and informal' (72.7 per cent). This is a picture of 'seat of the pants' research, possibly undertaken because of budgetary limits, lack of knowledge, personal preferences and habit.

Lindenmann's research did not reach out to all levels of public relations practice, especially small regional consultancies and industrial companies where the typical unit is of five people or less. Thus it is not possible to apply his conclusions to the breadth of practice in the United States or to similar anglophone countries. It is, however, of value in establishing attitudes to evaluation and measurement among larger US organizations.

## WATSON'S STUDIES

The first survey by Tom Watson was conducted among UK-based full members of the IPR in 1992 (Watson, 1994). Among the key results were:

- Practitioners viewed evaluation very narrowly and lacked confidence in promoting evaluation methods to employers and clients.

- Most relied on output measurement of media coverage. Few undertook research or pre-testing when preparing campaigns.
- Evaluation was not undertaken because of a lack of time, budget and knowledge of methods.
- Evaluation was feared because it could challenge the logic of practitioners' advice and activities.
- Seventy-five per cent claimed to undertake some form of evaluation, with 61.6 per cent of programmes being evaluated, mainly by the project manager.
- Little was spent on evaluation, with 74.3 per cent (who answered this question) indicating that the total proportion of budget was zero to 5 per cent.
- The picture that emerged was of the practitioner as a 'doer' rather than an adviser.

Watson summarized practitioner standards on evaluation and planning as 'basic'. He added that 'the culture of public relation practice appears largely concerned with functional communications (ie communications for the sake of it) and not with planning to meet agreed objectives and creation of desired effects'.

In 1996, many aspects of the study were repeated in a UK sample, again taken randomly from the UK-based full members of the IPR. Comparing the results of the two studies, Watson found there had been a sea change in attitudes towards evaluation and an increased respect among practitioners for the topic (Watson, 1996).

Many benefits were perceived from using evaluation techniques and there was little rejection. During the four-year period, many practitioners had set up evaluation systems. These were mostly informal and self-assessment, but they had begun to undertake regular activity.

Evaluation was seen by 63.9 per cent as increasing respect from clients and employers and 67.7 per cent indicated that these groups accepted evaluation results. By 1996, 15 per cent more practitioners were undertaking evaluation, with 21.8 per cent doing it systematically and 39.1 per cent 'often'.

Budgets, however, had not moved markedly. In 1992, those allocating 0-5 per cent totalled 74.3 per cent and four years later it had risen to 80.2 per cent. Watson commented that 'we are evaluating more, but we aren't spending more'.

The importance of evaluation was indicated by 85.1 per cent who ranked it as 'very important' or 'important'. Only 4.5 per cent said it was 'unimportant' or 'irrelevant'. There was no similar question in the 1992 survey, but written comments were often trenchantly doubtful about evaluation, eg: 'PR is not a science; most practitioners are inadequate; clients are too thick.'

Watson concluded that because information on evaluation was more easily available and the subject was regularly covered in trade publications, the topic had risen up the profession's agenda and had become 'less difficult to sell as a concept and practice to clients and employers'.

## **AUSTRALIAN STUDIES**

Australian evaluation expert Jim Macnamara refers to a 'philosophical consensus' on its importance, but says application of evaluation has been low in public relations. Two 1993 surveys in Australia found a substantial gulf between attitudes and practices among practitioners. Consistent with public relations best practice credo, academic Gael Walker found there was 90 per cent agreement or strong agreement that research is widely accepted 'as a necessary and integral part of the planning, program development and evaluation process' (Walker, 1997). Only 55 per cent, however, reported very frequently or occasionally 'measuring or evaluating the outcomes, impact or effectiveness of PR programs or activities'. A worldwide study by the International Public Relations Association found that 90 per cent of Australian public relations practitioners believed evaluation was necessary, but just 14 per cent 'frequently undertook research aimed at evaluating' (IPRA, 1994). Australia's figure was slightly lower than the United States, South Africa and the average for the whole sample.

A recent president of the Public Relations Institute of Australia said in 2002 that there 'is little evidence that the use of research has increased significantly in public relations since 1994, and some surveys suggest that even if more research is being used, there is still a long way to go' (Macnamara, 2002). In 2003, Mercer Consulting reported that more than 50 per cent of an Australian sample reported that communications effectiveness was measured either on an ad hoc basis or not at all (Mercer, 2003).

The most recent survey of Australian public relations practitioners' evaluation practices and attitudes was undertaken among members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia by Tom Watson and Peter Simmons. A picture of a media relations-centric approach was found (Watson and Simmons, 2004).

It also found there was an increase in research and evaluation activity, but the focus remained on outputs, not outcomes, of communication. Media coverage monitoring and media content analysis dominated research methods used to plan, monitor and evaluate PR communication. Some 89 per cent of practitioners reported often or always measuring the volume of communication, but just 32 per cent often or always measure resulting changes in behaviour.

The data show that UK and Australian attitudes are broadly similar, although Australian practitioners indicated that cost is much less of a barrier to evaluation than a lack of time and knowledge. Analysis of attitudes and responses to an open-ended question suggests that lack of research skills and confidence, longing to show bottom-line results, and frustration at decision-makers' misunderstanding of public relations has made evaluation a cause of anguish for many practitioners.

## **SMALL SAMPLE RESEARCH**

### **Silver Anvil study**

An indicator of attitudes that may be slowly changing was the analysis undertaken by Blissland (1990) of entries in the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) annual Silver Anvil case study competition. This is a competition open to all members of the PRSA and is a highly prized professional award.

Blissland compared entries from the end of the 1980s with those at the beginning of the decade to see if there were changes in attitude to evaluation methods over the period. All Silver Anvil winners in the years in question were reviewed and Blissland identified three groups of evaluation methods, namely: measures of communication output, measures of intermediate effect and measures of organization achievement. He also created sub-groups in each of the groups.

The main findings were that of the 12 evaluation sub-groups, two were strongly preferred – media coverage and inferred goal achievement. Contacts from the media and financial measures were the least used. The preferred categories fall into Dozier's 'seat of the pants' definitions.

A cosmetic change of nomenclature was that, in the early part of the decade, only one entrant used the term 'evaluation' but 88 per cent used 'results'. By the end, 83 per cent were using 'evaluation' as the term to describe their outcomes section. They also used more evaluation methods, too. This rose from a mean of 3.6 methods/winner to 4.57 methods/winner.

The statistically significant changes were the use of behavioural science measures, and two measures of organizational goal achievement: inferred achievement and substantiated achievement. Blissland concluded that by the end of the decade there was marginally greater reliance on the output measure of media coverage, which rose from 70.0 per cent to 79.2 per cent. However, when this is linked to the inferred (that is, unsubstantiated) achievement claims, which rose in winning entries from 53.3 to 87.5 per cent, it is hard to agree with Blissland's conclusion that 'Clearly, progress has been made.' In a chameleon-like manner, the Silver Anvil entrants have learned the new buzz-words, but have remained even more attached to output measures and unsubstantiated claims. Blissland admits that the entries do have some sizeable gaps in methodology:

However, much remains to be done. The rigour of behavioural science methodology was still missing from the evaluation of more than half (55.6 per cent) of the most recent Silver Anvil winners... And while most winners claimed organizational goal achievement from only circumstantial evidence, more than half of the winners – 56.7 per cent – did not bother to substantiate such claims with behavioural science methods. Thus, unsubstantiated claims of goal achievement outstripped substantiated ones by about two to one.

Blissland's study is a snapshot of award entries that may contain *ex post facto* thinking to justify actions. To gain a prize or pass the test does not indicate best practice. Blissland claims that Silver Anvil winners 'may well represent the leading edge in evaluation practice', but this could be an over-statement of the quality of the entries.

A recent study of Australian practitioners, which looked at several years of winning entries in that nation's Golden Target PR awards, has found that lip service has been given to evaluation, with most winners using very limited media analysis to support claims of success or effectiveness (Xavier, Patel and Johnston, 2004).

## German practitioners' attitudes

European research on evaluation has been undertaken mainly in Germany. Barbara Baerns studied attitudes among German in-house public relations managers in the 1990s and found similar results to Dozier's studies (Baerns, 1993).

A postal survey was undertaken among 216 managers who were members of the German Public Relations Association (DPRG). It had a response level of 69 per cent and led Baerns to a conclusion similar to that of Grunig's 'evaluation and sin' analogy:

**Table 3.3 German PR practitioners' attitudes**

Attitudinal statement	%
Could name phases in the planning of public relations	49
Gave no answer to the question	17
Could not distinguish between planning and phases of operation	14
Listed public relations goals	14
Gave meaningless answers	6

Almost all West German public relations experts in managerial positions regarded analytical work as important in the context of public relations. However, almost all of them rarely analysed and controlled what they had accomplished irregularly or never. If controlling occurred, then (it was) mostly as press analyses. With regard to possible contribution by science (*ie social science methods*), PR experts showed themselves to be uncertain – or said that it was not in demand at all.

Baerns questioned the managers on three aspects of public relations activity – planning, analysis and control and their view of whether their work met the US descriptions (such as Dozier's analysis) of communications manager or communication technician. Although Baerns' data is largely concerned with attitudes to planning of public relations activity, the results link with Watson's UK studies that also viewed this subject.

She found that the majority of respondents (55 per cent) regarded long-term public relations planning as 'indispensable', while 39 per cent referred to the priority of day-to-day events. A small number (7 per cent) regarded planning in public relations as 'impossible'. Baerns then explored the ways in which planning took place and found a considerable gap between the reported attitudes towards planning and the reality of what took place. In her paper, she asks the reader to 'draw your own conclusion' from data which was difficult for her to assess. Analysis of the data illustrates the gap between the practitioners' claims and their normal behaviour (Table 3.3).

Her conclusion was that the majority said public relations planning was indispensable, but the majority did without it. As for analysis and control, Baerns found 88 per cent of managers regarded this as 'important', with the residual 12 per cent saying it was 'relatively unimportant'. However, more than half the respondents analysed their activities only 'irregularly' or 'never'.

Most respondents delegated their analysis and investigations partly or wholly to external institutions. Baerns found that 63 per cent of respondents believed that 'scientific findings' play only a minor part in public relations

**Table 3.4 Ranking of evaluation barriers**

Barrier	Rank
Lack of time	1
Lack of personnel to undertake the task	2
Lack of funds/budget	3
Doubts on usefulness of results	4
Lack of knowledge of methods	5
Aversion to scientific methodology	6

practice. This corresponds with the ‘seat of the pants’ attitudes identified in the United States and the UK by Dozier and Watson, respectively. Her conclusion was that when evaluation or monitoring took place, ‘(it was) mostly as press analyses’.

In her third question, Baerns asked managers if they would rank the majority of their professional colleagues, ie other members of DPRG, as ‘communications managers’ or ‘communications technicians’, with the result that 88 per cent regarded their colleagues, to quote Baerns, ‘as mere doers, as “communications technicians”’, an epithet they did not apply to themselves. In the 1992 study, the German research focused on why practitioners did not evaluate their work (Table 3.4).

Baerns does not specify percentage data to all the rankings other than for the lowest three, which were doubts on usefulness (20 per cent), lack of knowledge of methods (14 per cent) and aversion to scientific methodology (6 per cent). The German data shows similarities with many other Western public relations cultures, namely that research is not being used as a formative tool and evaluation (or control methods) is based on ‘seat of the pants’ methods such as media analysis. These shared characteristics indicate that the conclusions for the development of common evaluation techniques could have credence outside a strictly English-speaking culture upon which so much of public relations practice worldwide draws. The German public relations attitudes are shown to be very close to those identified in the United States, UK and Australia.

### **ICCO/GPRA survey**

A survey of 107 European public relations consultancies in 1996 (ICCO/GPRA) found similar results to Watson’s UK studies. Although more expenditure was available for evaluation, 71.9 per cent spent 0–5 per cent or

had no separate budget. Also, the consultancy was most likely to be analysing its output and report to the client. Analysis of media coverage was the most common evaluation tool offered by consultancies and requested by their clients.

## **Other small sample research**

US researchers undertook most of the early studies in the 1970s but there has been a rise in other countries. Among the US studies are those by Judd and Hiebert and Devine. Judd (1990) found that 67 per cent of PRSA members used formal research or evaluation and that regional practitioners in Texas were only marginally lower at 66 per cent. He has also cross-checked his results by analysing whether those who say they evaluate actually do so and is satisfied that there is a clear correlation between saying and doing. His results, however, are at variance with most US and overseas practitioner studies. One reason could be that his samples were small, with only 100 PRSA members in the national survey and even smaller populations in local surveys undertaken in Texas and Houston. Another is that almost all those participating in the survey were very experienced practitioners with averages of between 14.3 and 16.7 years in public relations practice. With such a high average period of involvement, most respondents would be expected to be in a managerial position, which may result in the higher than average response. A third factor is that Judd's surveys used quota-filling methods, thus eliminating any respondents who did not wish to participate. These three factors may have resulted in the over-optimistic picture of a high level of evaluation.

Hiebert and Devine (1985), however, found the reverse in an earlier study of government information officers in the United States of whom 85 per cent thought evaluation 'was either an important or very important activity', but who conducted almost no research.

## **Australia and the UK**

Research in Australia by Jim Macnamara also detected a gap between saying and doing, but more significantly a reliance on measurement of media indicators and the absence of objective research methods (Macnamara, 1999). He found that only 3 of 50 senior public relations consultancies surveyed could nominate an objective methodology used to evaluate media coverage, despite 70 per cent of respondents claiming that they undertook qualitative judgement of media coverage.

Macnamara found that when asked what methods of evaluation were used, the consultancies nominated discussions with journalists, number of

enquiries received, client sales results, share price movements and community participation in events. The research methodology was subjective and variously described as professional judgement, client feelings, word of mouth and general feedback. 'A number of these were hardly objective or reliable forms of evaluation research. Even those that are legitimate forms of measurement were not administered in any remotely scientific way in the majority of cases.'

The public relations profession aspires to shift from a technical (writing, events and information dissemination) to a strategic (managerial decision making) role in organizations. Practitioners are well known to express frustration at the sidelining of public relations in many organizations, and management failure to recognize adequately the value of communication. Jim Macnamara has highlighted two failings that help explain why public relations lacks credibility in the eyes of management. First is the failure of public relations to evaluate and report the outcomes or effects of communication. A second and related reason is failure to use the language of accountability preferred by organizations (such as MBO, TQM, QA and benchmarking). These factors, he says, are major obstacles to the inclusion of public relations in strategic decision making.

Another survey of senior Australian managers by Steiner and Black (2000) suggests that public relations' transition to managerial status is far from complete. Managers were found to have very low expectations of public relations' role in strategic planning, and rely on public relations officers for information dissemination rather than advice.

In the UK, a small study of practitioner attitudes was undertaken by Jon White who reviewed practice among a cross-section of consultancies in membership of the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) (White, 2002). The aim of his paper was to offer a qualitative discussion of evaluation issues to the PRCA and so no statistical sample was developed on the actual use.

In 2001, a study of UK marketing directors by Test Research found that only 28 per cent were satisfied with their public relations evaluation, compared with 67 per cent for advertising and 68 per cent for sales promotion. Managerial status will require research and evaluation that give firm evidence of contribution to the organization. Indeed, the IPR/CDF study recommends explicitly that: 'The cost of PR measurement should be considered against the business case of what PR programmes can achieve rather than against the budget of the programmes themselves. Viewed in this context – helping make a strong business case – the cost of evaluation can be better justified. ... measurement plays a key role in obtaining higher PR budgets by demonstrating the business case of the results achieved.'

## THE BARRIERS TO EVALUATION

The barriers to the more widespread evaluation of public relations activity are many. Dozier points to several reasons: previous working experience of practitioners, lack of knowledge of research techniques, the manager/technician dichotomy, the practitioners' participation in decision making. Lindenmann believed that practitioners were 'not thoroughly aware' of research techniques. He also found that respondents to his survey complained of a lack of money, with 54 per cent spending 3 per cent or less (often much less) on evaluation.

Baerns found similar barriers in Germany, with time, lack of personnel, inadequate budgets and doubts about the process all being important. Macnamara's research found that practitioners lacked knowledge of methodology, but did not explore other explanations. In the UK, one strong reason advanced by practitioner commentator Quentin Bell was money and client reluctance to spend it:

And the problem I fear lies with money – too many clients are still not prepared to allocate realistic budgets to pay for the process. But I concede that it's a Catch 22; until clients have become accustomed to what's possible on evaluation, they won't begin to demand it. That's the basic problem that our industry as a whole must aim to solve. (Bell, 1992)

These barriers follow a circular argument: most practitioners' education does not include social science research techniques; therefore they don't use them but concentrate on technician skills, which means they don't rise into the manager roles and participate in decision making. This would give access to budgets for planning and evaluation, thus creating programmes and campaigns that can enhance their personal standing and meet the objectives of their client or employer.

Unless evaluation becomes less of a mystery and a more accessible process, it would appear that a generation of better-educated practitioners is needed to break the technician mould. Technicians will always be needed to carry out the operational aspects and tactical implementation of programmes and campaigns, especially those that are based on media relations and publications. If the evaluation models are simpler to operate, then technicians can participate in them. As they are producing many of the materials for the strategy, it makes sense for them to aid the evaluation process. Money and time will always be in short supply, but simpler models to enable

evaluation to take place more frequently would prove a more convincing case when budgets are set.

## PRESSURES TO EVALUATE

Without evidence of the effects of public relations communication, the decision to invest is based on belief. Decision-makers generally prefer measures and precedent to guesswork and assurance. Thus investment in public relations communication is threatened by decision-maker perceptions of lack of accountability.

According to Michael Fairchild, author of the *PR Evaluation Toolkit*, in the UK the need to strengthen PR's research and evaluation practices has become even more urgent in recent years (Fairchild, 2002). Recessionary pressures on organizational budgets are causing cutbacks to public relations in the UK, 'indicating yet again that PR is regarded as an optional and dispensable service'. He also discussed a trend leading to increased competition for public relations core business. The convergence of management consulting, legal and accountancy services is resulting in the encroachment of multidisciplinary consultancies on fields such as issues and risk management, communication and reputation. Fairchild notes that, without the esteem of management, public relations is likely to take a publicity rather than strategic role as organizations respond to the increasing (regulatory and non-regulatory) demands to report non-financial performance.

Other pressures upon practitioners include the introduction of payment-by-results (PBR) contracts and the use of purchasing professionals in the negotiation of consultancy arrangements. PBR, which is widely used in advertising, demands evidence of the achievement of mutually agreed objectives or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). These objectives, or KPIs, are measured by some form of evaluation methodology in order to decide whether the supplier of PR services (in-house and consultancy) can be paid the full contract amount or penalized for missing the targets. It is a similar position where purchasing professionals are involved in negotiating the performance elements of a contract or a campaign. This practice has become widespread in consumer and technology public relations in the UK and North America and is being introduced into the governmental sector in many countries. In the UK, for example, there has been a strong effort by bodies representing purchasers of services and the suppliers to develop a

common industry-wide approach which includes evaluation methodologies. Like it or not, PR practitioners are having to face up to the use of evaluation.

## CONCLUSIONS

What can be seen as a major change in one researcher's view may not be seen in the same light by another. The claims that there has been progress in the adoption of higher standards of evaluation by both Lindenmann and Blissland are examples of this ambiguity.

Both have used samples chosen to represent the leading edge of public relations practice. Both have found extensive use of the words 'evaluation' and 'research'. Lindenmann, especially, found pious hopes for an expansion of evaluation in the 1990s.

Yet all of the three main studies referred to – Dozier, Lindenmann and Watson as well as small sample research from Baerns, Macnamara and ICO/GPRA – have found that most practitioners rely on 'seat of the pants' research. This is mainly consideration of coverage (cuttings, airtime etc) in the media. Lindenmann and Blissland's studies could be questioned on the basis of their samples, which may be skewed towards higher achievers and the more research-literate. They certainly do not cover the breadth of public relations practice.

Yet both (as well as Watson) have produced data in line with Dozier, who has looked at public relations practice at all levels from his home area of San Diego to the IABC's membership in three anglophone countries.

The culture that he has uncovered, which is confirmed by Baerns in Germany, Macnamara in Australia and among the IPRA membership, shows that most practitioners, because of their educational background and experience, do not have a working knowledge of research techniques which would aid the evaluation of public relations. Only in the UK research from Watson are there indications of greater imperatives by practitioners for evaluation to be discussed, albeit the most basic output stage.

As has been said above by Dozier, 'seat of the pants' techniques are overwhelmingly in use. To change to a more research-minded practitioner culture may require greater demand by clients and employers, continuing professional education and a more accessible approach to evaluation through the introduction of models which can be used in all areas of practice, especially in the more typically small units of five people or less in which most practitioners work.

## **Interview**

David Gallagher has an air of resignation when the subject of evaluation is raised. 'I am not sure whether we know what we are looking for, why we are looking for it, and what it's significance might be.' He argues that evaluation (of public relations) is frequently discussed in a marketing context, often using an advertising model. He accepts that it might (at least in theory) be possible to develop a model that would give some idea of the ROI from public relations as a marketing discipline, but that is a limited view of public relations leading to an evaluation system that would not give the user much predictive value.

Predictive value is a point that Gallagher comes back to. 'In theory, it would be nice if you were looking at evaluation to do some mid-course adjustments or maybe at the end of the campaign or programme to assess its efficacy. But I see now the shift to be for evaluation programmes to be predictive in terms of the type of yield you are likely to get from the investment.'

A related theme for Gallagher is the need for public relations to establish its own data set. 'I would feel better about PR evaluation in almost any application if there was PR-specific baseline or benchmarking data available.' Rather than 'borrowing' data from the advertising department, market research agency or public policy group, he would like to see data specifically derived to test certain hypotheses about the effectiveness of the PR programme. 'Starting from that point, then set your objectives, set your strategy, set your creative elements against that baseline data', he continues.

But overall Gallagher is sceptical about most evaluation systems and unconvinced that they do much more than help obtain a larger slice of the marketing budget. He recognizes that the theory is all very well, but it is likely to take a significant investment in both upfront research and back-end evaluation to result in a highly correlated set of data. 'And in PR, budgets are generally relatively small so that the investment required to measure at the beginning and the end would, in some cases, offset the amount you spend on the programme.'

Ruth Yearley focuses on the public relations process. 'Understand the business opportunity or problem that your client is faced with, and what role public relations can play in that. Get specific PR objectives and don't over-promise. Make sure that your PR objectives are communications objectives, not business objectives. Understand the latter, but don't promise things that are not within your gift.' Gallagher picks up on the discussion of objectives by stressing the importance of the linkage

between PR and business objectives. 'If you can't make the link you should question why you are doing it. I am surprised by how tenuous the link is sometimes between PR objectives and stated business goals.'

Both Gallagher and Yearley argue strongly for softer measures to assess the value of the public relations function in general and public relations programmes in particular. In a telling aside, Gallagher points out that other professional functions within the organization are not subjected to the same type of scrutiny. 'I've yet to see the legal department called in to justify themselves on the basis of the ROI it provides.'

Yearley puts the evaluation debate into a consultancy context by stressing the use of the term evaluation rather than measurement. 'Increasingly, our clients take a qualitative, emotional approach to evaluating our outputs. A piece on BBC Radio's agenda-setting *Today* programme in the UK carries a lot of weight, irrespective of reach and target audience. Public relations seems to evoke a different reaction from other disciplines: there's a lot more kudos in editorial publicity than in briefing good creativity or buying media well. It's quite an emotional and amorphous evaluation as opposed to a metric.'

Gallagher adds that although many clients do not understand the public relations process, they know good public relations when they see it and they know bad public relations. So, in defiance of a research-based evaluation programme, gut feel (or professional judgement) has a role to play. He concludes: 'I haven't seen an evaluation programme that wasn't mostly based on gut feel and then retro-fitted to accommodate some sort of statistical analysis. That's not to say I would not prefer some sort of analytical model, it's just I have not seen one that is truly analytically based.'

*David Gallagher is chief executive of Ketchum, London and Ruth Yearley is planning director.*

### Questionnaire responses

**Q: How do you encourage clients/employers to include evaluation in public relations programmes?**

They only need to see that there will be a return on investment – evaluation/research decisions are not different from other business decisions.

**Dejan Verčič**

We are committed to industry best practice as outlined in the IPR (UK) Evaluation Toolkit and include this message in all presentations. **Alison Clarke**

A team of five undertakes evaluation. As there are only 60 staff in the organization, evaluation is a priority and valued. The other positive aspect is that communication is integrated across all programmes. **Fran Hagon**

We build it in from the word go by using our proprietary planning, management and evaluation system. **Crispin Manners**

In presentations we argue that PR is not, contrary to belief, an intangible and demonstrate various measurement and evaluation techniques. **Ray Mawerera**

We make an element of measurement mandatory and build it into the management of any account. Setting the targets up front also means that measurement of the beginning and end point becomes an automatic activity. Measurement isn't seen as additional or a postscript. It is clear and routine within the programme activity. **Annabelle Warren**

I encourage clients to support evaluation by reinforcing the fact it justifies PR expenditure. **Lurna O'Donnell**

By telling them that this is the only way in which we can justify to them how we spend their money, or what value they have actually received from us. **Clara Zawawi**

By establishing that research is an investment, not an expense; baselines can be set for future research and knowledge acquisition to guide communications activities; programmes can be guided by reliable, detached information instead of best guess and/or instinct. **Tom O'Donoghue**

We now have it as part of any pitch. We offer a basic software-managed measurement service as part of our service so the client does not have to pay extra for it. Anything above the basic analysis does carry a charge. **Mike Copland**

It seems like those that want it, have it, and the ones that don't, don't really care, don't want to spend the time and budget on it. We try to encourage them to build it in not just as a measurement tool, but also as a diagnostic tool – to determine if the programme needs adjustment or should continue as-is. **Matt Kucharski**

The UK government has always encouraged building in a means of evaluating results. It is regarded as best practice by government. **Richard Offer**

All staff are encouraged to evaluate their campaigns so they are in control of the campaign, maintain records and understand the purpose and target market of the campaign. Records provide a good source of information that can be referred to when required. Information obtained and experiences learnt from evaluation are a vital tool for organizing and the success of future campaigns. **Adam Connolly**

We prefer pre-campaign and post-campaign awareness studies. **John Bliss**

# Gathering and interpreting information

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**The intimate link between research and evaluation is established and a review undertaken of the current application of research in practice and how different practitioner roles use research. Research methods with relevance to public relations evaluation are outlined together with advice on their application.**

Evaluation is a research-based activity, so any progress in evaluation practice has to be underpinned by an understanding of research methods. This is not to say that public relations practitioners have to become experts in research methodology. It does, however, mean that a basic understanding of research methods is part of the professional practitioner's toolkit and that there is a role for research specialists in public relations consultancies and departments. Anyone managing public relations campaigns and activities therefore needs to be an effective commissioner and user of research.

Cutlip, Center and Broom expand on this point: 'Even though it cannot answer all the questions or sway all decisions, methodical, systematic research is the foundation of effective public relations' (2000: 343). They argue that, without research, public relations practitioners are restricted to asserting they understand the situation and can provide a solution, while,

with research (followed by analysis of the data gathered), they can put forward proposals clearly backed up with evidence to support them. Research is the 'scientific alternative to tenacity, authority and intuition'. Cutlip, Center and Broom suggest that training in research sits at the top of the pantheon when it comes to professional development. And while lack of resources and time are often the reasons proffered for not doing more research, a better explanation might be a combination of practitioners lacking an understanding of research methods and clients/employers regarding research as unnecessary.

The importance of market research in supporting evaluation is confirmed by the IPR/CDF (2004: 6) study which makes the following points when summarizing relevant aspects of current communications practice. An important theme of this discussion is the care needed to ensure any effects achieved can be attributed to PR, as opposed to other communications activities, so that any PR effects are clearly isolated:

- Market research can be conducted on a repeatable basis (at least annually to track PR message uptake and spontaneous recall of PR campaigns but care needs to be taken to avoid advertising and other communication message effects).
- Measure customers' and prospective customers' perceptions on a recurring basis (at least annually) against competitor benchmarks (again, care needs to be taken to account for advertising and other communication effects, where appropriate). Similarly, measure employees' perceptions and knowledge, again on a regular basis.
- Measure reach and frequency achieved against target audiences by PR programmes, using media evaluation (such information can be compared directly with similar advertising data as well as cost per thousand reached).
- Use market research to determine changes in spontaneous and prompted awareness before and after specific PR activity (care must be taken to ensure that the results can be attributed to PR and not some other communication activity, such as advertising or direct marketing).
- Measure response to specific PR activity by, for instance, using telephone Helpline numbers or micro-website addresses that are only available through PR material. Such response can then be measured against benchmarked sales and other data to assess the impact of PR.

- Use market mix modelling to assess and compare the incremental product sales attributable to PR.

Importantly, research does not have to mean wide-ranging, expensive and highly technical exercises. The US writer Mark McElreath (1997: 203) makes the point that research may range from the informal to the formal. While formal research will have advantages such as the ability to be replicated, all types of research have the potential to yield useful results. 'One insightful revelation from one focus group can be as telling as the key result from a massive opinion poll.'

In parallel with this, many practitioners will have access to 'free' research that has already been undertaken for other, parallel, purposes within the organization or client. *IPR Toolkit* author Michael Fairchild (2002: 306) confirms this point when discussing the reasons why the use of research is not yet widespread, one of which he suggests is: 'failure to tap into existing, and often free, sources of research, or to appreciate the value of developing a working relationship with the client's professional market research providers'.

The UK's IPR has long advocated research as an integral part of public relations planning and implementation. Working with the Public Relations Consultants Association, it has promoted the concept of PRE (planning, research and evaluation) through its series of evaluation toolkits, now in its third edition (*IPR Toolkit*, 2003). The five steps of the PRE Process are described as:

1. **Audit:** gather information and conduct research ('inputs') to build a foundation for the PR campaign or programme.
2. **Setting objectives:** align the publicity objectives with the goals and objectives of the client organization.
3. **Strategy and plan:** decide what type and level of research to use.
4. **Ongoing measurement:** how are we doing – what have we learnt from measurement?
5. **Results and evaluation:** quantify the outcome. (2003: 9)

So, evaluation is both a research-based discipline and intimately involved with (if not actually a prerequisite for) professional public relations practice. Its purpose is to inform and clarify and it operates to high standards of rigour and logic. As the orbit of public relations extends from publicity-seeking

media relations to issues management and corporate reputation, research will play an increasingly important role in the planning, execution and measurement of public relations programmes.

Research and a strategic perspective on public relations are intimately connected. Most texts which claim to address strategic public relations planning and practice will – quite appropriately – have significant sections on research methods. Why is this? The thinking that lies behind a public relations strategy could be listed as the following:

- analysing the problem;
- establishing objectives;
- building the creative theme;
- segmenting target publics;
- positioning the organization;
- evaluating the results.

A cursory glance at any of these elements confirms the linkage between research and developing a public relations strategy. Analysis (of a problem) requires the gathering of extensive data, for example. Similarly, if ‘the big idea’ proves elusive you need more information: on the organization, market, environment, competitors, product/service, whatever. US planning expert Smith (2002: 9) reinforces the link between strategy and research when outlining his ‘four phases’ of strategic planning. Phase one is formative research and the final phase, evaluative research.

Here, we have a broader view of public relations evaluation than just research undertaken at the end of the programme to establish effectiveness (important as this is). We extend evaluation to encompass formative research and use the term ‘summative’ to describe the final research phase. This is aligned with McElreath’s (1997: 203) terminology: formative evaluation research and summative evaluative research: ‘Research conducted to help a manager better formulate plans for implementing a program is called formative evaluative research. Research designed to help summarize the overall impact of a program is called summative evaluative research.’

Elsewhere (see Chapter 5), we discuss the concepts of *outputs*, *out-takes* and *outcomes* to classify the different categories of results that flow from public relations activities. The point is made ([www.instituteforpr.com](http://www.instituteforpr.com)) that the measurement of *PR outputs* is relatively simple: ‘usually counting, tracking and observing’. In contrast, for *PR out-takes* and *PR outcomes*, ‘it is a matter

of asking and carrying out extensive review and analysis of what was said and what was done'. The latter often requires the use of research techniques, so the nature of evaluation activity will determine how extensive the research activity to support it needs to be.

## **THE SCOPE OF RESEARCH**

When we defined evaluation in Chapter 2, we confirmed the role of evaluation as a proactive, forward-looking activity. Naturally the collection of historical data is a prerequisite, but evaluation is not restricted to making conclusions on past activity. The emphasis on improving programme effectiveness strongly indicates that the information collected on previous activity is used as feedback to adapt the nature of future activities, and therefore argues for a formative (as well as summative) perspective on public relations evaluation. UK researchers McCoy and Hargie (2003: 305) confirm this orientation and also link formative evaluation into a strategic role for public relations practitioners: 'if practitioners engage in formative evaluation and environmental monitoring it is suggested that this will help them to manage relationships, link PR to organizational goals and make PR more strategic than tactical'.

Professional practitioners base their activities on a body of knowledge as well as techniques. They see public relations operating at a strategic level within organizations: managing relationships with the publics that are key to the success of the organization. This implies an out-take/outcome orientation to public relations research and evaluation.

The current momentum for evaluation in public relations is predicated on the assumption that social scientific methods can be applied to public relations. Broom and Dozier (1990: 14) established the foundations on which much modern thinking associated with research and public relations is based. They identified five major approaches to the management of public relations programmes, based on the role of research in that management. These range from the no-research approach in which 'public relations technicians operate on the basis of their intuition and artistic judgement' through the informal approach, media-event approach, evaluation-only approach to the scientific management approach.

The informal approach uses research but only so-called informal, 'pre-scientific', research that is then misappropriated as the basis for strategic planning. The media-event approach is the province of the visibility study where research (which is usually internally rigorous) is used not in a scientific,

knowledge-seeking manner, but rather to create newsworthy, attention-attracting information.

The evaluation-only approach consigns research to an impact-measuring role only, as opposed to a planning tool. This is a common theme, with, for example, McCoy and Hargie (2003: 305) arguing that the focus of public relations evaluation remains on output measures and that, anyway, these tend to be subjective, ad hoc and informal: 'evaluation should include formative evaluation and environmental monitoring rather than just the summative output evaluation that is common in PR'. It is symptomatic of the problems of terminology surrounding public relations in general and evaluation in particular that, while media coverage is often described as the 'output' of public relations activity, many others would argue that media evaluation is at best formative as it focuses on the process of public relations rather than being summative by examining any impact that the PR campaign in question has.

The scientific management approach sees research threaded through every stage of the management of public relations programmes: research is undertaken to analyse the starting point, monitor the programme as it unfolds and ascertain whether objectives have been met.

Earlier research by Dozier (1984) to test whether public relations had adopted 'scientifically derived knowledge' revealed three major approaches to evaluation. Seat-of-the-pants evaluation is a subjective and intuitive method of evaluation which uses casual observation by the practitioner to judge the output of the campaign. It is the traditional approach used by public relations practitioners, particularly those concerned with the process of public relations rather than outcomes, thereby displaying the no-research intuitive approach to the management of public relations programmes.

Scientific dissemination evaluation is another process-oriented approach but with particular emphasis on distribution. It rests on the assumption that wider dissemination means higher impact. It is usually based on numerical analysis of press clippings or broadcast transcripts, the circulation/readership of media used, or analysis of the content achieved. It almost goes without saying that media evaluation falls into this category.

In contrast to scientific dissemination, scientific impact evaluation primarily uses quantitative, social scientific methods of data collection to determine the public relations campaign impact directly. Frequently, practitioners rely upon experimental or quasi-experimental research designs in which measures are taken both before and after a new programme is implemented. This design allows one to determine whether the programme 'caused' the observed change.

Broom and Dozier (1990: 26) mirror the frequent three-step/stage analysis of public relations evaluation (see Chapter 5) when they discuss using research to plan programmes, to monitor programmes and to evaluate programmes. The first stage in programme planning is indeed to analyse the situation, which is effectively an analysis of the public relations 'problem'. This problem concerns the mismatch between the situation as it is and the situation as the organization would ideally like it to be. The public relations programme is designed to align this dichotomy. The key here is to use a cycle of formal and informal, quantitative and qualitative approaches first to confirm and delineate the 'problem', and then to understand and explain it. This approach can be exemplified in this way:

Somebody tells you that there is a rumour going around that redundancies are in the offing and that staff are worried. Senior management confirm that the rumour is completely unfounded. Informal discussions with opinion formers in the staff canteen confirm that there is indeed such a rumour doing the rounds and 'a lot of people are worried'. You poll a systematic sample of employees to check how widespread the concern is and then talk to a random sample of nine employees to see why they think layoffs are imminent and get a feel as to how the rumour started in the first place.

Once the programme has been launched, research is used to monitor its effectiveness (or otherwise). This can be frightening, but it is essential to avoid wasting resources on pointless activity. The key point is that it is the process that is being examined, but not the ultimate impact (yet). It is worth monitoring process activity because effective processes are *more likely* to lead to successful results. But however good the process, this is no *guarantee* of successful results (see the substitution game, Chapter 5).

When moving on to assessment of the impact of the public relations programme, the outcomes stated in the programme's objectives must be examined. Broom and Dozier (1990: 77) divide these programme outcomes in to three categories: *change or maintenance of a public's knowledge* (including awareness and understanding), *predispositions* (opinions and attitudes), and *behaviour*. This is where direct measurement is required, frequently using formal research techniques, but sometimes using more easily available quantitative data such as sales enquiries (or even sales).

The operational management of public relations is centred on the planning of public relations programmes or campaigns. A common theme of public relations planning models is that they start with a research phase designed to analyse the current situation; the starting point needs to be defined if the correct strategy to reach the end point (objectives/goals) is to be identified.

**Table 4.1 Families, approaches and techniques**

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Research families	■ Quantitative or qualitative
	■ Deskwork or fieldwork
Research approaches	■ Action research
	■ Case studies
	■ Experiments
	■ Surveys
Research techniques	■ Documents
	■ Interviews
	■ Observation
	■ Questionnaires

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## RESEARCH METHODS

Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996: 59) bring a refreshing simplicity – and therefore clarity – to a discussion of research with their discussion of methods at three successive levels: research families, approaches and techniques (see Table 4.1).

Quantitative research is to do with numbers and qualitative is to do with words. Quantitative answers the question ‘what is happening?’ and qualitative the question ‘why is it happening?’ These two terms do not refer to research methods, but how the data acquired by different research methods is treated.

Questionnaires are generally the research method used to gather quantitative data. Qualitative data is usually obtained using an interview technique. This divide is not a ravine, however, and, as is so often the case, terminology frequently confuses. Is the stereotypical market researcher with a clipboard in the high street doing a fully structured interview or administering a questionnaire (probably both!)?

UK researcher Denscombe comprehensively and elegantly defines and distinguishes the quantitative and qualitative (2003: 232–35); see Table 4.2.

## DESK RESEARCH

There is no point in reinventing the wheel and it may be that field research, also known as primary research, is not necessary. Desk research unearths

**Table 4.2 Quantitative v qualitative**

Quantitative research tends to be associated with:	numbers as the unit of analysis analysis large-scale studies a specific focus researcher detachment a predetermined research design
Qualitative research tends to be associated with:	words as the unit of analysis description small-scale studies holistic perspective researcher involvement an emergent research design

information that already exists: in the form of internal records (can reveal much about the characteristics of customers, what they buy and how) or published information. It is also sometimes referred to as secondary data to distinguish it from primary data, which is raw data obtained by fieldwork (interviews, questionnaires etc). The main attributes of desk research are that it can be carried out quickly and at a low cost. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to know in advance whether you are going to unearth the information you seek. Sometimes desk research will be fruitless, although usually something of interest will be found. The quality of desk research varies according to the availability of information, how up to date it is, and the time that is available to put it together.

## Selecting a sample

Published sources list people or companies to interview. Examples are the electoral register, telephone directory, lists of customers and trade directories.

## Obtaining details on products

Approaches include observation (looking at products in action or on the shelf in shops); buying products and stripping them down (yoghurt pots!); getting sales literature on products; and so on.

## Providing an economic backcloth

Frequently, it is useful to provide background information as a perspective against which primary information can be set. A survey on the use of plastics

in food containers may be made more understandable against a background of the trends in food packaging in general. The broader the scope, the more likely there is to be something available in published form.

### **Assessment of market size and trends**

Government, trade associations and market research companies publish reams of market statistics. Frequently these are only the starting point, particularly if the product of interest is only a niche in that market.

### **Information on companies**

Desk research can provide a considerable amount of information on companies. It can show their turnover and financial performance, the products they sell, their distribution networks, pricing policy, etc. This information can be found in company accounts, press coverage, product literature and directories.

Desk research has one advantage in that the information tends to be collected together in one place, a library for example. A good library will contain under one roof most directories, company information, and journals and magazines covering a bewildering array of subjects. They may also operate online databases bringing together – usually abstracted – information from newspapers, journals and market research reports.

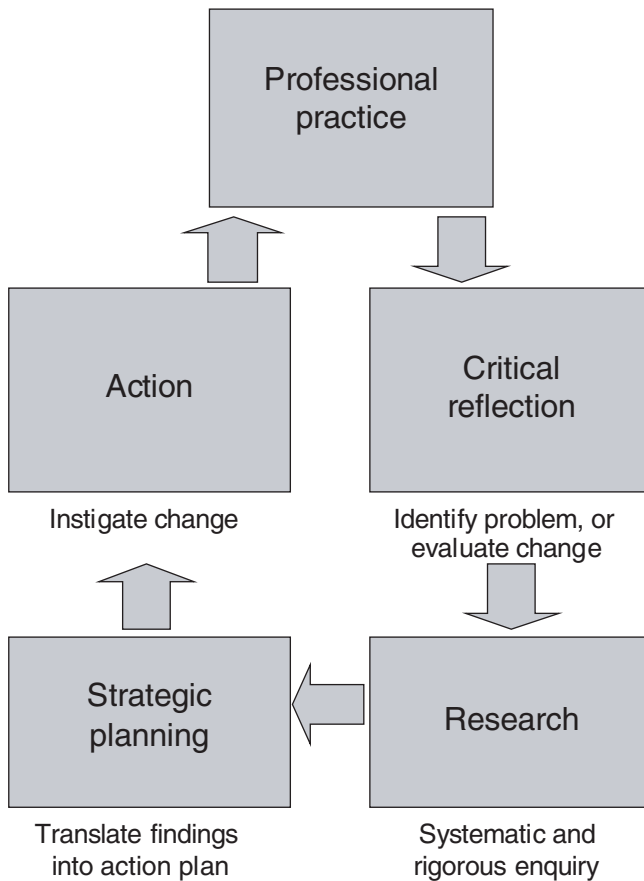
## **ACTION RESEARCH**

There is much discussion among social scientists about the concept of action research. Its distinguishing feature is that it avoids any two-stage approach: specialist researchers generating some research findings as one stage, and then after consideration and reflection a separate body of practitioners taking some action as a result of those findings as a separate stage. Closer examination indicates that, rather than a research strategy, in a public relations context action research is more a planning and management framework that accepts a rigorous research orientation: 'Practitioner research can only be designated action research if it is carried out by professionals who are engaged in researching, through structured self-reflection, aspects of their own practice as they engage in that practice' (Edwards and Talbot cited in Denscombe, 2003: 75).

The parallels with public relations practice are reinforced (and become almost uncanny) wherever action research is discussed. For example, Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996: 64), discussing action research, state:

It is well suited to the needs of people conducting research in their workplaces, and who have a focus on improving aspects of their own and their colleagues' practices. ... It offers a research design which links the research process closely to its context, and is predicated on the idea of research having a practical purpose in view and leading to change. It also fits well with the idea of the research process as a spiral activity, going through repeated cycles and changing each time.

Three parallels immediately appear. First, the focus on improving practice links to the thinking behind formative evaluation. Second, public relations is frequently associated with the management of change. Finally, there is wide agreement that the public relations planning process is necessarily a cyclical one and action research is clearly cyclical as well (see Figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1** Action research parallels the cyclical nature of PR planning

## CASE STUDIES

The use of case studies (single or multiple) is increasingly popular among social science researchers. By looking in depth at a single instance (or a few instances) it may be possible to derive understandings that are more widely applicable than the single case being studied. For example, a detailed investigation into the organizational behaviour of one complex company *may* give us an insight into how large companies in general behave. In public relations, case studies are not so much a research technique as a useful means of demonstrating the efficacy of a company's/client's products or services as well as generating third-party endorsement. Case studies sacrifice breadth of study for depth of study: 'Case studies focus on one instance (or a few instances) of a particular phenomenon with a view to providing an in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences or processes occurring in that particular instance' (Denscombe, 2003: 32).

Daymon and Holloway (2002: 105–06) have examined the role of (qualitative) research methods in the context of public relations and marketing communications. They point out that a case study is a distinctive approach because it focuses specifically on the case as an end in itself:

A case study is an extensive examination, using multiple sources of evidence (which may be qualitative, quantitative or both), of a single entity which is bounded by time and place. Usually it is associated with a location. The 'case' may be an organisation, a set of people such as social or work group, a community, an event, a process, an issue or a campaign.

Many PR and marcomms (marketing communications) people prefer quantitative survey research. The term 'case study' is used to refer to slightly different concepts, indeed not restricted to a research context. 'In public relations consultancies and advertising agencies, "case studies" are compiled of good practice or award-winning campaigns and used for promotional purposes or to generate new business. In education, "case studies" act as a teaching tool to stimulate discussion and debate. Used in this way, they are examples of professional practice within industry contexts' (Daymon and Holloway, 2002).

Stacks (2002: 71–72) is one of the few writers to have examined research issues in a public relations context. He points out that, although case studies are regarded as highly valuable in public relations (frequently to demonstrate examples of good practice), public relations has been slow to adopt them as a research method. 'They provide a richly detailed and

complete understanding of the case under study. Case studies are found in most *applied* disciplines, from business to law to advertising to medicine to public relations. They offer insight into good and bad practice. A case study helps us to understand theory, but theory as applied to specific situations.' Stacks then links case studies with the concepts of grounded theory.

Daymon and Holloway (2002: 118) argue that grounded theory is all about data driving the research rather than any existing theories or hypotheses:

Grounded theory studies have the potential to offer original insights into how things happen, such as how a particular advertising campaign is created or how internal change is effectively communicated over time, or how negative internet communications impact on a company's reputation, and so on. Grounded theory is useful in situations where a new approach is needed in familiar settings. Although it can be applied to any area of study, it is especially suitable when the purpose of the research is to discover consumer- or employee-based theories and constructs.

## EXPERIMENTS

Broom and Dozier (1990: 99) argue that experimental design is always used when a public relations programme is evaluated. This is because a group of subjects (one or more publics) is subjected to a treatment (the PR campaign). The impact of that treatment is then measured by a quantitative comparison before and after the treatment was applied.

Common sense indicates that any application of the concept of an experiment to public relations does not revolve around people in white coats wielding test tubes in a sterile laboratory. Instead, the experimental design predicates field studies, such as the pre-testing of messages among naturally occurring groups of people before the deployment of those messages in a planned campaign. The true scientific experiment seeks to control all the variables associated with the experiment. This becomes increasingly difficult as the experiment moves out of the laboratory and into the field. The latter can only really be described as 'quasi-experimental' in that: 'The quasi (*as if*) experimental approach is conducted in the spirit of the classic laboratory experiment, but recognizes that the researcher cannot dictate circumstances and needs to take the role of observing events "as they naturally occur"' (Denscombe, 2003: 69).

## **SURVEYS**

A field survey should only be used when secondary sources are exhausted, otherwise you will be wasting time and money finding out what you already know. Unfortunately, however, desk research is not always going to provide all the information that is required. In this case, primary or field research will be required. This is an area fraught with difficulty, theoretically requiring a great deal of technical competence as well as resources in terms of both time and money.

However, in practice a surprising amount of information can be obtained by 'gifted amateurs' and fairly limited surveys, provided no more emphasis is placed on the results than they deserve. All research is subject to error and, in general, the less detailed the research and the smaller the sample size the wider the margin of error. There is no harm in undertaking a brief survey among a small number of people provided that these limitations are taken into account when interpreting the results. Asking six randomly selected people what car they drive cannot be used to calculate Ford's UK market share. It might indicate that Ford is a popular marque (provided that you are not attending a 2CV convention at the time!). This is the province of 'informal research', theoretically a contradiction in terms, but nevertheless, thought-provoking feedback from a few unsystematically polled but influential opinion formers could hardly be ignored.

## **INTERVIEWS**

One of the main techniques when undertaking field research is the interview (administered by telephone or face-to-face). Interviews can vary from being highly structured where a questionnaire has to be strictly followed, while others are completely unstructured and the topic is examined in depth, with the respondent being allowed to lead the discussion in virtually any direction they wish. The less structured the interview, the more skill is required by the researcher in both conducting the interview and interpreting its results.

Because of the cost and time involved, it is normally impractical to carry out a significant number of personal interviews. However, if there are a small number of people with valuable information which requires intricate and detailed questions then this approach might well be appropriate.

The advantages of a personal interview include a low refusal rate by respondents, and the sample is usually less distorted (postal enquiries have

an erratic response rate and with the telephone you will not be able to get hold of everybody in the sample). Also, a rapport can be established between respondent and interviewer that breaks down any initial suspicion associated with surveys, and also a wider range of questions can be asked. Dr Kevin Moloney of Bournemouth University has developed a set of rules of thumb for doing research-based interviews which we have adapted (with permission):

**Before the interview, ensure that you:**

- understand that you are doing qualitative research which may or may not be backed up by survey data;
- can justify how you have chosen your interview sample: randomly, representatively or purposively;
- have a master research question which breaks down into sub-questions.

**During the interview, ensure that you:**

- ask the questions in a tightly structured way *or* go with the flow of the responses;
- ensure by the end of the interview you have asked all the questions on your research agenda;
- tape the interview;
- do not take notes (more than a few key words) – concentrate on what is being said;
- note body language, repetitions and omissions;
- don't ask leading questions;
- don't expect respondents to be overly self-critical;
- realize you may have to get at critical points obliquely.

**After the interview, ensure that you:**

- write up observation notes on leaving the interview and listen to the tape right through twice;
- are on the look out for topics emerging that you may have missed;

- transcribe everything and do so within two days of the interview;
- remember that a 20-minute interview takes three hours to transcribe (so consider paying somebody else to do it!).

Telephone interviews are cheaper than personal interviews in terms of use of time. They also enable interviews to be completed faster. A wide geographical spread can be covered, the interviewer can take copious notes and is able to study reference or confidential material. Compared with postal questionnaires, the interviewer is able to explain the survey in some detail, even using semi-structured questionnaires that would be totally inappropriate by post. The principal problem is that the length of the interview tends to be restricted compared with a personal interview, and the lack of eye contact makes the relationship between respondent and interviewer less relaxed.

The key benefit of the in-depth interview is the opportunity to probe, to encourage people to expand on their answers. Kane and O'Reilly-de Brun (2001: 206) offer useful advice on probing techniques that are useful for interviews:

- Ask questions that allow people to develop their answers, not questions that can simply be answered by 'yes' or 'no'.
- Pursue information further by asking questions that will tell you 'Who?', 'What?', 'Where?', 'Why?', and 'How?', as appropriate.
- Encourage people to expand on an answer by pausing after the reply, and perhaps giving some sign of encouragement.
- Encourage people to clarify their answers.
- Cross-check the answers by phrasing the question slightly differently.

A focus group can be regarded as a group interview but the interaction between group members gives it particular richness, as well as requiring skill to moderate. Grunig and Hunt (1984: 31) outline three research methods in the context of planning and executing public relations campaigns. In addition to primary research in the form of surveys and secondary desk research they list the focus group:

*Focus Group interviews* are a marketing research technique that has been successfully adapted to the needs of public relations practitioners. They do not yield the strictly quantitative data that can be gotten [sic] from a survey. But they do have the advantage of being open-ended and permitting members of target groups to speak in their own terms of understanding, provide their own emphasis, and respond to the views expressed by other members of the same group.

Focus groups are undoubtedly a powerful research tool and can provide a useful complement to quantitative approaches to get a deep understanding of the opinions and attitudes of particular publics. However, they do need to be moderated by trained researchers and are not really the province of the 'gifted amateur'. Therefore, the need to outsource their operation has implications in terms of cost.

Daymon and Holloway (2002: 186) suggest that the key features of a focus group are:

- They provide evidence from many voices on the same topic.
- They are interactive.
- They provide a supportive forum for expressing suppressed views.
- They allow you to collect a large amount of data fairly quickly.

The interactive nature of the focus group is important, as one person's comments motivate others to expand upon and develop their own views. They are also useful for involving participants who are suspicious of researching and hesitant to articulate their own views, opinions and perspectives. Typically, focus groups can be used to examine issues that vary from the micro to the macro:

- advertising or concept testing;
- understanding behaviours and attitudes;
- exploring strategic policies and issues;
- developing and understanding brands, products and services;
- exploring organizational and industry issues.

The length of a focus group session varies, but typically is two hours. Similarly, the size of the group varies, with smaller groups preferred for detailed discussions of contentious issues, and larger groups for less intensive discussions of less controversial topics. The facilitator moves from introducing the session, through putting members at ease and outlining the scope of the topic, to the main discussion, with questioning moving from the general to the particular. Note that while contrasting views can be illuminating, an important role for the facilitator is to diffuse any potential hostility:

The qualities of an effective moderator are the same as those of an in-depth interviewer: flexibility, open-mindedness, skills in eliciting information, and the ability

to both listen and interpret. In addition, because you take on a leadership role when moderating, you must have excellent social and refereeing skills. These allow you, first, to guide participants towards effective interaction. Then they enable you to focus and control the discussion without coercing participants or directing the debate. (Daymon and Holloway, 2002: 198)

## QUESTIONNAIRES

While it has already been mentioned that a questionnaire can be administered face-to-face, particularly in a market research context, the use of the questionnaire is normally considered when it is administered by post, or increasingly by e-mail where many of the same considerations apply. Denscombe (2003: 145) outlines those situations when this type of questionnaire is at its most effective:

- when used with *large numbers* of respondents in many locations, eg the postal questionnaire;
- when what is required tends to be fairly *straightforward information* – relatively brief and uncontroversial;
- when the *social climate is open enough* to allow full and honest answers;
- when there is a need for *standardized data* from identical questions – without requiring personal, face-to-face interaction;
- when *time allows for delays* caused by production, piloting, posting and procrastination before receipt of a response;
- when *resources allow for the costs* of printing, postage and data preparation;
- when the respondents can be expected to be *able to read and understand the questions* – the implications of age, intellect and eyesight need to be considered.

Questionnaires are generally reckoned to be a relatively cost-effective form of research, and certainly a postal survey can be carried out at reasonable cost. Another advantage is that they can be carried out quite widely, physically and otherwise. Surprisingly, speed is another advantage. Usually, if people are to respond to a postal questionnaire they do so immediately and, although you will find the odd straggler coming in months afterwards, the bulk of response will come back within a few days. The postal questionnaire also eliminates interviewer bias, which is a major problem

associated with telephone and face-to-face interviewers. Also, respondents can remain anonymous.

The main problem of postal questionnaires compared with other means of distribution is lack of response. The principal factor governing response is the degree of interest it generates among respondents. Providing some sort of incentive to respond (prize draw or free gift) can increase response rate but does add cost. Another problem is getting a representative mailing list in the first place. Another restricting factor is the length of the questionnaire. Once it gets beyond two sides of A4, the length of the questionnaire is going to deter postal respondents. This restriction naturally limits the amount of information that can be obtained.

The chances of a good response rate can be enhanced in a number of ways. First, pay attention to the mailing list; it's worth ringing up a sample to check that names, addresses and job titles are correct. Make sure that the questionnaire is addressed to a named individual rather than a vague job title, and that the questions asked are of real interest. Include a covering letter, which together with the questionnaire itself should be of professional appearance. Don't make the questionnaire more than two pages long. A reminder sent, say, two weeks after the initial mailing can increase response, but – together with incentives – adds to the cost of the exercise.

## **SAMPLING METHODS**

Survey research is based on the idea that to obtain representative views from a body of people, it is not normally necessary to talk to them all. The problem is to derive a sample that is large enough and broad enough to be representative of the group as a whole. The sample size is usually a compromise between the resources available to devote to the survey and the accuracy required. There is almost no limit to the statistical knots that some researchers will tie themselves up in trying to perfect sampling techniques. However, much useful information can be gathered using low-cost, small-sample research and, although sample selection should always be approached very carefully, this care should be based on common sense rather than academic statistical theory.

Denscombe (2003: 24) points out that: 'Whatever the theoretical issues, the simple fact is that surveys and sampling are frequently used in small-scale research involving between 30 and 250 cases.' He stresses four points in relation to the use of smaller sample sizes:

- Extra attention needs to be paid to the issue of how representative the sample is.
- The smaller the sample, the simpler the analysis should be.
- Samples should not involve fewer than 30 people or events.
- In the case of qualitative research there is a different logic for the size of the sample and the selection of cases to be included. A small sample size is quite in keeping with the nature of qualitative data.

Briefly, there are two major types of sampling procedures: probability or random sampling, and non-probability or quota sampling. With random sampling, each member of the population to be sampled has an equal chance of being selected. This is not as simple as it sounds, since random does not mean haphazard. For example, picking 20 names in no particular order from a telephone directory does not produce a random sample. There will be some bias in the sample selection (the eye being drawn to familiar or short names, for example). Instead, a preferable approach is to use random number tables.

An alternative approach is quota sampling. Here, those who should be interviewed are specified in terms of specific variables. In consumer terms, this might be a certain proportion of people of a certain sex and age, social class etc. In industrial terms the aim might be to achieve an equal spread of firms of different size.

## **QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN**

Crucial to the whole issue of public relations research is questionnaire design. It is the vehicle for collecting the information required. One golden rule with questionnaires is to pilot them by doing a pre-test with two or three potential or typical respondents. Before tackling the questions themselves, two quick points. First, the length of the questionnaire: as a guideline, a postal questionnaire should be limited to 20 questions, a telephone survey to 15 minutes and a face-to-face interview either 30 minutes (in the home or office) or 3 minutes (in the street). The other vital consideration is to ensure that the instructions to both the respondent and interviewer (if applicable) are clear and unambiguous.

Dichotomous questions are the simplest type of questions to ask since, theoretically, there are only two possible answers:

1. Have you heard of EIC (the Extremely Interesting Company)? Yes/No
2. Which of the two products A or B do you think is most attractive?

Questions such as these are easy to ask and analyse but make sure that in the circumstances in which you use them they truly are a two-way choice. 'Don't know' could well be a response to the first question and 'neither' or 'both' to question 2.

With multiple-choice questions, respondents are able to choose from a range of possible answers. Again, these questions are very easy to analyse but it is important to list all possible options and always include an answer 'other (please specify)' in case an option you had not considered emerges.

Where did you buy your trailer from?	Manufacturer
	Merchant
	Importer
	Second-hand centre
	Other (please specify)

Scaling questions are an attempt to identify attitudes and strength of feeling. The most common means of attempting to gauge strength of feeling is the so-called 'Likert' scale. A respondent is asked to what extent he or she agrees or disagrees with a particular statement, indicating whether he or she strongly agrees, agrees, is uncertain, disagrees or strongly disagrees.

EIC's products are expensive				
5	4	3	2	1
Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly disagree

The exact form and phrasing of questions will vary according to the particular research exercise being undertaken. However, there are a number of points to consider:

- Given the subject matter, make it as simple and easy as possible.
- Do not digress: keep to the subject and ask only relevant questions.
- Bear in mind that you will have to analyse the results afterwards.
- Each question should cover one point at a time.
- Questions should be unambiguous.

- Avoid leading and misleading questions.
- Ensure good sequencing and question flow.
- Do not ask unanswerable questions.
- Do not offend or embarrass.
- Introduce some variety; don't be monotonous.
- Use positive questions; try to avoid negatives.

Apparently simple questions can be very difficult to answer. Take the question: Which supplier offers the best price and delivery? There are a number of problems that the respondent may have:

All prices are the same.  
The best price does not have the best delivery.  
What is 'best' anyway?

Ambiguity is a result of poor use of the English language. For example: Do you use an online database? Is the 'you' the individual, the department or the company? Does the 'use' mean physically and regularly or irregularly? Ambiguity is usually the fault that remains in a questionnaire even when all others have been eliminated. Don't you think that the transfer speed is too slow? is a leading question in that the respondent is not asked to think about an answer but has one suggested. Unless the respondent feels strongly on the subject, he or she will not wish to argue.

Always start with questions that are easy to answer and ensure that they follow a logical progression. In particular, keep any sensitive questions until towards the end of the questionnaire. Also, remember that respondents can only answer questions that are within their own attitudes and experience. Avoid 'How will your competitors react to the situation?' and 'If product X were available, would you buy it?'

## **ANALYSING INFORMATION**

If a simple, well-structured questionnaire has been designed then analysing the information is generally common sense. Remember you have no interest in the responses of individual respondents (on the whole). Rather, the aim is to make generalizations about all – or part – of the sample that was surveyed. If the sample is a representative one then these generalizations can be extended to the population as a whole.

Take this question:

*How likely are you to buy a package holiday in the next two years? (one response only)*

- Very likely
- Fairly likely
- Neither likely/unlikely
- Fairly unlikely
- Very unlikely

A simple analysis of this question might be as follows:

*Likelihood of buying a packaged holiday in the next two years (all respondents)*

Likelihood of buying	Percentage
Very likely	25
Fairly likely	40
Neither likely/unlikely	14
Fairly unlikely	18
Very unlikely	3
Total	100
[Sample size	200]

This table shows the responses of all respondents but you may be interested in part of the sample or – and this is where analysis of what appears to be ‘ordinary’ data can start to throw up some interesting results – compare the response of different parts of the sample. This is known as cross-analysis.

*Likelihood of buying a package holiday in the next two years (existing buyers)*

Likelihood of buying	Percentage
Very likely	40
Fairly likely	0
Neither likely/unlikely	25
Fairly unlikely	30
Very unlikely	5
Total	100
[Sample size	100]

*Likelihood of buying a package holiday in the next two years by existing buyers*

Likelihood of buying	Total	Existing	Not existing
Very likely	25	40	10
Fairly likely	40	0	80
Neither likely/unlikely	14	25	5
Fairly unlikely	18	30	5
Very unlikely	3	5	0
Total	100	100	100
[Sample size	200	100	100]

This is an example of a relatively simple cross-analysis. This type of analysis can be much more elaborate, with cross-analysis by more than one question and more variables for each question. Another additional analysis for scalar questions, such as this question about the likelihood of purchase, is to assign numeric values to answers and then derive mean scores as shown below:

*Likelihood of buying appliance in the next two years by existing ownership of the appliance (all respondents)*

Likelihood of buying	Total	Existing	Not existing
Very likely (+2)	25	40	10
Fairly likely (+1)	40	0	80
Neither likely/unlikely (0)	14	25	5
Fairly unlikely (-1)	18	30	5
Very unlikely (-2)	3	5	0
Total	100	100	100
Mean score	+0.66	+0.40	+0.95
[Sample size	200	100	100]

Although mean scores have a tendency to over-simplify the situation, they do show – in this instance – at a glance that non-owners are more likely to buy than owners.

### **Interview**

Anne Gregory emphasizes the confusion that surrounds evaluation in public relations: ‘For some people, it’s an overall cycle that includes research at the start of the programme, monitoring as the programme unfolds, and then final evaluation at the end. For others, it’s purely and simply what the end result is.’ Even when evaluation is restricted to looking at the end result, Gregory still thinks the issue is clouded by confusion. ‘For some it’s ROI. For others it’s changes in attitudes and behaviour, while for others it’s the “how many column inches did we get?” approach’, she adds.

She suggests that the solution is to step back and reflect on what the public relations effort is trying to achieve. Gregory makes a clear distinction between the strategic and the tactical. ‘If you take a strategic approach to public relations and your purpose is to change attitudes and behaviour on behalf of, or within, your organization or your client, then that leads to a research-based perspective on evaluation. If your public relations is tactical, focused on a series of defined activities, then you will probably concentrate on measuring specific elements of the process. It really depends on where you are starting from.’

Gregory does not see these two forms of evaluation as incompatible, rather as complementary. She recognizes that changing attitudes (for example) is likely to be a long-term effort so that the evaluation associated with it will involve measurement over time. Also, the evaluation measures required will need to be research-based and probably (possibly) quite expensive as a benchmark will be required. In contrast, a tactical publicity campaign (short term and restricted to public relations activities) will be relatively easy to monitor and evaluate. 'Probably what is needed is a mixture of the two. Yes, we have reached that particular milestone, but that's within the context of a much wider public relations programme. Also, associated with that are questions such as, am I spending my money effectively, am I managing my resources effectively, do I have the right mix of skills within my team?'

However, when justifying the worth of the public relations effort to the organization as a whole, Gregory's instinct is that, at the most senior levels, public relations practitioners do not have to continually justify the value of their contribution. 'If you get your research right, your planning right, you know where your audiences are, you know where you want to go with them, and you have tested the effectiveness of the channels of communication, then all you need to do at the end is check that you are on track.' Gregory argues that many respected companies focus not on impact evaluation (which is complicated by a range of issues) but on researching the starting point thoroughly and then using a range of qualitative measures to check that the programme is being applied effectively. 'We tend to plunge into a campaign and then say: "oh, it's achieved something". So, we have to come up with all kinds of elaborate measures to justify having taken money out of the budget. Do it the other way around, and put the effort into planning before you start, then all you have to do is check that you are on track once you move to implementation', she suggests.

Gregory feels that the public relations industry 'looks inward all the time' and does not ask how other functional areas are judged. 'I doubt very much if an HR director is asked to justify employing John Smith. Instead they will point to soft measures (which may have figures attached to them) such as employer of choice, or a reputation for having enlightened employment policies.' She suggests that similar thinking can be applied to public relations. Gregory argues that public relations will have responsibility for much of the non-financial reporting that will be required under UK and European directives. 'A lot of that will be public relations, because it's about how an organization conducts itself.'

In looking at the future of evaluation, Gregory adds another perspective on public relations justifying its value to the organization. 'At some stage, you have to bridge a credibility gap, but once you have done it, you don't have to justify yourself any more.' She feels that there has to be some sort of trigger that prompts people to accept that public relations has proved its worth. 'Quite often it's an external trigger like a crisis, when all of a sudden there is an understanding of the importance of communication. But it's nothing to do with ROI, it's to do with what might have been had PR not been there, or what actually happened because PR wasn't there.'

*Professor Anne Gregory is Professor of Public Relations at Leeds Metropolitan University and 2004 President of the Institute of Public Relations.*

### Questionnaire responses

#### *Evaluation questionnaire for industry leaders*

**Q: What is the most important role of evaluation – demonstrating effectiveness or planning and monitoring campaigns?**

The proof of the pudding is in the eating – for that reason the ultimate value of evaluation/research lies in demonstrating (or disproving) effectiveness and efficiency. Planning and monitoring programs are means to some ends. **Dejan Verčič**

Both are equally important in my opinion. **Alison Clarke**

Demonstrating effectiveness. **Fran Hagon**

PR as a discipline has sadly failed to demonstrate a cause and effect in delivering demonstrable business value. The right kind of evaluation should focus entirely on proving value. If we do that then we can finally swap the heinous habit of assertion for demonstration or proof. **Crispin Manners**

Demonstrating effectiveness – but it's marginal. Its role in planning is almost as important. **Loretta Tobin**

Demonstrating effectiveness, on the basis that most times that is what the client is interested in: is the cat catching the mice? **Ray Mawerera**

This question is irrelevant. It's like asking which part of the road is more important – the left- or the right-hand side. You can't have a road without both sides. To be effective you must both plan the campaign and continually monitor it. **Annabelle Warren**

I think demonstrating effectiveness, although our clients love the big number at the end of the campaign – it justifies their existence. **Laurina O'Donnell**

Depends – tweaking is extremely important but you need to be sure that you're measuring the right things – ie that your data isn't being skewed by some other element out of your control. If you can't set yourself up to learn from your mistakes though, you're wasting your own time and someone else's money. **Clara Zawawi**

The most significant value is in properly guiding the planning, designing and execution of programs to ensure effort, time and money are dedicated in the right direction. If the plan is properly designed, executed and funded it should be effective. Supporting research proving success is a bonus. **Tom O'Donoghue**

I suspect that you have to get through the demonstrating effectiveness phase before you can get to the planning element. Clearly the latter looks forward and is the most important, but without a feedback loop even the planning part is meaningless. **Mike Copland**

I believe it's planning and monitoring campaigns. Demonstrating effectiveness is nice, but that's really just self-protection with the client. If you can find a truly effective ROI measurement for PR, then you ought to bottle it up and sell it, because you'll make millions. **Matt Kucharski**

The two are interrelated. Unless you can demonstrate effectiveness, it may be counter productive planning further campaigns. **Richard Offer**

Demonstrating effectiveness – the Holy Grail of PR. **John Bliss**



# Evaluation structures and processes

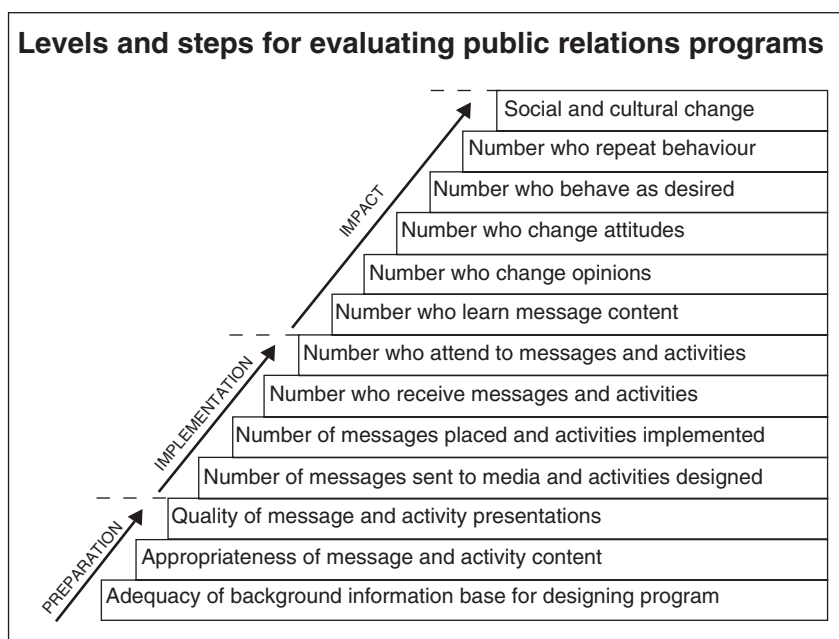
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**For some time a number of evaluation structures and models have been made available to practitioners to assist them to define and implement evaluation strategies. They have not been universally adopted; the reasons for this are discussed and, together with practitioner research, this discussion is used as the basis of developing more accessible alternatives.**

When practitioners undertake evaluation, they tend to take a narrow view of the methods used and concentrate on simplistic methodologies. However, there are a range of structures and models which outline processes for public relations evaluation. This chapter considers those structures and proposes two more based on research among (and feedback from) practitioners.

It is increasingly recognized that the evaluation of public relations programmes/activities requires a mix of techniques: 'In most cases, a skilled practitioner will use a combination of methods to evaluate the effectiveness of a program' (Wilcox *et al*, 2000: 193). This is confirmed by experienced practitioner Walter Lindenmann in his seminal article (1993: 9): 'it is important to recognize that *there is no one simplistic method* for measuring PR effectiveness. Depending on which level of measurement is required, an array of different tools and techniques is needed to properly assess PR impact.'

Frequently a triple-layered or three-stage model is established as a framework for this 'combination of methods'. Typical is Cutlip, Center and Broom's 'Stages and Levels for Evaluating Public Relations Programs' model



**Figure 5.1** *The Preparation, Implementation and Impact model*

which discusses three ‘different levels of a complete program evaluation: *preparation, implementation, and impact*’ (2000: 436–37).

## PREPARATION, IMPLEMENTATION, IMPACT

Cutlip, Center and Broom’s evaluation model (2000: 436), known as PII (Preparation, Implementation, Impact), is a step model that offers levels of evaluation for differing demands. It does not prescribe methodology, but accepts that ‘Evaluation means different things to different practitioners.’ (See Figure 5.1.)

Each step in the PII model contributes to increased understanding and adds information for assessing effectiveness. The bottom rung of *preparation evaluation* examines whether adequate background information has been gathered in order to plan the programme effectively. Next, the content of materials produced is examined to ensure it matches the plan (does the press release carry one or more of the campaign’s key messages, for example?). Finally, at this level, the presentation of materials is examined – a professionally produced

annual report does not guarantee effective investor relations but it contributes towards it.

At the second level, *implementation evaluation* considers how tactics and effort have been applied. The starting point is distribution (of materials) and attendance (at events), moving on to opportunities for exposing members of the target audience to organizational messages. This type of evaluation can identify flaws: a professionally written press release will not be effective unless distributed to the right contacts. Although significant numbers can be quoted for Opportunities to See (OTS), these figures are just that – opportunities to see – and give no indication of the extent to which messages were attended to. As an aside, therefore, OTS and similar constructs play a role in media planning, but have limited use in any sort of measurement of campaign effectiveness. Although public relations evaluation is frequently centred around the implementation phase, Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000: 442) sound a warning note: ‘The ease with which practitioners can amass large numbers of column inches, broadcast minutes, readers, viewers, attendees, and gross impressions probably accounts for widespread use – and misuse – of evaluations at this level.’

The discussion to date has been concerned with ‘process’ evaluation. However, at the *impact* level, the emphasis switches to examining the extent to which the outcomes specified in the objectives and overall goals for the programme have been achieved. Impact evaluation is based on measuring the same variables that formed the benchmark for the campaign to establish whether the quantified changes spelled out in the objectives have been achieved – or not. Direct measurement using research techniques from surveys to observation (direct and indirect) is required here and requires both an understanding of research techniques and some ingenuity in establishing indicators of attitude and behavioural changes.

The PII model is valuable for its separation of output and impact and for counselling against the confusion of these different measures. It acts as a checklist and a reminder when planning evaluation. Its most important message (the substitution game, 2000: 436) bears reiteration as it is a point returned to several times in this text:

The most common error in program evaluation is substituting measures from one level for those at another level. This is most clearly illustrated when practitioners use the number of news releases sent, brochures distributed, or meetings held (implementation efforts) to document program effectiveness (impact). Or if asked to document program impact, they substitute publicity placements, in the form of column inches or airtime, for the changes in the target publics’ knowledge, predisposition, and behavior spelt out in program objectives. Evaluation researchers refer to this as

the “substitution game”. Somewhat analogously, to create an illusion, magicians talk of “misdirecting” audience attention from what is really happening.

## MACNAMARA’S MACRO MODEL

Australian evaluation specialist Jim Macnamara developed a similar (to PII) model that he calls Macro Communication in reference to marketing writer Philip Kotler’s macro environment of company operations. It represents public relations programmes and campaigns in a pyramidal form which rise from a broad base of inputs, through outputs to results, with the pinnacle being ‘objectives achieved’. The base inputs are similar to PII and include background information, appropriateness of media and the quality of message. In the middle of the pyramid is a message sequence, starting at distribution and ending with the ‘number who consider messages’. The result section is concerned with stages of research and ends with the judgement on whether or not objectives have been reached or problems solved. (See Figure 5.2.)

The model separates outputs and results. For example, a news release can be evaluated as an output in terms of quality, readability and timeliness but not as to whether a communication effect has been achieved. The Macro model lists evaluation methodologies that can be applied to each of the steps in an attempt at developing a completed measurable process. Macnamara (1992: 19) says it ‘presents a practical model for planning and managing

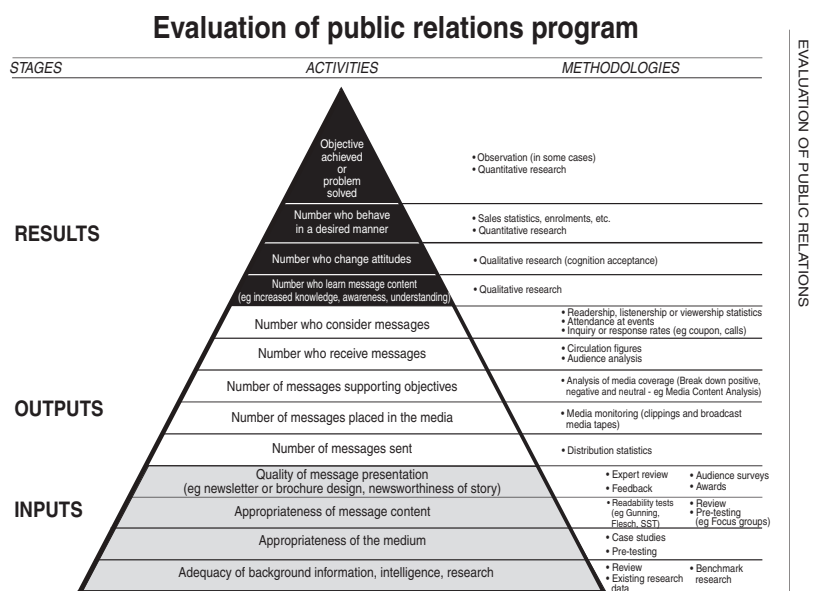


Figure 5.2 Macnamara’s Macro model

evaluation of public relations' and that it recognizes communication as a multi-step process.

Macnamara has put forward a comprehensive menu of evaluation techniques for most public relations situations – from Gunning's Fog Index through media content analysis to observation and quantitative research – but the Macro model lacks a dynamic element. It does not focus on creation of effects or allow mid-campaign variations of strategy or tactics. It is mostly concerned with media relations, which need not be the main strategy in a long-term public relations campaign.

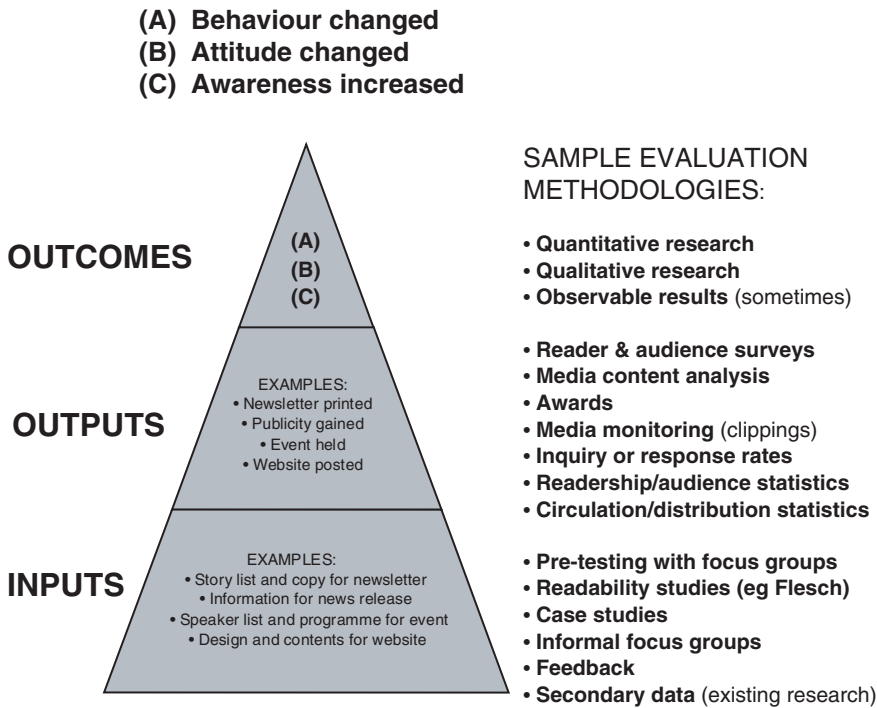
More recently, Macnamara (2000: 231) has simplified and refined his model. The simplification makes it more accessible and reinforces the broad principles that the Macro model espouses. Rather than attempting a comprehensive list of methodologies, which is optimistic given the variety and breadth of public relations activities, a smaller list is given as examples. Results have become outcomes, which reflects more recent terminology. Importantly, the outcomes reflect the hierarchy of objectives discussed in Chapter 8, distinguishing changes in awareness, attitudes and behaviour. (See Figure 5.3 overleaf.)

## PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFECTIVENESS YARDSTICK

The Public Relations Yardstick model, developed by Walter Lindenmann, differs from the other models because its staging does not progress from planning to objectives. It could therefore be criticized for not reinforcing the role of evaluation right at the beginning of the planning process when the situation is analysed and benchmarks established. Instead, it is another three-stage model but the three stages encompass the latter two stages (implementation and preparation) of the PII model and final two stages of the Macro model (outputs and results/outcomes).

Lindenmann (1993: 7) argues that it is possible to measure public relations effectiveness and that there is growing pressure from clients and employers to be more accountable. He adds: 'measuring public relations effectiveness does *not* have to be either unbelievably expensive or laboriously time-consuming. PR measurement studies *can* be done at relatively modest cost and in a matter of only a few weeks.' (See Figure 5.4.)

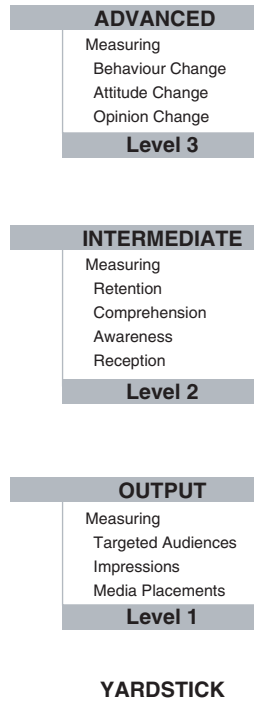
However, the Yardstick is rooted in objective setting and clearly positioned as the second of a two-step process: first, setting public relations objectives and, second, determining at what levels (of expenditure and depth) public relations effectiveness is to be measured. It was also an important development as it was one of the first attempts to sketch out the hierarchy



**Figure 5.3** *Simplified Macro model*

of public relations objective setting, establishing the key role this hierarchy plays in evaluation. At the same time, Lindenmann established the terminology – which is emerging as a *de facto* standard – of outputs, outgrowths (now out-takes) and outcomes. This important aspect of objective setting in particular and public relations evaluation in general is expanded upon in Chapter 8.

The three Levels of the Yardstick gauge the sophistication of the measurement of PR success and failure. Level 1 is the *Basic* level that measures PR *outputs*: the ways in which the programme or campaign is presented through, typically, media relations. It is measured in terms of media placements and the likelihood of reaching the target groups. The methodology used is media content analysis, measurement of placements or opportunities to see, or simple surveys measuring awareness change among target groups. It is essentially the low-cost approach but is more detailed than counting up cuttings or using ‘gut reactions’, which are informal judgements lacking any rigour in terms of methodology.



**Figure 5.4** *Lindenmann's Effectiveness Yardstick*

Level 2 is termed by Lindenmann as the Intermediate level as it uses *out-growth* (or *out-take*) measures. These judge whether or not the target audience actually received the messages and so evaluates retention, comprehension and awareness. Practitioners will use a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques such as focus groups, interviews with opinion leaders and polling of target groups. This stage is more sophisticated than Level 1 and for programmes and campaigns that do not rely solely on media relations for their tactics, this stage will produce data that will be valuable for feedback on strategy and tactics. The data collection methods may not give evidence that attitudes have changed but for practical public relations purposes, it is a lower-cost evaluation strategy.

*Outcomes* are measured in Level 3. These include opinion, attitudes and behavioural changes. This is where the role of pre- and post-testing comes into its own, with the use of before and after polling, observational methods, psychographic analysis and other social science techniques. It is more complete, takes a longer period to undertake and is more expensive, but for a

long-term campaign, gives a clear-cut understanding of target audience awareness, comprehension levels and behavioural patterns. It is the comprehensive and valid test of effectiveness and success.

The Yardstick may not be strictly comparable to the other models as it offers a vertical progression of techniques rather than a horizontal movement from Inputs to Results (Macro) or Preparation, Implementation, Impact (PII). It does emphasize the setting of objectives and choosing evaluation methods before starting public relations activity. These are important factors that should be included in any model of evaluation. However, the Yardstick is largely an educational (or promotional) device to encourage practitioners to use evaluation techniques. Its role is to make selection of methodology more accessible to practitioners whose knowledge and understanding of research techniques is poor and to help them bid more accurately for budget in order to undertake evaluation.

## **THE PRE PROCESS**

The three models discussed above have varying provenances. Cutlip, Center and Broom's PII is well known, the Macro model much less so. Lindenmann's Yardstick has been publicized in the United States and UK. None of them, however, was mentioned by practitioners in Watson's two surveys among the UK's Institute of Public Relations membership or among public relations practitioners in a multinational firm. They have, however, had considerable exposure in the public relations media of their countries of origin and in other countries. That they have not been adopted by practitioners as appropriate methods can be a result of several factors: practitioners' lack of knowledge, a base of dissemination that is too narrow and academic, or that they lack a practical and universal appeal.

Existing models are too complex; they do not have an integral relationship with effects creation and lack dynamic feedback. They are static, step-by-step processes seen as the final stage in the public relations campaign. Yet public relations is not a 'start/stop' communications process where an organization stops interactions with publics while results of a media relations programme are measured (Watson 1995). All through the programme, it will be informally monitoring and adjusting tactics. At the completion of a particular tactical stage, it may formally measure the effectiveness, but there will be parallel actions continuing and the public relations team will not be in a PR purdah while the evaluation judgements continue. The Macro model, with its pinnacle of 'objective achieved or problem solved', is an exemplar of the

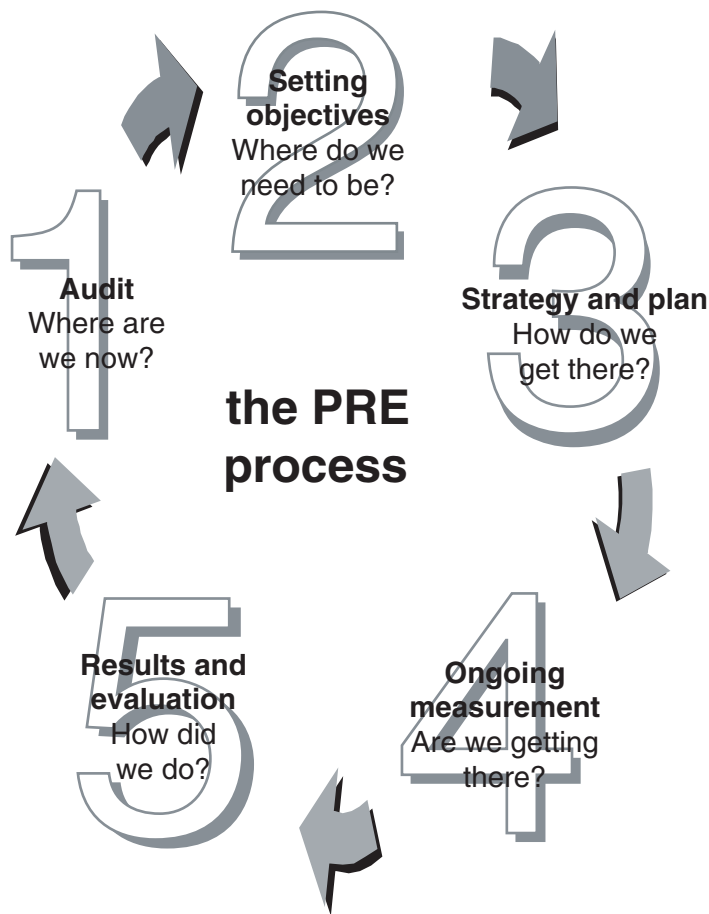
problem of practical application. In the real world of public relations, nothing stops and activity continues – any valid model must reflect the dynamic, progressive and continuous nature of this process.

*IPR Toolkit* author Michael Fairchild has developed Lindenmann's thinking (particularly with respect to establishing evaluation as a continuous, dynamic process), first on behalf of the International Committee of Public Relations Consultancies Associations (ICO) and more recently through the UK's Institute of Public Relations. The IPR, with input from PRCA, has published three editions of its Evaluation Toolkit in an attempt to give practitioners practical tools to undertake evaluation. Although it is a concern that the third edition of *IPR Toolkit* is described as the 'Media Evaluation edition', a somewhat regressive step – given the consensus that media coverage is an (important) element of the public relations process and that evaluation needs also to concentrate on impact – the series contains some excellent thinking on public relations planning in general, and evaluation in particular.

This thinking includes a focus on the concept of planning, research and evaluation (PRE). The PRE concept both establishes evaluation as an integral part of public relations planning (not to be tacked on afterwards) and reinforces the close linkage between evaluation and research. Indeed Fairchild's (2002: 36) list of the particular shortcomings related to PRE could be mistaken for the challenges facing public relations in general:

- failure to tap into existing, and often free, sources of research, or to appreciate the value of developing a working relationship with the client's professional market research providers;
- failure to align communications objectives with the business or public sector goals of the client or internal customer;
- the tendency to go into creative mode before constructing a robust planning, research and evaluation framework;
- using terminology for effect rather than for clarity, eg regarding 'objectives', 'strategy' and 'tactics' as interchangeable;
- focusing too heavily on the value of media publicity or failing to assess its value in a broader context.

The PRE process is outlined as a five-step circular process: audit, setting objectives, strategy and plan, ongoing measurement, and results and evaluation (IPR, 2003: 9). Importantly, it is portrayed as a dynamic process (see Figure 5.5).



**Figure 5.5** *The Planning, Research and Evaluation (PRE) process*

Step 1 (audit) is concerned with conducting research and gathering information to form a foundation on which the programme or campaign is based. Then objectives are set (step 2) and the point is made that as well as being SMART, they should not be set in a vacuum: public relations objectives need to be aligned with organizational goals and objectives. Next, the strategy and its implementation are established (step 3) but even here, research and evaluation are to the forefront with decisions made about selecting the type of measurement to be used and pre-testing of PR techniques/ messages to be employed. Formative evaluation is the province of the fourth step (ongoing

measurement), when checks are made as to whether the programme is on track and decisions are made about any adjustments required (or even whether the programme needs to be abandoned). Step 5 (results and evaluation) examines to what degree the objectives set for the campaign or programme have been achieved. While this step is very much summative in nature, there is still a learning perspective, such as what can be fed back into the planning process for the future?

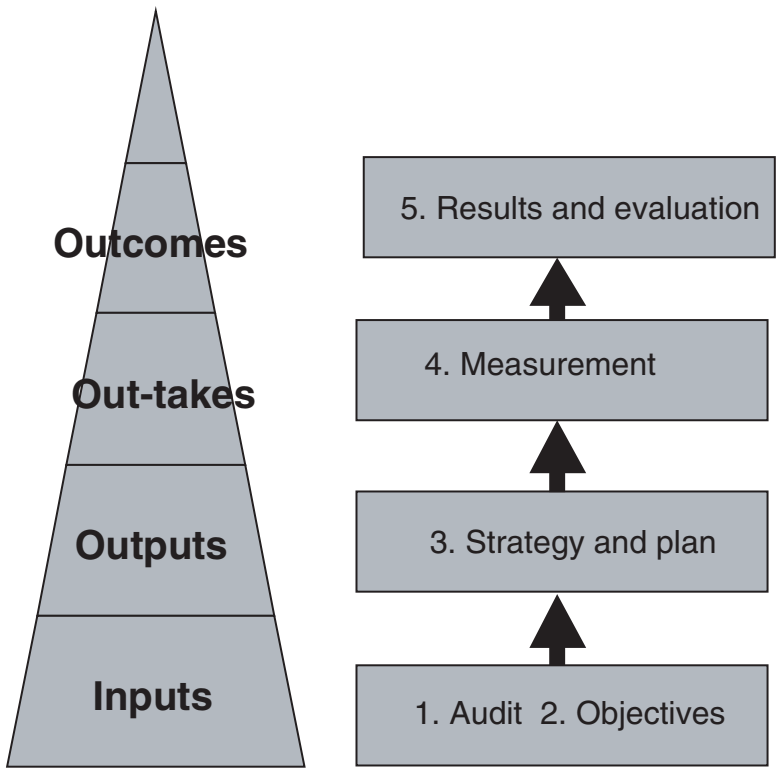
Finally, the dynamic, circular, feedback-oriented PRE process can be mapped onto a four-layered pyramid. This adds 'input' as the base to Lindenmann's three steps, as well as following Macnamara by being pyramidal and linking evaluation methodologies to different levels. PRE steps 1 and 2 (audit and objectives) use research as input, PRE step 3 (strategy and plan) pre-tests and informs the choice of and implementation of tactics, PRE step 4 (ongoing measurement) uses tracking research to monitor progress, and step 5 (results and evaluation) uses direct measurement to examine overall success (see Figure 5.6 overleaf).

## **THE UNIFIED MODEL**

An analysis of the four existing three-level or three-stage models indicates that, together, they actually describe four steps (as indicated by the Measurement Pyramid) and also that they use a variety of terminology to describe exactly the same – or certainly very similar – stages in the public relations process. Lindenmann does well to separate cognitive and behavioural (also referred to as informational and motivational) effects but maintains three levels by omitting a preparation/input stage. The PII and Macro models feature the latter but fail to make this important distinction at the impact/results stage. The PRE process uses slightly different terms for Lindenmann's three levels but separately recognizes the necessity for an input stage as a benchmark. But PRE does introduce a dynamic perspective to the other – static – models.

However, these approaches remain a useful concept. The first stage to evaluation 'wisdom' in public relations is an understanding that public relations is a multi-step process and that different evaluation methodologies are probably appropriate at these different steps. This is the premise behind all these models and grasping this concept leads to an understanding of the pitfalls of the substitution game.

However, the substitution game continues to be played and therefore the models have not been able to do their job in even this simple respect. The

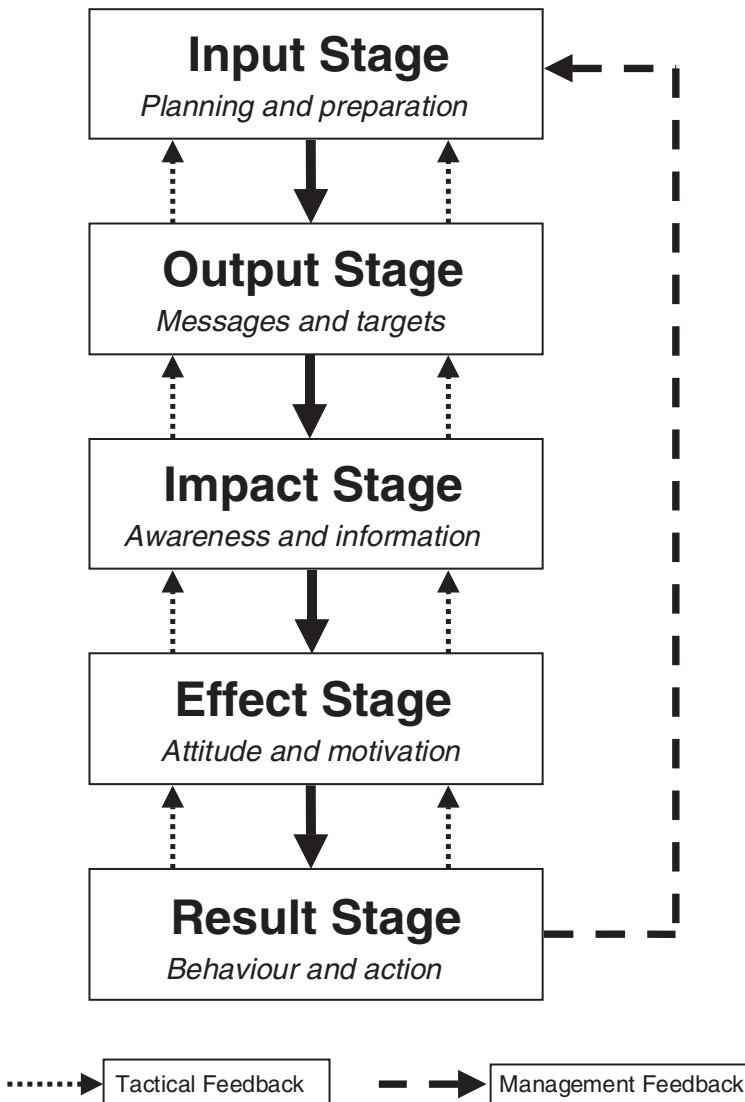


**Figure 5.6** *Linking PRE and levels of measurement*

suggestion is that their complexity, allied with confusing terminology, prevents them completing this task. Consequently, the Unified model first takes a relatively simple approach. Second, it is expanded to five levels so that it can accept both an input stage and split out the evaluation of public relations programmes or activities with objectives at the three different levels of the hierarchy.

The integral part of situational analysis in a research and evaluation framework has already been argued. With objective setting such an integral part of a professional evaluation culture, it is a final criticism of the established models that they do not recognize this hierarchy, nor that objectives at different levels will almost certainly require different evaluation methodologies. For both these reasons, a truly representative evaluation structure needs to separate out these three different levels of objective-setting. Consequently, the term ‘outcome’ is abandoned in favour of a family of outcomes labelled impact, effect and result according to whether the objective(s)

set are knowledge/awareness, predisposition or behaviour, respectively. Naturally, as the objectives are hierarchical, impact and effect have to be achieved before result (and, indeed, impact before effect). (See Figure 5.7 and Table 5.1.)



**Figure 5.7** *The Unified model*

**Table 5.1 Mapping terminology**

	Unified model	PII model	Macro model	Lindenmann	PRE
Level/Stage	(S)	(L/S)	(S)	(L)	(L)
A	Input	Preparation	Inputs	--	Inputs
B	Output	Implementation	Outputs	Outputs	Outputs
C (awareness)	Impact	Impact	Results	Outgrowths	Out-takes
D (predisposition)	Effect	Impact	Results	Outcomes	Outcomes
E (behavioural)	Result	Impact	Results/ Outcomes	Outcomes	Outcomes

No methodologies are spelt out in the Unified model. Although it is natural that different methodologies will be required at different levels, the research methodology required should be governed by the particular research problem in the particular circumstances that apply. Consequently, any listing would simply be a collection of likely approaches rather than something of universal applicability. Also, given that an evaluation culture is a research culture, as an evaluation culture develops then so should an appreciation of research methods. As well as accepting the hierarchy of objectives, the Unified model takes account of the lack of dynamic feedback for which its predecessors have been criticized. This is done in the formative spirit of public relations evaluation but operates at two levels. At one level, there is likely to be formative feedback from one stage to the preceding stage as a means of fine-tuning the current campaign. At another level, there is likely to be lessons learnt from one campaign that will feed back into the planning of future campaigns.

**PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES**

Watson's study of practitioners in the UK (referred to in Chapter 3) found many characteristics that were shared with practitioners around the world. These included:

- 1. The main methods to gauge impact of activity and degrees of 'success' were simple output measures of media coverage.

2. The main barriers to evaluation were the reluctance of employers and clients to pay for research, and lack of knowledge and confidence among practitioners to promote evaluation.
3. There was belief that software-based evaluation may have a role in 'proving' effectiveness.
4. There was ambivalence towards the use of commercially available media-content analysis as a stepping stone towards social-science-based evaluation procedures.

The UK survey was cross-checked with a sample of 30 practitioners from 25 countries and the results mirrored the UK conclusions with only a few variations. These practitioners expressed a greater appreciation of the role of evaluation in measurement and planning of activities, indicating an understanding of the value of the feedback (iterative) loop. They also considered that budget/cost was less important as a barrier. These barriers to evaluation were confirmed as having worldwide relevance by research in Germany by Barbara Baerns (see Chapter 2), who made similar conclusions. This allows the creation of a matrix of practitioner attitudes to the barriers to evaluation; see Table 5.2.

The German data indicated that lack of personnel could also be linked to a time. Overall, this data is similar to other public relations cultures and shows that research is not being used as a formative tool and that evaluation was based on 'seat of the pants' methods.

Watson (1995) used four case studies to investigate the real-life constraints and practical difficulties of systematic evaluation. In two case studies, a major

**Table 5.2 Barriers to public relations evaluation. Rankings from the UK, Germany and multinational corporation practitioner studies (1 = highest rank)**

Barrier	UK	German	Multinational
Lack of time	3	1	2
Lack of personnel	– not suggested	2	– not suggested
Lack of budget	4	=3	3
Cost of evaluation	2	=3	4
Doubts on usefulness	– not suggested	4	– not suggested
Lack of knowledge	1	5	1
Aversion to scientific methods	– not suggested	6	– not suggested

industrial redevelopment and a proposal for a new town, it was found that the environmental and development issues embodied in the two projects were so sensitive that it was not practical for pre-testing of attitudes to be undertaken. In the industrial redevelopment programme, research has been used to validate the community relations programme and modify it for the future. An iterative loop was used to sustain the public relations process.

In a third case study – an intensive three-month-long lobbying campaign – there was only one opportunity to make an impact. The proof of performance (ie indication of success) came when the UK government found new money for a project and the threat to the organization receded. Unlike the longer-term campaigns, this intensive campaign had an outcome that was quickly visible and could be expressed as a Yes or No result. The methodology to evaluate the results did not need an iterative loop.

The fourth case study was a community public relations campaign against a new coal-fired power station in an environmentally sensitive area. The results were measured by failure of the public utility's proposals. The campaign's effectiveness demonstrated the value of effects-based planning and the manner in which it creates a feedback to review tactics.

The case studies demonstrated different structures of public relations actions, ranging from the short, sharp lobbying activities to the long-running industrial development and new community programmes. Thus different implications for evaluation theory have emerged. The lobbying campaign pointed to the need for simple models to overcome the barriers to evaluation of lack of time and money (budget/cost factors). It also indicated that a simple Yes/No or Win/Lose outcome from the evaluation process was needed in a short time span.

Evaluation models designed for short-term public relations action must answer the Win/Lose dichotomy. The nature of these types of public relations campaigns is a call to action. Effects are not being created because the objectives are usually concerned with awareness. As a result of these short time spans, practitioners are unlikely to be creating attitudinal or behavioural effects.

The longer-term programmes have different characteristics. They segment audiences and aim to create different effects among target groups by a variety of strategies and tactics. The effects can be judged through continuing, consistent research. They also operate at differing speeds, compared with a short, intense awareness campaign. Indeed, their pace can vary quite considerably over the years. Awareness campaigns largely feature media relations strategies and evaluate the communication of messages through the media filter. Long-term programmes may have minimal use of media relations, preferring lobbying and direct communication with target groups.

Evaluation based on media analysis is thus less relevant for these programmes and so a model suitable for continuing, long-term actions needs to take account of the desired effects and whether these and the objectives are being achieved. It should also offer answers to the Win/Lose dichotomy and to the 'staying alive' factor in mid-campaign. Another factor is that a long-term programme will use a greater variety of strategy and tactics and these will need to be monitored, formally or informally, as the programme progresses.

In summary, the case studies indicated that two different evaluation models are needed to judge two very different scenarios: the common short-term awareness campaign based heavily on media relations and the longer-term programme which has a variety of strategies and tactics.

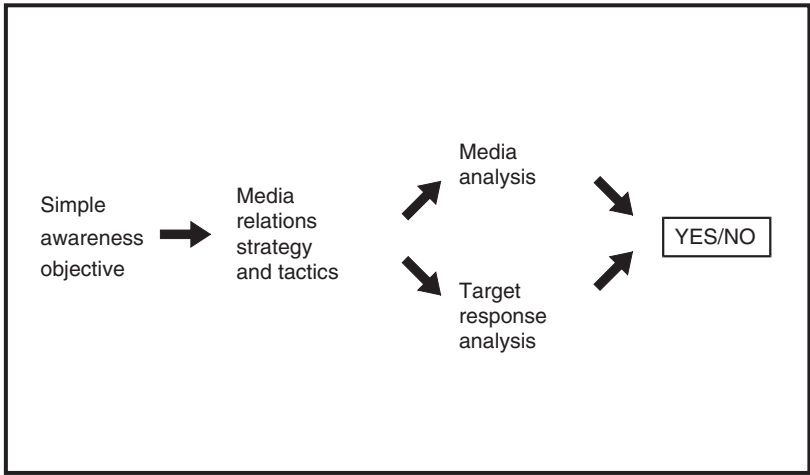
The evidence of practitioner surveys and the case studies supports the assertion that simpler approaches to evaluation are called for to bring down the barriers hindering the widespread study of impact of public relations activity. Existing models – such as Cutlip, Center and Broom's PII, Macnamara's Macro and Lindenmann's three-level Yardstick models – are too complex, do not have an integral relationship with the creation of effects and lack the dynamic element of feedback. That they have not been adopted widely by practitioners as appropriate methods for evaluation is the result of several factors: practitioners' lack of knowledge, narrow dissemination or they lack a practical or universal appeal.

Essentially, these were static step-by-step models that relied on the public relations activity stopping while evaluation was undertaken. No in-house or consultancy public relations operation can stop and take stock in such a leisurely way. Public relations evaluation models must reflect the dynamic nature of communications in a pressurized world.

The IPRA's Gold Paper No 11 proposed a circular model which links planning with evaluation in much the same way that the PRE process attempts to do. While descriptive of a process of planning and subsequent evaluation for long-term activity, it does not appear to have been developed empirically and practitioner acceptance and understanding are limited, as illustrated by Fairchild's comments. Thus it does not address the barriers and practitioner perceptions that have been identified by so many studies.

## **SHORT TERM AND CONTINUING PROGRAMMES**

Taking into account the need for accessible, dynamic models of evaluation, two models are proposed: the Short Term model for short time span, largely media-relations-based campaigns and activities which seek a rapid result, and the Continuing model for long-term activities where the consistent



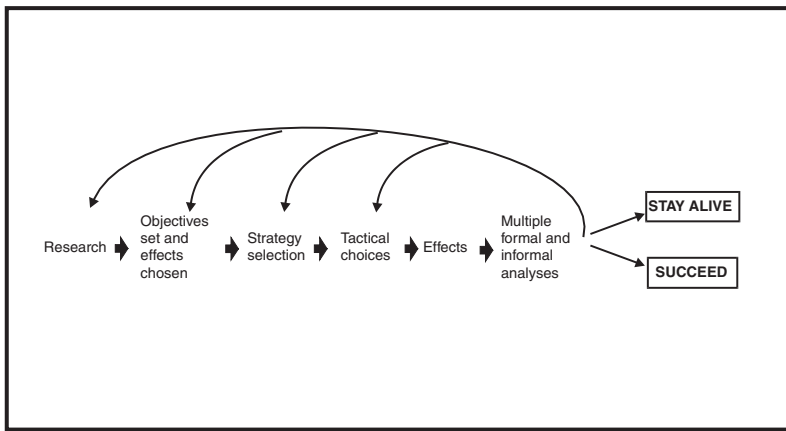
**Figure 5.8** *Watson's Short Term model*

promotion of messages is a central strategy and the outcome may occur after a long period (a year or more) of continuous activity (Watson, 2001: 267–68).

These models link with Grunig's four summations of public relations activity. The Short Term model is similar to the Press Agency and Public Information one-way summations as it does not seek a dialogue or feedback. The Continuing model fits with the Two-Way Asymmetric and Two-Way Symmetric models that cover a broader band of communication methods and rely on feedback for campaign monitoring and modification of messages. These models can be expressed graphically (see Figures 5.8 and 5.9).

The Short Term model has a single track, linear process with an outcome. It does not set out to measure effects and because it does not have a continuing existence, there is no feedback mechanism. Typically, a public relations campaign has a simple awareness objective with one or two strategies. A common example of public relations practice in the Public Information summation is the distribution of news releases about products or services to the media. This is a technician skill of assembling information and photographs or drawings in the manner most acceptable to the media. Measuring achievement of the objectives can be by media analysis, sales response or phone research among the target market.

Using the Short Term model, the objectives could be set on the basis of obtaining coverage in specific media (chosen for its relevance to target audiences), the number of sales responses (realistically set according to the appropriateness of the media and the attractions of the product or service) or quantitative techniques such as phone research or mail surveys. The



**Figure 5.9** *Watson's Continuing model*

judgement of success or failure is thus made on whether or not the targets are reached.

This simple model can be applied in different cultures because the accent is on setting realistic awareness objectives and choosing relevant strategies. The terminology can be translated and the model structure is straightforward. If the client or employer sets unrealistic objectives, the model will be as irrelevant as a step-by-step model or informal 'seat of the pants' judgement. The quality of the model's results depends on the professionalism of the practitioner in designing the campaign.

This model has been designed for use in long-term public relations activity. In reviewing the case studies, the need for a dynamic model to cope with ever-changing circumstances was identified. A programme such as that for the new settlement, with multiple long-term corporate and planning objectives, or for the industrial redevelopment, with a medium-term objective of planning permission and a long-term objective of improved relations with the local community, needed a flexible evaluation model.

The Continuing model offers elements that have not been included in step-by-step models. It has an iterative loop and takes into account the effects that are being created by the programme. An additional element is that it offers an opportunity to make a judgement on 'staying alive' – the important stage in a long-term, issues-centred programme when keeping the issue in the decision frame is important. The Continuing model epitomizes VanLeuven's effects-based planning approach. By adopting these principles within the Continuing model, a dynamic and continuing evaluation process is created because the search for consistency means that monitoring is continuous.

The evidence from the long-term case studies reviewed in the research shows that the search for consistency is one of the most difficult practical issues facing public relations practitioners. The Continuing model, using effects-based planning, offers a more disciplined approach that allows the parameters of the programme to be more closely defined and enables continuous monitoring to replace after-the-event evaluation. The consistency of effects-based planning also aids validity and reliability of data.

The elements of the Continuing model are: an initial stage of Research; the setting of Objectives and choice of Programme Effects; from these follow the Strategy Selection and Tactical Choices. As the programme continues, there are multiple levels of Formal and Informal Analysis from which judgements can be made on progress in terms of success or 'staying alive'. The judgements are fed back through iterative loops to each of the programme elements. The loops assist the practitioners in validating the initial research and adding new data, adjusting the objectives and strategy, monitoring the progress to create the desired attitudinal or behavioural effects and helping with the adjustment or variation of tactics. This model is a continuing process that can be applied to a specific programme or to the overall public relations activities of an organization.

## **UNIVERSALITY OF APPLICATION**

The research into practitioner attitudes found many similarities: barriers, reliance on output measures, technician activities and lack of knowledge. The recognition of these similarities has been important in the design of the two models of evaluation and will encourage their use by practitioners in many countries. Their simplicity and accessibility go beyond anglophone public relations. There is no rigidity in the evaluation methodology. Whereas a British practitioner may use a market research approach to analysing response to a campaign among target audiences, a European practitioner may, typically, adopt sociological methodology.

The Continuing model, with its iterative loop, provides the response element that both of Grunig's two-way models require. It is suited to the Two-Way Asymmetrical model as it accepts that the proponent determines the objectives and strategy but this can be equally acceptable for the Two-Way Symmetrical model because the research and objectives setting can be part of a negotiation process in a bilateral or multilateral situation.

The models discussed in this chapter have not been as widely adopted by practitioners as would have been expected, especially in the case of PII, which

has been taught to many thousands of public relations students. With the exception of Lindenmann's Yardstick, which is not strictly comparable with the other models, they have 'summative' methods of seeking to answer questions of effectiveness at the end of a programme or campaign. They lack a dynamic element that could offer the formative research to feed back and improve the effectiveness of the continuing campaign or future programmes.

Setting aside practitioner issues such as setting objectives properly and agreeing evaluation methodology before the start of the activity, evaluation models should provide both formative and summative information. Their role should not be the last stage in a public relations programme, but the springboard to the next stage or, in a campaign, to help adjust strategy and tactics.

The two models – Short Term and Continuing – do not provide answers as to which single method of evaluation gives the universal solution. There is, of course, no single answer to this because each public relations programme or campaign has different objectives and client/employer imperatives. Different methods of data collection and analysis are called for. By using the two models, practitioners can apply an integrated planning and evaluation framework to all public relations activity, and thus test whether objectives have been reached and the desired effects have been created.

VanLeuven's effects-based approach to public relations (see Chapter 2) is a valuable addition to applied theory and should be more widely known among practitioners. The inclusion of Effects elements in the Continuing model was a direct result of testing this approach against real-life practice. These elements strengthen the integrated planning and evaluation style of the Continuing model with its characteristic iterative loop design.

The two new evaluation models proposed give clearly expressed dynamic frameworks for evaluation to practitioners in all cultures. They are based on empirical research and reside in the mainstream of public relations theory and practice. Used by fellow practitioners, the 'black art' reputation of public relations could be minimized and replaced by one of a measurable, effective communications activity.

By highlighting the relative simplicity of short-term, awareness-based, public relations activity, and the complexity of continuing programmes probably associated with attitude and/or behaviour change, Watson's models make an important contribution to clarifying thinking on evaluation. However, they complement, rather than replace, the various three-stage linear models. For example, Watson's Short Term model sits comfortably with Lindenmann's Level 2 and the more complex tasks associated with the Continuing model are appropriate to Level 3.

Modelling evaluation as a continuing activity formalizes and reinforces evaluation as a formative – as well as summative – process. The evaluation of a short-term campaign necessarily means that it cannot provide direct feedback as the particular campaign in question has been implemented by the time the evaluation process has been completed. However, by adding to the body of knowledge and experience of running campaigns it does act in a formative role: providing feedback to the communications management process in general, and thereby increasing the effectiveness of similar campaigns in the future.

Indeed, the Unified and Short Term/Continuing models are complementary rather than competitive, providing different perspectives on the same reality. For example, the Short Term model is exclusively concerned with cognitive awareness objectives (represented by the impact stage in the Unified model) and the Continuing model is likely to be concerned with higher-level motivational and behavioural objectives, represented by the effect and result stages of the Unified model. These models are not detailed prescriptions for undertaking evaluation of public relations programmes. This is a complex problem that does not lend itself to simple, straightforward solutions; nor is a long list of potential evaluation techniques useful for similar reasons. The role of the structures and approaches outlined and discussed in this chapter is to provide a framework that enables the practitioner to apply the sophisticated level of analysis that will lead to some sort of answer to the challenges promoted by this complex issue.

### ***Interview***

The reaction of Mike Granatt when the subject of evaluation is raised is one of mild despair, 'because, while people talk about it, a lot less is done than is said'. Granatt suggests two reasons for this lack of action. The first is the short-term perspective of many practitioners. 'In many ways, evaluation is not about the immediate, so for many people it is counter-intuitive.' He extends this stricture to both clients of consultancies and to principals of those working in-house, 'who really want to see immediate results rather than some sort of "deep" evaluation'.

Granatt suggests that the second problem for evaluation is the range of techniques that are used. He dismisses evaluation based on the column inches achieved for a particular cause as 'practically useless'. He argues that it says nothing about the quality of interaction with the audience, whether a strategy has been successfully implemented or whether any useful purpose has been achieved.

The word 'strategy' prompts Granatt to warm to his theme. 'You cannot get into evaluation unless you know what your strategy is and in a tactical business, strategy can be seen as a somewhat remote, worthy concept. Getting the strategy right is absolutely key because unless you've got the strategy sorted, what are you evaluating?'

He makes the point that evaluation doesn't start at the end of the programme. The first consideration is the purpose of the campaign. It is at this (very early) point in the 'train of thought' that evaluation's value should be considered. Segmenting target audiences and thinking through their desired reactions helps identify the indicators that will usefully evaluate the campaign.

Granatt feels that understanding the audience is what really counts when assessing the impact of a campaign. After dismissing the outmoded 'all publicity is good publicity' school of thought, he commends the more sophisticated applications of media evaluation, 'where there is a very clear understanding at the outset as to what the strategic purpose is, an examination of changes in reporting, and careful analysis of coverage to identify what is positive, negative and neutral – and why'. Granatt argues that 'this is where it really counts' because you can make judgements as to the knowledge audiences are likely to have gained and what their reactions are likely to be.

But he goes one step further and identifies that many practitioners have not yet moved from outputs to outcomes. They have not moved from using media coverage as their benchmark to measuring whether there have been changes in the behaviour or opinions of the audience.

When asked what distinguishes the more sophisticated users of evaluation, he is unequivocal: 'A research-based approach and a willingness to devote resources to it.' A key problem is that evaluation is regarded as an unreasonable expense. He points out that advertising campaigns are carefully researched, if only because of the expense associated with them. Ironically, practitioners claim that public relations is much more cost-effective, but investment is needed to support this claim.

Granatt sees no distinction between evaluating the process and evaluating the impact of the campaign. 'If you are simply evaluating at the end of the campaign, even if you are running the world's shortest campaign, you are closing your eyes to what is actually happening as it progresses. You cannot take any action without it modifying the environment on which you based your original planning. Not to evaluate as things go along leaves you blind as to whether you are achieving anything or not, or missing opportunities – or even making things worse.'

In summary, he comes back to his strategy theme. 'You can easily evaluate without strategy, but it's meaningless. You can easily have a strategy with no evaluation, but the outcome would be unproven. Strategy and evaluation are in the same bag', concludes Granatt.

*Mike Granatt is a partner at Luther Pendragon, a visiting professor at the University of Westminster, and formerly Director General of the UK Government Information and Communication Service.*

### Questionnaire responses

#### *Evaluation questionnaire for industry leaders*

**Q: How much budget is normally allocated to evaluation in annual budgets or major campaigns?**

We always do activity-based budgeting and for that reason we have no general rules to apply. Evaluation/research investments are made as appropriate. **Dejan Verčič**

Five per cent. **Alison Clarke**

It doesn't quite work that way. The evaluation team has a budget from each programme area. As we are a corporate service and not regarded as a programme, like evaluation, we too have a budget from each programme. **Fran Hagon**

This varies so much as to be unhelpful to give an average. The key point is to identify the cornerstones of success in any PR programme and establish key milestones to ensuring they are achieved. **Crispin Manners**

We aim for 10 per cent, but by the time the budget is finalized the client often reduces it. **Loretta Tobin**

Unfortunately it remains a non-issue for many clients, but we do internal assessments anyway. **Ray Mawerera**

In many programmes outcome measurement is actually conducted under the auspices of another department – customer satisfaction, market analysis etc. Some programmes require huge employee opinion surveys, others require small media monitoring programmes. Often the measurement itself is an integral part of the communication campaign that can't be separated from the activity of counsel and advice. There is no set percentage, especially when measurement is integrated into the programme to ensure the team is effective and accountable. **Annabelle Warren**

Normally included in the retainer fee as part of the deal! **Laurina O'Donnell**

It isn't allocated 'normally'. For some clients, it is included in overall budgets from the outset. With one client it's linked to their KPIs which is very nice (but very unusual). It really depends on what a client is seeking to achieve – a consumer client looks for exposure, a finance client looks for quality media or response to stockbroking presentations or property clients are seeking sales ahead of a schedule! **Clara Zawawi**

Few clients think of it like this. In reality, I would say that the amount allocated is well under 5 per cent. **Mike Copland**

It varies, but I'd guess between 10 and 15 per cent of budget. **Matt Kucharski**

It is costly in terms of hours spent but generally we spend very little actual cash. **Richard Offer**



# Developing a media evaluation system

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This chapter focuses on practical steps towards establishing media evaluation systems: the first part proposes a simple media monitoring system while the second proposes a more detailed analysis. Both are achievable by consultancies and in-house practitioners and offer usable feedback and data for short-term and continuing public relations activity. The simple system has methodological limitations and may lack social science purity, but it can be set up quickly and at low cost. This could be a major advantage for practitioners who have identified cost as an important barrier to evaluation. The more complex system can threaten to be too time-consuming for manual implementation. However, it can form the basis of a customized in-house system (implemented by an IT department – or database expert) or a specification for an external media evaluation bureau.

## SETTING UP A SIMPLE MEDIA MONITORING SYSTEM

The traditional method of measuring public relations success was amassing a collection of media clippings and transcriptions. Mounted on sturdy paper to give added bulk, the clippings were seen as the ‘deliverable’ of the process

and programme. To borrow an analogy from flying, this was like flying on one instrument and ignoring all the others. Kaplan and Norton use this in *The Balanced Scorecard* (1996: 1–2) and describe a pilot who uses only an air-speed indicator and ignores fuel gauges, altimeters and other instruments. They conclude that ‘we suspect that you would not board the plane after this discussion’. The point for practitioners is that they would not pilot a programme without checking the progress against objectives, yet many rely on a collection of clippings as the sole indicator of so-called success. Sadly, clients and employers often use the same judgement, too.

PR people are communicators, analysts, strategists and tacticians who are always making judgements in fluid environments. So how can they deduce whether the programme is flying fast or heading straight for a mountain of problems? ‘Gut feel’ and informal feedback are sometimes useful, but often misleading. To make accurate judgements, solid planning and valid, reliable information are needed.

This helps us decide whether we are ‘Doing Well’, but first we must set measurable public relations objectives. These are the four most important words for the development of both simple and complex evaluation. They tell us where we are starting from and where the programme is heading. ‘Measurable’ gives the basis of planning and aids validity of feedback data.

As described in Chapter 3, UK research shows that evaluation supports a professional image of public relations and thus strengthens the position of the practitioner. In the mid-1990s, Tom Watson found that 63.9 per cent of senior British practitioners believed that evaluation increased respect between them and their employer or clients. Only 2.1 per cent said that it worsened the level of respect. This demonstrates that, by demonstrating effectiveness, public relations can be brought into the corporate planning process and can improve its share of budget. (Watson, 1996)

The definition of public relations in Chapter 1 describes PR as a ‘management function’ and so this is a planned, structured and reviewed process which means more than scoring press mentions. Objectives are the reasons behind the programme in terms of audiences to be reached, messages communicated, channels of communication used and the reactions and responses sought. As a persuasive process, public relations needs measurable

objectives or it becomes a random information dissemination activity (see Chapter 8).

Lindenmann's Public Relations Yardstick (as outlined in Chapter 5) has proposed three increasingly complex stages of evaluation entitled Output, Outgrowth or Out-take and Outcomes. For a simple media monitoring system the appropriate Yardstick is Output, which measures production of the PR effort, as opposed to audience response and attitudinal change which are covered by the others. Output analysis judges where the message was received in the media, the manner and tone of its interpretation and quantitative measurements of its appearance. At this point, it is important to note the limitations of media analysis because it cannot judge the message(s) impact upon non-media targets groups. This needs an additional level of research among those groups, although in practice response to articles via letters, phone calls, sales, literature uptake or visits do give an informal (but partial) measure. Measuring media coverage should be systematic, continuous, part of an overall evaluation process and related to objectives.

The process of creating a simple media monitoring system is essentially a clerical process that has more time spent on the initial set-up stage than on the continuing regular analysis. The raw material is media clippings and transcripts, which can be generated through monitoring of the media by the practitioner or through agencies and broadcast monitoring bureaux. These can be supplemented by word and topic searches by online information organizations and scanning of the internet through search engines.

There are **six steps** to set up the system and fully utilize the information drawn from it:

1. Define objectives.
2. Determine criteria.
3. Choose a benchmark.
4. Select a measurement tool.
5. Compare results with objectives.
6. Modify campaign.

The objectives can include exposure of message, dissemination, education of target publics, sales lead generation, share of voice (*vis-à-vis* competitors or issues) or others that have been set out in the programme.

When selecting criteria for judgement, there is a useful although misleadingly titled mnemonic proposed by the US-based Delahaye media analysis consultancy. Called IMPACT, it sets out these criteria:

Influence or tone  
Message communicated  
Prominence  
Audience reached  
Consultant/spokesman quoted  
Type of article.

In order of importance, the letters could be reorganized as M (Message communicated), A (Audience reached), T (Type of article), C (Consultant/spokesman quoted), I (Influence or Tone) and P (Prominence). Sadly, MATCIP is not as catchy as IMPACT. The most questionable of factors is Prominence. As McGuire's Output Analysis of the Communications/Persuasion showed in Chapter 2, the way that we awkward humans scan and retain information is not linear. So it follows that we do not necessarily retain the information offered by the largest article on a prominent page or the first report in a broadcast news programme. Indeed, some of the best-read sections of print media are 'fillers' and diary pages that have terse, compressed information.

Having chosen criteria, the next stage is to benchmark media coverage and then choose the repetition by which the analysis will be undertaken. Practically, establishing an effective benchmark is best achieved by reviewing the previous 12 months' media coverage and then repeating the process every three or six months. Once the hard work in setting up the benchmark is undertaken, the period-on-period comparisons take much less time and use frequent repetitions.

### **Analysing media coverage: the key questions**

1. Where it has appeared and how often?
2. Which journalists have by-lines?
3. What is the tone of coverage? 0 to 10 ranking for each item. 0 is completely negative. 5 is neutral. 10 is completely positive.
4. Which products/services/issues have had coverage? (where and frequency?)
5. Coverage of major competitors; where and how often?
6. Classify the coverage as filler, medium or large. Indicate when photos have been used.
7. What are the key messages carried in the press coverage?

In order to get valid information, the project or programme manager should avoid personally judging the 'tone' or favourability of coverage and interpreting the messages carried by the media. If the manager or a close colleague undertakes the analysis role, there is a strong likelihood of 'observer bias', ie they will scan for the positive messages that support their advice and hoped-for results and bypass the negative feedback. The most effective route to take is to establish a panel of independent readers who scan the clippings and transcripts and give their objective opinion. This panel of readers should not be colleagues in the same organization or consultancy but come from outside the business. The media material is circulated among them (at least three people) for analysis using a pro forma. In this way, the level of subjective interpretation is reduced, the analysis is undertaken on a common basis and the practitioner benefits through valid feedback.

There are varying ways of organizing the reader panel. It can manage itself with one of its members preparing reports, the material can be returned to the practitioner for collation or it can be sent to an independent expert for interpretation. Usually, the panel members are part-time and operate from home, but this is a matter of convenience rather than of methodological importance.

When it comes to interpreting and implementing the information from simple media analysis, a final pitfall to be avoided is the 'substitution game'. These analyses describe the dissemination of messages and their reception and interpretation in the media (the Output phase), but they don't tell of the Impact upon the audiences. To ascribe Impact to the Output analyses will lead to inaccurate modifications of programmes and preparation for new ones. As indicated above and in earlier chapters, impact must be judged by research among the target audiences, not in the channels of communication to them.

In summary, simple media analysis should be continuous and objective. It need not be expensive to undertake and can be operated with in-house resources, with the exception of the reader panel. The information is limited to the programme's output, but it can be linked with other measures on impact to give an overall picture of 'Doing Well?' or not.

**Table 6.1** A typical form used in a simple media analysis system

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Factors to judge	Data and answers
Which publications have articles appeared in and how often? Use initials for frequently quoted publications. List names of by-lined journalists and the publications. On a scale of 1 to 10, make a judgement on the tone of the article. 1 = completely negative; 10 = completely positive; 5 = neutral.	
Write a one-sentence summary of what you see as the key message contained in the article.	Use a separate sheet
Identify if it was a small (Filler), Medium (average of 5 paragraphs) or Large (sizeable) article.	F M L
Name any client company spokespeople referred to within the story.	
If competitors or opponents are mentioned in the same story, list them and how often they appear.	

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A media analysis report based on a real financial services organization. Names have been changed to protect client confidentiality.

## CLIENT MEDIA ANALYSIS

### 'The Society'

(12 months to the end of period)

#### 1. Publications in which articles referring to The Society have appeared

National newspapers

<i>Financial Times</i>	1	
<i>The Guardian</i>	1	
<i>The Independent</i>	1	
<i>Sunday Express</i>	1	
<i>Sunday Telegraph</i>	1	(Total of 5)

Regional daily and weekly newspapers; business magazines

<i>Southern Daily Echo</i>	9
<i>Bournemouth Daily Echo</i>	4
<i>Derby Evening Telegraph</i>	3
<i>Gateway</i>	2
<i>Hampshire Chronicle</i>	2
<i>Isle of Thanet Gazette</i>	2
<i>Lynn News and Advertiser</i>	2
<i>Newmarket Journal</i>	2
<i>Basingstoke Gazette</i>	1
<i>Birmingham Post</i>	1
<i>Business South West</i>	1
<i>Coastal Express</i>	1
<i>Colchester Evening Gazette</i>	1
<i>Dorset Evening Echo</i>	1
<i>Dunmow Broadcast</i>	1
<i>East Anglian Daily Times</i>	1

<i>Evening Herald</i>	1	
<i>Grimsby Evening Telegraph</i>	1	
<i>Harlow &amp; Epping Herald</i>	1	
<i>Kentish Express</i>	1	
<i>Leek Post &amp; Times</i>	1	
<i>Manchester Evening News</i>	1	
<i>Mid-Anglia Business Wkly</i>	1	
<i>Northampton Journal</i>	1	
<i>Reading Chronicle</i>	1	
<i>Romford &amp; Havering Adv.</i>	1	
<i>Romford &amp; Havering Post</i>	1	
<i>Tamworth Herald</i>	1	
<i>Western Gazette</i>	1	
<i>Winchester Extra</i>	1	(Total of 48)
Financial publications		
<i>Financial Adviser</i>	1	
<i>Investors Chronicle</i>	1	
<i>Money Marketing</i>	1	
<i>Post Magazine</i>	1	(4)
TOTAL		57
<b>2. By-lined journalists</b>		
Jenny Andrews ( <i>Colchester Evening Gazette</i> )		
Anne Caborn ( <i>Chic</i> )		
Michael Freeman ( <i>Southern Daily Echo</i> )		
Martin Ford ( <i>Evening Herald</i> )		
Sean Macdonagh ( <i>The Guardian</i> )		
Vincent Langan ( <i>Grimsby Evening Telegraph</i> )		
Helen Pridham ( <i>Investors Chronicle</i> )		
James Seddon ( <i>Manchester Evening News</i> )		

**3. Tone of coverage** (1 = completely negative, 10 = completely positive.  
5 = neutral)

6.6/10, which is more positive than neutral and well ahead of average scores, which are usually around 5/10. There were three exceptionally high scores of 10/10 given to coverage in the *Reading Chronicle* and *Romford & Havering Post* (twice). The lowest scores of 4/10 went to coverage in *The Independent* and *Post Magazines*.

The strongest tone of coverage came in regional media at 6.8/10, which is a very positive score when set against the sample of 48 stories upon which it was drawn. Tone scores ranged from 5/10 to 10/10, with no scores lower than neutral.

Coverage in the nationals averaged 5.8/10, with four out of five articles ranking between 5/10 and 8/10. In the small number of financial press articles, the tone ranking was marginally above neutral at 5.25/10. The four articles were scored tightly between 4/10 and 6/10.

**4. Volume of coverage**

Fillers	39%
Medium	39%
Large	22%

**5. Client spokespeople**

Bob Anderson

John Pollard

Richard Moorecroft

Rod Page

Reg Darlington

Bill Hysom

**6. Competitors mentioned in the same story as The Society**

Travellers Friendly Society	7
Everton & Sheffield	5
Colchester United Friendly Society	4
Reading Equitable Friendly Society	1

## **7. Messages carried in the media about The Society**

### *Products and industry comment*

The Society has a lot to offer in the world of friendly societies.

Funeral plan launched by The Society.

Society discusses its pre-paid funeral plan.

Family Income Plan outlined by The Society.

Family Income Benefit described (three separate articles).

Chief Executive says products will fit into New Labour's plans.

Chairman talks of the major role of friendly societies in welfare provision.

Low cost sickness plan offered.

Investors can contribute up to £600 a year for ISAs.

A parent can be valued at £30,000 a year, so insurance cover is needed.

### **Community**

*£500 donated to school for wheelchair access.*

*The Society investing in revival of South's property market.*

*Society replaces doctor's equipment destroyed in an arson attack.*

*£500 donated to Salvation Army.*

*Medical Trust has received £100.*

*Scout group saved from closure.*

*Conference to be held at Buxton Cathedral.*

*Surgery has new equipment, thanks to The Society.*

*Football team gets new strip from The Society.*

*Cheque presented to emergency doctors group.*

While a manual clerical media evaluation system is simple, very low cost and can be operated in situations of low-volume coverage, it is clumsy to manage for medium to high-volume coverage where frequent reports are needed. There are commercial software packages, such as COMAudit from Masscom in Australia, which offer turnkey solutions. COMAudit is available for most world markets and is used by both corporates and international consultancies to benchmark media coverage and produce insightful and attractive reports.

Alternatives can be developed using spreadsheet software, notably Microsoft Excel, which is easy to tailor for different employer/client needs and campaign situations. The main skill is creating and manipulating the macros (mathematical formulae) to relevant data. One example is the apPRaise system developed by the Hallmark Public Relations consultancy at Winchester in England. It has been in use for several years and has been used for clients such as leading professional services firms, government agencies and commercial property agents.

The essence of this system is that the consultancy and the client jointly choose up to six messages that they want to disseminate through the media. (Any number of messages can be chosen, but it is considered difficult for audiences to comprehend or retain more than three to six messages during a campaign.) These messages can be linked to corporate objectives, product promotion, key contact information (such as websites or phone numbers), etc.

The media targets are set and then monitored by regular scanning of publications, broadcast and internet media. While the data entry is essentially a clerical task, it is the analysis of the data that provides value.

The apPRaise system allows for the collection of alternative messages, such as negative comment and competitor response. It also collects data on the media relations activity that generated the media coverage, journalists who are writing about the client organization, corporate spokespeople quoted by the media and the placement of the articles in the media by position in print or broadcast.

A typical ApPRaise analysis form (see Figure 6.1, pp. 116–19) will cover Date; Headline, Media Title, Media Type, Section, OTS (Opportunities to See), Messages 1 to 6, Alternative Messages, Media Activity, Spokespeople, Reporter/Author, Target Audience, Placement of Article, Visual Impact and a space for Comments by the analyst.

From this data, charts and text can be developed to provide information on:

- number of articles per target media;
- OTS received per message;
- OTS per media activity;
- number of times that key messages are featured;
- tone of coverage for each message on a +5 to – 5 scale;
- section in which articles appeared;
- number of articles per media title;
- position of articles;
- visual impact of articles.

**Table 6.2 apPRaise – Key to analysis**

Media type	Refers to whether broadcast, press, national, regional, trade, consumer etc
Section	Where was the story found? – News, features, health, business, letters, classifieds etc
OTS	The circulation of publication/viewers of a programme multiplied by 2.5 (to indicate average readership)
Messages	Indicate the tone of a message in each piece of coverage on a scale from –5 to +5: those messages not featured within a piece of coverage leave blank
Alternative messages	Indicate messages that appear that are not one of your key messages
Media activity	Indicate which activity generated the coverage – press release, launch event, phone call, etc
Spokespeople	Who was quoted?
Reporter/author	Any by-line?
Target audience	Who did it reach?
Placement of article	Its position, using the code below: 10: Front page, DPS (double page spread), centre pages 9: Pages 2 and 3, feature (article) 8: Pages 4–9 7: Pages 10–centre 6: Back page, columnist's comments 5: Editor's comments, centre – mid-back 4: Letters 3: Neighbourhood/community news 2: Mid–late back 1: Filler
Visual impact	Use the key below A – full page/DPS B – 3/4 page C – 1/2 page D – 1/3 page E – 1/4 page F – 1 column G – 1/2 column H – 1/3 column I – 1/4 column J – couple of lines

Hallmark PR director Steve Osborne-Brown says that for most continuing media analysis purposes, the apPRaise system gives a width of information that helps the consultancy and its clients monitor the progress of a campaign or short-term project.

With regular production of reports, we know whether the messages that our clients want to express are reaching their media targets. If they aren't, we can decide whether to modify them or put in additional effort. Conversely, if messages are being accepted in the media, we can move on to new challenges.

The apPRaise system monitors the placement of articles but does not allocate a value to them. Hallmark PR says that this requires the development of sophisticated algorithms and that there is still debate as to whether a story on page 1 or page 10 has a differing value. Steve Osborne-Brown argues that the psychology of communication shows that every reader comprehends and retains information in a different manner. 'A short filler story of one or two sentences can have just as big an impact as the page one lead report. It all depends on what the reader's information need is at the time. A media analysis system cannot demonstrate that.'

A more complex system is based on the same principles but adds more flexibility in the choice of criteria/variables to be analysed. The additional complexity – such that it is – comes from the need to go through a 'pre-definition' stage to arrive at the outputs required. These outputs are quantitative in nature in the form of bar charts, line graphs, pie charts and the like.

The 'dimensional' methodology outlined below can be implemented manually, but is ideally suited to automation using database software. There is always a trade-off between the time taken to process the analyses and their usefulness. The key issue here would be to find a balance between capturing all the information that might possibly be useful, and making the process so time-consuming and tedious that it becomes self-defeating.

The health warnings that apply to media evaluation outlined below and elsewhere in this book to do with the 'substitution game' – output not impact – and the like apply equally to the dimensional methodology. Even though the dimensional methodology claims to be relatively sophisticated, it remains concerned with media monitoring and therefore still addresses output only and has nothing directly to do with the impact of the programme, campaign or activity.

The case study shows the type of data captured and outputs produced for a customized in-house media evaluation system developed using the dimensional methodology. In this anonymous (owing to client confidentiality)



[illegible]

**Figure 6.1** Sample apPRaise evaluation report (continued)

[illegible]

**Figure 6.1** *Sample apPRAise evaluation report (continued)*

[illegible]

**Figure 6.1** *Sample apPRaise evaluation report (continued)*

example, the emphasis is very much on formative – rather than summative – evaluation, a role in which media evaluation is very comfortable.

The ability to design a truly customized approach was key to enabling the department to derive maximum benefit from media evaluation. The department was not seeking to use media evaluation to justify the worth of its activities to the organization as a whole. Instead, it was seeking feedback from the public relations process in order to improve and fine-tune the day-to-day management of its media relations efforts.

So, for example, a key output (see below) is the relative volume of coverage generated by different activities (eg press release). Linking this with the known resources (time and additional costs) required to support this activity would then enable the department to establish which types of activity were most cost-effective. Similarly, feedback on the relative favourability of comment from different media could influence where the emphasis of media relations effort would be placed.

## **A DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF MEDIA EVALUATION**

Media evaluation is concerned with evaluating outputs, specifically the number of messages placed in the media, the number of messages supporting objectives, and the number of people who receive (or have the opportunity to receive) the message. In spite of our repeated concerns expressed here about the limitations of media evaluation, particularly with respect to the substitution game, we enthusiastically accept that media evaluation has an important role to play.

However, it is equally important to understand the limitations that media evaluation has in fulfilling this role. Media evaluation is concerned with the outputs – not the results – of a public relations programme so it can be used as feedback to improve the quality of those results and – if we accept a link between outputs and results – can be used to make cautious, limited inferences about results where direct measurement is impossible or impractical.

There is a key point here to be made about the use of reader panels. They are important if media evaluation is being used in a summative, judgemental – ‘how did we do?’ – manner for the reasons already outlined. However, it is acceptable for the practitioners running the programme to undertake the media analysis themselves if the purpose is formative, that is, feedback is being sought in order to fine-tune continuing implementation.

The types of questions that media evaluation seeks to answer are:

- Is the coverage beneficial, neutral or adverse?
- Are the media reporting our key corporate messages?
- Which journalists/publications are reporting us favourably?
- What is the source of the press coverage we are achieving?
- How are we doing compared to our competitors?
- Is our media coverage getting better or worse?
- What are the emerging issues affecting our organization?

The type of analyses that are useful to a particular public relations department will vary according to the organization/client concerned. The dimensional model sets out a media evaluation methodology that first specifies a customized set of reports and then defines how they are produced.

So, in contrast to the media monitoring system outlined above, the dimensional methodology is an approach within which practitioners can develop their own system or systems. It is a structure within which a customized system can be developed rather than being itself a customized step-by-step procedure. The case study gives an example of a system developed using the dimensional methodology.

Indeed, both the simple and more complex systems outlined in this chapter are eminently compatible with some of the specific tools (eg pro formas) developed as part of the generalized monitoring system able to be used for an individual system developed under the dimensional methodology. The latter is essentially a framework for practitioners to develop their own system customized according to the specific needs of different clients or organizations. It complements Watson's findings, which indicate that the way forward for media evaluation may well be the development of externally designed, but internally operated systems.

## **Quantitative axes**

The dimensional media evaluation model has four sets of four axes: quantitative axes, qualitative axes, focus axes, and time axes. The quantitative axes relate to the output 'layers' of Macnamara's Macro model (similarly they can be converted into equivalent levels as outlined by other authors, see Chapter 5):

Table 6.3

Dimensional model – quantitative axes	Macro model layer
Number of clippings	Number who receive messages
Volume of coverage	Number who receive messages
Name checks	Number of messages placed
Number of key messages	Number of messages supporting objectives

Number of clippings is self-explanatory, but note that the term clippings is taken to incorporate broadcast media transcripts. It is highly desirable to handle press and broadcast coverage in an integrated manner. This is done by monitoring broadcast coverage through transcripts which then allow the volume of broadcast coverage to be converted into equivalent column centimetres through a conversion based on word counts. Similarly, readership and viewing figures would be considered comparable. Volume of coverage refers to the number of words or can be expressed as column centimetres. Name checks simply refers to the number of mentions of the company or brand name, and number of key messages refers to the number of occasions that specified key messages appear.

Qualitative axes

The qualitative axes start to put some flesh on the bare bones of the quantitative axes:

Table 6.4

Dimensional model – qualitative axes
Circulation/readership
Attribution
Beneficial/neutral/adverse (BNA)
Impact or message strength

Different media will have different raw circulation and readership figures, and it may be appropriate to adjust for these variances. It may be appropriate to account for the proportion of readership or audience that fall into the target market. Attribution concerns the extent to which volume can be attributed to one name check; for example, can the whole clipping be attributed to a company or brand name when there is one name check in a two-page article? Normal practice might be to leave the decision to the practitioner but to have a default value of, say, 50 column centimetres. BNA (beneficial, neutral, and adverse) refers to the extent that editorial coverage is positive, negative or neutral.

The impact of an article and the strength with which any messages within it are transmitted are determined by a wide range of factors, many of which are peculiar to particular media or sectors of media. Factors which can affect impact include headlines, photographs, position on the page, position of the page, solus, length and many others.

## **Focus axes**

The focus axes determine how focused the media evaluation exercise needs to be:

**Table 6.5**

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**Dimensional model – focus axes**

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Source  
Medium  
Media sector  
Total media

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The source can either be a particular journalist or third-party commentator. The medium is a particular publication or broadcast programme, while media sector is a classification such as national press, local media, trade press etc.

## **The fourth dimension**

Science regards time as the fourth dimension and this gives the dimensional model its name:

Table 6.6

Dimensional model – time axes

Historical comparison  
Competitive comparison  
Objectives comparison  
Benchmarking

Specifying a working model

With four sets of four variables, the dimensional model theoretically gives us 256 separate analyses that can be performed. In practice, not all possible combinations are meaningful but, nonetheless, there is a requirement to select a small number of meaningful analyses, from the vast number available, for each evaluation exercise. The process is as follows. First, decide which combinations of time and focus dimensions are required:

Table 6.7

Source	Media	Sector	Total
Historical			
Competitive			
Objectives			
Benchmarking			

Then for each of these combinations, select a further combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses (see Table 6.8).

One example might be a competitive analysis in the trade press, using volume adjusted for impact, BNA and attribution. In this way, it is possible to arrive at an evaluation approach, customized for the brand, company or client in question.

Table 6.8

Circulation	Attribution	BNA	Impact
Clippings			
Volume			
Name checks			
Key messages			

## **CASE STUDY: IN-HOUSE MEDIA EVALUATION SYSTEM**

### **Background**

XYZ's Public Affairs department has used a media evaluation bureau in the past but the reports provided were of limited use and the service was discontinued. More recently, one staff member has begun to undertake a manual analysis of media coverage. Time constraints mean that any manual approach to media evaluation is going to be limited in scope.

It is anticipated that the software issues associated with a simple computerized media evaluation system are relatively trivial. The aim, therefore, was to design an in-house, computerized media evaluation system customized to the planning and management requirements of the department. A limited range of specific reports would be produced but more detailed and broader in scope than those able to be produced manually at present.

### **Input**

Key to the whole process would be the electronic coding sheet that would be completed for each press cutting or transcript. Note that the scanning in of press cuttings and broadcast transcripts (the latter may well be available electronically anyway) is an attractive proposition. It would allow some sort of simple automatic content analysis such as the identification of key words and/or messages, as well as being an efficient means of storing press coverage. Finally, internal electronic distribution of key items of media coverage internally via intranet is likely to happen soon anyway. However, the feeling is that the project should be implemented one step at a time so that, initially anyway, cuttings and transcripts will remain paper based.

The design of the coding sheet (actually a screen rather than a physical piece of paper) would be a key element of the next phase of the project. Naturally, its precise content would be dependent on the specific outputs required from the system. However, capture of the following data should enable all likely outputs required to be generated:

- Publication/programme and date plus time of transmission (if appropriate).
- Publisher/broadcaster plus circulation, readership and viewership/listenership (this might be imported from a media directory or entered manually but once only in each case; there would have to be the facility for periodic update of media data).

- Journalist (if known) and position within publication/programme.
- Presence or absence of a photograph (print media only) and whether the photograph is branded.
- Presence or absence of name in headline.
- Campaign coding (to enable specific campaigns to be tracked).
- Genre (eg documentary, travel section, etc).
- Media sector (automatically prompted from a look up list).
- Importance of publication/programme (1 = key, 2 = important, 3 = the rest).
- Raw volume in column centimetres (for broadcast coverage either number of lines [transcript] or transmission time [tape] would be entered and a constant used to produce an 'equivalent column centimetre').
- Number of company/product mentions.
- Attributed volume if appropriate, ie only 10 column centimetres would be attributed to each mention up to a maximum equivalent to the length of the item.
- Whether the coverage is beneficial, neutral or adverse (BNA). In the case of beneficial or adverse, a score might be added to indicate slightly, fairly or very.
- The presence of a small range of specified key corporate messages and an indication of the strength (1-5) of those messages. If those messages were directly contradicted, a negative score would be entered. Occasionally, key messages might change so the user would need the facility to update key messages.
- Mention of a small specified selection of key issues. From time to time particular issues would go away and new issues arise.
- A yes/no indication of whether the coverage was generated proactively. If yes, an indication of which type of action from a range (eg press release, facility trip, launch event, VNR, product placement etc, and which particular release, event etc).
- Name of any spokesperson quoted.

The key issue here would be to find a balance between capturing all the information that might possibly be useful, and making the process so time-consuming and tedious that it becomes self-defeating.

## **Outputs**

A large number of outputs would be available from the system: the precise range and their nature would be identified as part of the next phase of the project (if appropriate). However, it is possible to give a broad indication of the type of outputs sought and some specific examples. The output will be quantitative and therefore tabular or graphical (frequently multi-coloured to assist interpretation) in the form of bar charts, line graphs and pie charts. Invariably, written commentaries will be added by public affairs staff as a post-report activity.

Normally there will be some sort of measure of volume of coverage. This may be expressed as column centimetres, circulation/readership, or opportunities to see. Column centimetres can be converted into an equivalent advertising cost subject to the availability of suitable data on advertising rates. Circulation figures are available for all media from a computerized media directory already used by the department. Readership figures are available for national media (not always for local or trade publications) and could probably be sourced through the advertising agency. These figures (particularly when aggregated, and duplication/overlap cannot be taken into account) are frequently meaningless in absolute terms, but can be useful to indicate trends and make comparisons.

There are a number of ways in which figures for raw volume of coverage can be adjusted. Media coverage can be classified as beneficial, neutral or adverse and also adjusted for impact. Subject to confirmation, the sort of factors that might be taken into account when assessing the impact of media coverage are: whether the article is accompanied by a photograph, whether that photograph is branded, the position of that article within the publication, and whether the brand name is in the headline. Attribution is a further factor to be considered: is it appropriate to attribute the full volume (say, 100 column centimetres) of a long article when there is only a single, passing mention? Equivalent adjustments could be made for broadcast coverage once it is converted into equivalent column centimetres.

Two types of report are of particular interest: first, the presence (or absence) in the media and strength of a limited number of key messages directed at the media; second, whether or not the coverage had been directly prompted by the public affairs department and, if so, what type of activity had acted as the prompt (press release, launch event, facility trip, telephone contact, product placement etc).

These reports would also be subject to varying degrees of focus. It may be desirable to analyse the coverage prompted by one particular journalist or

emanating from one particular publication or programme. More likely, coverage might well be broken down into media sectors: national, consumer, trade, local etc. Coverage could also be analysed according to target media, important media, and the rest.

It would be highly desirable to handle press and broadcast coverage in an integrated manner. This would be done by monitoring broadcast coverage through transcripts which would then allow the volume of broadcast coverage to be converted into equivalent column centimetres through a conversion based on word counts. Similarly, readership and viewing figures would be considered comparable.

## Sample outputs

This is a list of possible outputs to give an indication of the type of outputs that are envisaged. Their precise nature and scope would need to be discussed/examined in more detail. *The absence of a particular output does not necessarily mean it could not be generated.* Also given is some indication of the perceived management benefits:

1. Raw (unadjusted) volume of coverage in column centimetres or number of mentions by month (*bar chart*). **A crude indication of presence in the media and how it compares with previous periods.**
2. Weighted volume (adjusted for readership/viewership, attribution, BNA and impact [position of page, name in headline, photograph, branded photograph]) of coverage in column centimetres per month for a) target/important/other and b) media sectors (*two bar charts with multiple bars per month*). **Media presence taking into account nature of coverage and where it appears; again allowing historical comparison.**
3. Relative volume of coverage (percentage) for a specified period (eg three months, six months, twelve months) according to activity that prompted the coverage. This volume could be weighted and the analysis carried out for different media sectors (*pie charts*). **An indication of the effectiveness of different activities which could then be compared with the time/resources devoted to those activities.**

4. Number of mentions of specified key issues (eg illegal immigration) in national media over time (*number of mentions against month/week with a line for each issue*). **Inevitably historical, but past trends might give early indication of those issues which will dominate media interest in the future.**
5. Volume of coverage attributed to key messages (adjusted for strength) per month in target media (*bar chart with multiple bars per month, each bar representing a specified key issue*). **Success or otherwise of persuading the media to report Buggins key messages.**
6. Separate rankings of journalists and publications/programmes according to the beneficial, neutral and adverse comment (*table*). **A clear indication of those journalists or media who report Buggins particularly positively or negatively.**
7. A campaign analysis listing the volume of coverage (column centimetres for press, time for broadcast, and a combined figure using equivalent column centimetres), both raw and adjusted, opportunities to see, and advertising value equivalent for a particular campaign. This could be split by media category and/or genre if required (*probably a table according to complexity*). **Quantitative data to support reporting on and analysis of a specific campaign.**
8. An activity analysis listing the volume of coverage (column centimetres for press, time for broadcast, and a combined figure using equivalent column centimetres), both raw and adjusted, opportunities to see, and advertising value equivalent for a particular activity such as a press trip (*table*). **Quantitative data to support reporting on and analysis of a specific activity.**

### **Interview**

Fiona Wilkinson, Senior Vice President, Corporate Communications, Visa EU, appreciates a dual role of evaluation. Clippings play a prominent role for planning within her communications group and for feeding back results to internal customers: 'a great thump of a large book of clippings is what a lot of people want to hear still.'

However, when justifying the worth of communications to the organization on a higher level, the approach is different. On the surface, it's

what she describes as 'gut feel' but it seems that her membership of the management team (and therefore the strategic role of communications) is crucial. 'I walk the floor, talk to people as much as possible, try and understand what the current issues are. I'm involved in board meetings, so I keep in touch with what's going on and can make sure that what I am doing is aligned with the way management thinking is moving.'

When talking about press relations, Wilkinson does not claim a sophisticated approach to evaluation. 'We don't spend a lot of money on evaluation and most of what we do is subjective and quite simple.' Volume of clippings, the proportion that are positive, and how many have Visa in the headline are the type of analysis Visa undertakes. She feels that this reflects the type of advice that she gets from major PR consultancies: 'If we ask for a recommendation on evaluation for a specific campaign, we will get it but it is primarily of the clippings variety.'

Wilkinson is a wider user of research than it first appears: 'We do measure the attitude of our member banks: how they feel about Visa, how the system works, what they think about the communications they receive, what they feel about the portrayal of Visa in the media.' This is alongside surveying staff and opinion formers, among other research efforts

Returning to a discussion of media evaluation reinforces her twin track approach. 'I think it's useful as a communications planning tool. As for convincing the rest of the business about the value of the communications function, I don't think it makes the slightest difference.'

When Wilkinson returned to communications about three years ago having spent time in other parts of the business, she was very concerned to catch up with the latest thinking on evaluation. Her enthusiasm was short lived: 'Frankly, I don't think it had moved forwards at all.' In her opinion, one reason for the lack of progress is that there is no single, simple solution. She is wary of AVEs, for example, but does feel they have a role as one element of the evaluation mix: 'It puts some objectivity behind it.'

This thinking is an extension of her view that the management of expectations is important to all aspects of public relations. 'This follows through to evaluation: you won't get a perfect measure; you'll get a number of indicators'.

*Fiona Wilkinson is senior vice president, corporate communications, Visa EU.*

## Questionnaire responses

### *Evaluation questionnaire for industry leaders*

**Q: Getting started on evaluation of public relations activity is often a challenge to practitioners. What advice would you give to practitioners?**

Either you learn how to do it well or you need to have a qualified and reliable supplier. Margins of error are smaller than in any other public relations activity. **Dejan Verčič**

Use the IPR Evaluation Toolkit as it gives a helpful step-by-step guide. Start modestly and see the results. **Alison Clarke**

1. Develop your own evaluation processes and demonstrate to the rest of the organization the value you deliver.
2. Evaluate your work from the beginning (research methodologies, processes, activities, budget, and outcomes).
3. Make sure it is evidence based (not just media either).
4. Make sure senior management/board receive report.

### **Fran Hagon**

Identify the desired outcome at the planning stage – shape what this outcome will look like to the client and then set about delivering it – with milestones identified so everyone involved knows that they are still heading to the correct destination. **Crispin Manners**

Think outside the box – don't take a formulaic approach – think about all the stakeholders in the PR programme and what they would like to see. **Loretta Tobin**

It is important for clients to understand and appreciate the contribution of PR programmes to the bottom line. Practitioners need to take time to devise and implement evaluation mechanisms that are easy to follow to show if they are achieving objectives. **Ray Mawerera**

Don't think of it as evaluation. Think of it as celebration points. Every time you can say to a client 'We've done it, we hit the target!' get out a bottle of champagne. Learn to enjoy evaluation as part of the good side of our industry. **Annabelle Warren**

I encourage them to use evaluation by reinforcing the fact it justifies PR expenditure. Invest in a good software package, train your staff properly and educate them about the importance of evaluation – it's increasingly becoming a 'must have' for all clients. **Laurina O'Donnell**

The hardest thing can be picking exactly what it is that could be measured. For example, would it be readership, in which case you can use data issued by the media – or is it in outcomes, in which you could measure sales? You don't always have to set up and perform the evaluation yourself – think about how you can identify and piggyback on what other people are doing. **Clara Zawawi**

Identify proven evaluation methods that apply to the programme in question; closely check references and track record of performance when engaging a research firm; seek out observations, suggestions and opinions of fellow practitioners. **Tom O'Donoghue**

Start from what you are trying to achieve rather than thinking of measurement as an optional extra (which can be cut when the budget is cut). Think in particular about how you justify your role and worth and also realize that senior management does want to see the return on any investment: failure to measure, even at a basic level, puts your job in jeopardy. **Mike Copland**

Make sure that the objectives are well defined and measurable. Without that, any evaluation attempts will be pure conjecture. **Matt Kucharski**

Build it in at the start. Plan the evaluation when you plan the campaign. If you have the budget, measure beforehand and measure afterwards. **Richard Offer**

Allocating time is considered one of the most challenging aspects for evaluating campaigns. Encroaching deadlines and additional work

heavily influence practitioners' management methods of the campaign. Before commencement of a public relations campaign, a practitioner should be aware of the repercussions if extensive evaluation is not undertaken. Ultimately, the success of the campaign will be apparent from the results and if they are not favourable, some form of evaluation is required to recognize problems and areas of improvement. **Adam Connolly**



# Evaluation in practice – case studies

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## EMIRATES GROUP

### Managing international consultancy performance

UK consultancy group Bell Pottinger Communications was appointed by the Dubai-based Emirates Group (including its international airline) in 2000 to manage public relations in the UK and its global network of 23 agencies and to reposition the carrier from being an Arab-owned airline into a globally recognized brand.

Echo Research has provided ongoing media evaluation to Bell Pottinger since 2000 so that performance by the local PR support in each country could be monitored and PR impact assessed. Analysis is provided, on a six-monthly basis, of coverage across a growing number of countries (currently 24 countries and 20 languages, including Sinhalese, Tamil, Urdu, Hindi, Thai, Malayan, Arabic, Maltese and Chinese).

The data are used by Bell Pottinger to evaluate the performance of individual PR agencies in each territory, to target consistent messages to the media, to develop tactical actions to secure increased awareness of the company, the brand, its products and campaigns, and to address current and emerging issues proactively.

## Contribution to client's business

David Wilson, MD and Emirates account director, QBO Bell Pottinger, commented: 'While we have measured the overall value of media coverage in order to track the performance of all PR consultancies representing Emirates globally, including Bell Pottinger at the core, we also tracked messaging trends to ensure:

- key messages were getting through in the right target media (and Echo did an initial market analysis to determine the right targets);
- any areas that required development were identified;
- potential problem areas that might occur in future were highlighted.

'By doing this, Bell Pottinger and our Emirates client have been able to drive the performance of agencies the world over.'

*This case study won the AMEC Communication Effectiveness Award in 2003 for Best Use of Measurement on an International Scale (multi-country).*

## PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS

### Benchmarking tunes PR performance

Hard-core data convinced senior management at PricewaterhouseCoopers to spend more on public relations. 'Our public relations programme moved from the anecdotal and subjective to the realm of fact,' said Peter Horowitz, senior managing director for global public relations.

The proof prompted management to increase the PR budget after analysis revealed that PwC was the most written-about firm in the accounting/consulting industry and enjoyed the most favourable reputation among journalists.

'Our research on the effectiveness of the public relations programme swept away management's subjective negativism such as "Why aren't we getting press?", when of course we had been,' Horowitz said. 'I had been fighting that battle for 20 years, but now I have definitive proof of public relations' effectiveness, and it has changed the way our management views what we do.'

PwC's analytical approach to media research and evaluation began in July 1998, when Price Waterhouse and Coopers Lybrand merged. With help from Echo Research, PwC's PR programme was fine tuned by quarterly reports that monitored the percentage of negative and positive stories, tracked journalists who regularly write about PwC, and helped identify the

strategies that drive favourable press. 'Without regular benchmarking to measure the impact of PR, we'd be walking around blind,' Horowitz reported.

## Measuring awareness

Measurement helped PwC determine how well it communicated its new brand name and brand attributes following the merger. 'We wanted to make sure the new PwC name was reported correctly and our messages about the merger weren't overlooked,' Horowitz said.

Initially, media tracking of domestic and international publications revealed many negative articles that quoted business analysts who scrutinized the merger. Reporters also positioned the merger as a takeover of a larger firm, Coopers Lybrand, by the smaller Price Waterhouse rather than a merger of equals.

Research helped PwC focus on journalists from the *Financial Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, as these were found to be the key media influencers. In follow-up interviews, PwC emphasized that the merger was equal in name and that an equal number of senior managers from Price Waterhouse and Coopers made up the merged firm's board of directors. 'It was important to communicate those actions and not spin some nice words,' Horowitz said. 'Our CEO and senior team played a significant role by making themselves available for interviews to answer any questions reporters raised during that time.' Subsequently, journalists portrayed the merger as one of equals and the number of negative articles decreased.

Measurement also proved PR's impact on reputation during the US Security and Exchange Commission's investigation into potential conflicts of interest between PwC's auditing and consulting division. Although the investigation shifted PwC's reputation rating into a negative area for the first time, research showed that within four months, media coverage shifted back to positive, thus easing management concerns. 'During that time, we communicated the positives about PwC and we were able to show the impact our communication had on reputation,' Horowitz said. 'Measurement showed how, over time, we completely recovered from that crisis.'

## Improving your campaign

Research also demonstrated key methods of improving PR programmes:

- Favourable press coverage increased when a chart or graph accompanied a press release. 'If you offer a graphic, the chances are very good that the story will run,' Horowitz said.

- Evaluation showed that articles written by senior managers are ‘the most powerful way of generating positive press and influencing readers’. Getting the CEO to participate in press interviews results in articles that are more favourable than an article on the same topic without him.
- Media evaluation identifies the reporters, publications and wire services that wrote most often about industries and topics. Without benchmarking, effort can be misdirected.

## **INFOCOMM DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY OF SINGAPORE**

### **Tracking global positioning as an ‘IT hub’**

In the early 2000s, the Singapore government launched a major policy initiative to promote the island state as the primary location for leading international IT and telecommunications companies wishing to establish head offices, joint ventures and manufacturing facilities in the Asian market. Success in this potentially means billions of dollars to the Singapore economy.

With China widely predicted to become the world’s largest market, much attention has turned to Beijing and Shanghai, while Hong Kong continues to vie for international investment, and new emerging economies such as Malaysia and India are also competing for international investment dollars.

Through the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA), working in conjunction with the Economic Development Board of Singapore and other government agencies, Singapore launched an international public relations campaign to promote key messages that position Singapore positively as an ‘IT investment hub’ in Asia, including:

- government support and incentives for international investment;
- the wide availability of technology infrastructure, including broadband, in Singapore;
- a skilled workforce;
- geographic centrality to the emerging economies of China and India;
- multicultural and multilingual capabilities with Singapore having large Indian and Chinese-speaking populations as well as English;
- a safe, secure environment to invest and establish facilities.

An international firm was engaged to communicate key Singapore messages to target audiences, such as CEOs, CFOs and CIOs (Chief Information Officers) of large international IT and telecoms companies in the United States, Canada, UK, Europe and Australia.

The public relations campaign identified the key media that are influential within these target audiences in each market. These included publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Forbes* magazine, *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, *Bloomberg*, *The Times of London*, *Australian Financial Review*, *BRW*, and key CEO, CFO and CIO trade journals. Then IDA and Edelman set about distributing Singapore's messages to these key media through news releases, fact sheets, interviews, and other communication activities.

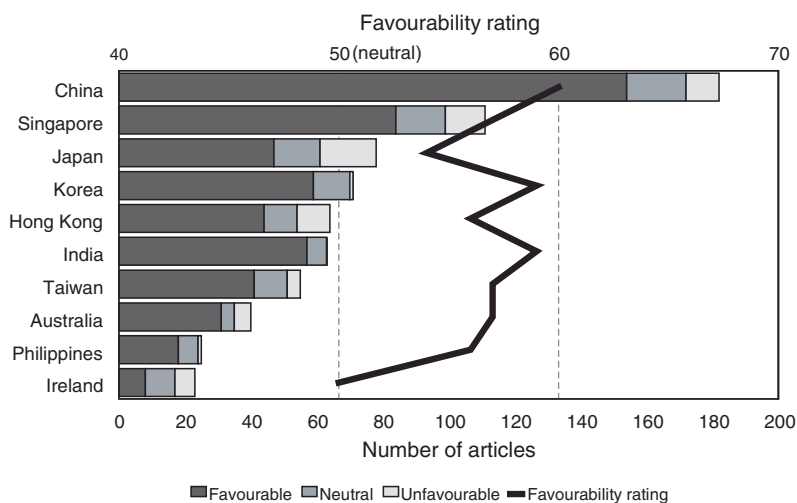
Two stages of research were planned to evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign.

### **Media analysis tracks message placement and positioning**

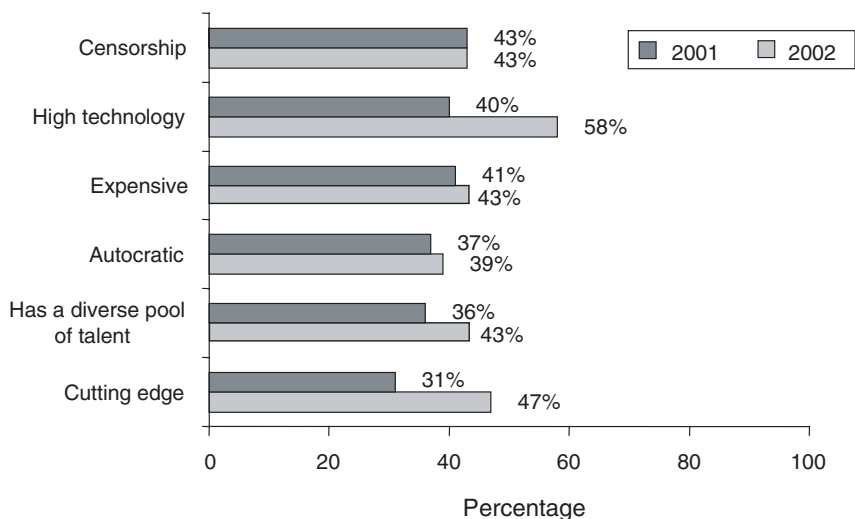
First, media analysis firm CARMA International was engaged to analyse the content of target media. This identified the extent to which key messages were effectively placed in media read by the target audiences. Furthermore, media analysis tracked Singapore's competitors (other countries in Asia including China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, etc) to identify Singapore's 'share of voice' and positioning. From analysis of leading messages and the favourability of coverage, as well as 'share of voice' of various Asian countries, media analysis could show the success of the PR efforts as well as draw inferential and predictive conclusions concerning likely market impact. See Figure 7.1.

### **Audits identify awareness and perceptions**

To 'close the loop' and gain conclusive data on outcomes of the campaign, IDA also commissioned a research firm to conduct interviews with CEOs, CFOs and CIOs in target countries every six months to identify their awareness of Singapore attributes and their attitude towards investing in Singapore. Early in the campaign, perception audits showed low awareness of Singapore's key messages and the presence of several negative messages concerning Singapore (eg it was perceived as autocratic, having strict censorship and more expensive than other Asian countries). However, after more than 12 months of public relations activity, awareness and perceptions among target audiences confirmed that Singapore's messages were getting through, with an increased number of senior executives being able to recall key positives about Singapore unprompted, such as its high technology and skilled workforce as shown in Figure 7.2.



**Figure 7.1** IDA Chart 1: CARMA International media analysis showing media coverage by volume and 'favourability' of leading Asian markets



**Figure 7.2** IDA Chart 2: Findings of a perception audit among CEOs, CFOs and CIOs in the United States following PR campaign

## **FISH4**

### **Research helps online business refine operations**

Fish4 is the umbrella brand name of a range of interactive online services, backed by 80 per cent of the UK's regional newspapers. Through its entry point on the internet at [www.fish4.co.uk](http://www.fish4.co.uk), consumers can search vast databases of cars, homes, jobs and other directory-based services.

Acting as the entry point to a range of online services, the Fish4 site provides access to Fish4cars, Fish4jobs and Fish4homes, providing site users with access to a vast selection of motors, jobs and homes, while, in addition, an online directory service features 1.9 million businesses. It aims to be the UK's leading source for finding cars, jobs, homes and local businesses.

At the heart of Fish4's proposition is an interesting contradiction in this age of globalization, so much facilitated and emphasized by the internet. While the majority of web-based businesses seek to exploit their global reach to the full, Fish4's primary goal is to be the 'local expert'. For its nearly one million users, the company aims to deliver information which is so specific to their locality that it is practically on their doorstep.

### **Research on target audiences**

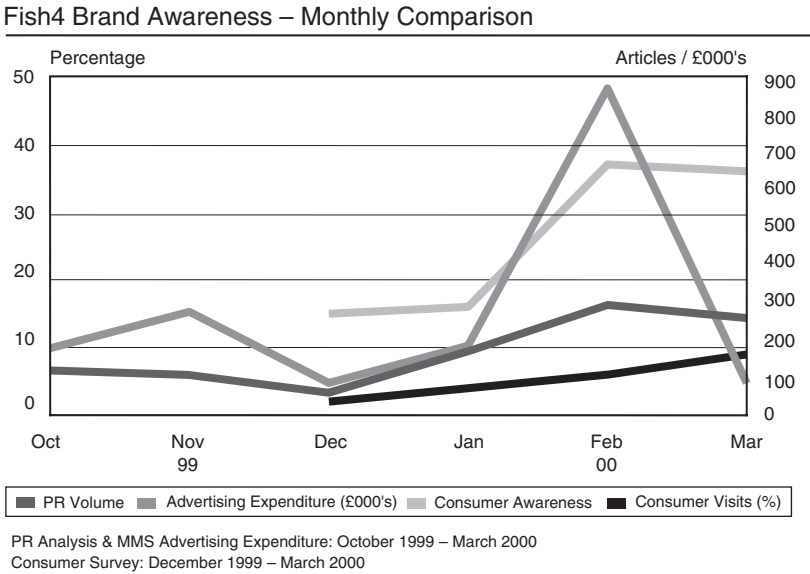
'We undertake a huge amount of research because we feel it is critical to our future success and evolution as a company,' says Jonathon Lines, Fish4's sales and marketing director. 'We must know how we are perceived across all our target audiences.'

As part of this extensive research programme, Fish4 commissioned Echo Research to conduct continuous tracking and evaluation from October 1999 to March 2000, the time of a major drive to raise awareness and drive traffic to the site. This included evaluation of PR-generated media coverage, together with interviews with opinion formers, journalists and consumers, in order to:

- evaluate brand recall and awareness;
- assess the effectiveness of above-the-line advertising spend;
- measure the impact of public relations activity.

### **Integrated marketing communications research**

During this period, Fish4 ran an integrated communications campaign using TV, outdoor, press and radio and PR. Other arrangements were made to



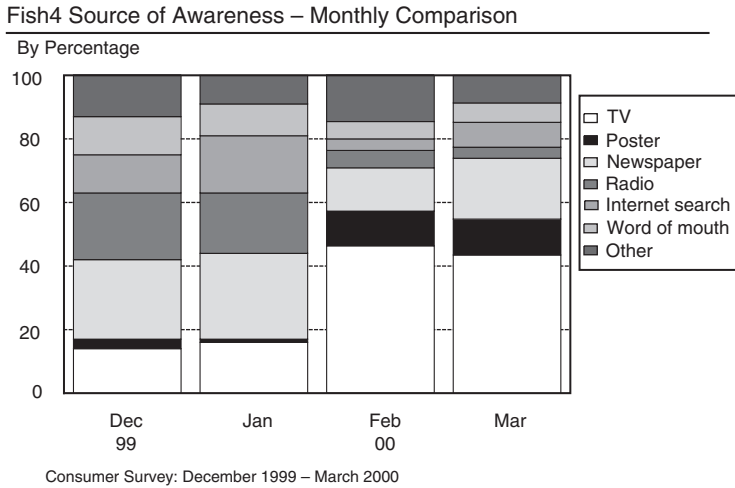
**Figure 7.3** *Fish4 brand awareness chart*

facilitate internet searches for the site. After running advertising at a relatively low level through the last quarter of 1999, Fish4 sharply increased expenditure, primarily on TV and outdoor, in February 2000, backed by an intensifying of the ongoing PR activity. See Figure 7.3.

Research showed that the increased advertising spend led to a dramatic rise in brand awareness, which was sustained through PR when the TV burst had finished. At the same time, the number of visitors to the site grew rapidly. Analysis of the sources of brand awareness shows the importance of the TV burst and the impact of posters, but also illustrates the continuing value of favourable PR in newspapers. See Figure 7.4.

Interviews with opinion formers in internet and marketing fields endorsed Fish4's creative work and media strategy and their comments were fed into subsequent campaigns. The marketing campaign was also successful in raising awareness among journalists. A writer with the *Daily Telegraph* said she was familiar with Fish4 due to their 'PR activities', while a journalist with *The Times* said it was 'generally through television advertisements'.

There was a correlation between the positive attributes of Fish4 cited by those consumers that had visited the site and from the site reviews in editorial coverage.



**Figure 7.4** *Fish4 source awareness chart*

### Fine-tuning PR strategy

The value of Fish4's PR activity and the support received from its regional newspaper investors was shown by detailed regional analysis. A statistical relationship between consumer site visits and the volume of PR-generated coverage indicated that while advertising was driving awareness, PR activity was prompting visits. Most of the editorial coverage occurred in regional publications – a benefit of the company's shareholder structure.

As a result of analysis of more than 1,000 UK press cuttings across the national, regional and trade media, the company has been able to fine-tune its PR strategy. 'We were able to see gaps in our coverage and take steps to alter course pretty much instantly,' Lines explained. 'In a competitive environment such as ours, this was a major asset.'

This case study demonstrates how successful research can inform effective decision making. By integrating and tailoring media analysis and market research techniques, Echo was able to identify strategic operational and communications opportunities. Advertising tracking and media analysis informed Fish4 about what was happening. Market research enabled Fish4 to understand why it was happening. Combining the two gave the company a unique insight into the drivers of its brand, facilitating decisions which helped the company take control of the media agenda, promote an image in keeping with its strategic aim, and ensure value for money from scarce resources.

## **VOLVO XC90**

### **Measuring an integrated consumer launch**

The small vehicle 4×4 market is the fastest-growing automotive sector. In the last decade in the UK, it has grown by 400 per cent. Volvo's presence in this sector had been limited to one model, which had not been very successful. With a new entrant on its way, Volvo placed a substantial budget behind the launch of its new 4×4, the XC90, as it wanted to ensure success in this highly competitive marketplace.

Volvo invested heavily in qualitative research prior to launch, especially against the key segment competitors the BMW X5 and Mercedes M-Class, in order to give the XC90 the best possible start. Once the launch phase was under way, the Swedish carmaker wanted to assess the success of the promotional campaign and to acquire integrated research that judged all aspects of the launch activity.

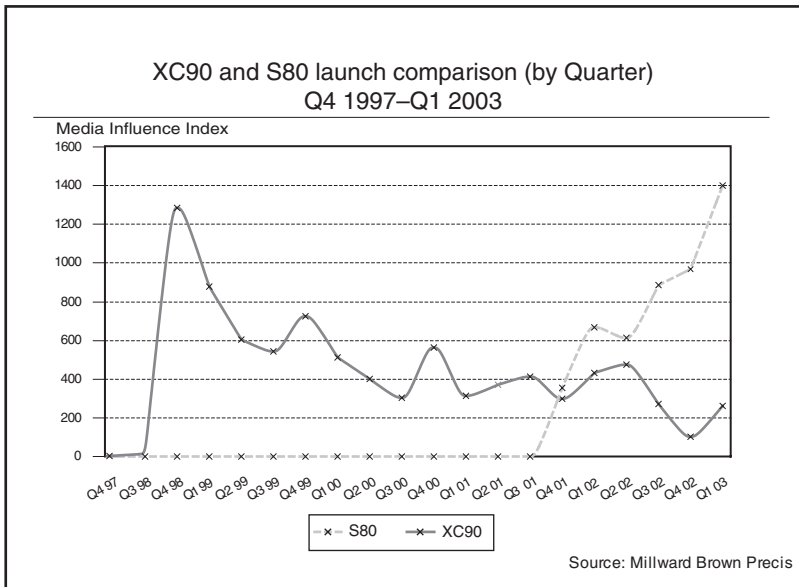
Volvo commissioned Millward Brown Precise with the objective of assessing the UK launch of the XC90 in as comprehensive manner as possible by integrating all available data collected between July 2001 and April 2003. The measures used were:

- evaluation of the quality and quantity of PR coverage, its perceived strengths and weaknesses and overall effect on the brand:
  - comparison against key competitors
  - tonality of coverage
- measurement of consumer perceptions about the XC90 and Volvo brand;
- monitoring internet traffic tracked on the Volvo website;
- measuring personal and web-based customer enquiries;
- assessing target audience segmentation analysis.

These measures were then integrated to assess the campaign in its entirety.

The XC90 was launched at the Detroit motor show in January 2002. It was immediately reported favourably by the media due to its looks and for its overall package. However, many models launched at motor shows enjoy a short burst of success then fade away, so did the XC90 fall into that trap?

The first task was to compare the XC90 launch against a successful launch of another Volvo vehicle using a more traditional PR campaign. The Volvo S80 was considered to be the most recent example of such a launch. The S80



**Figure 7.5** *Volvo XC90 launch comparison chart*

achieved a huge peak in media attention around its launch, but then interest diminished and dwindled to current levels, where it is a low-volume player within its sector. XC90 was also mapped against the BMW X5, the sector leader, which also followed a similar strategy. See Figure 7.5.

XC90 employed a different tactic whereby it built on its launch coverage to increase its impact quarter on quarter. Since its launch in early 2002, it has become a benchmark vehicle in its sector, thus ensuring a place in major vehicle group tests.

## Contribution to the brand

XC90 boosted the brand across a 15-month period, contributing around 45 per cent of the media coverage generated for the whole Volvo brand. It also boosted Volvo's core attributes of design, safety and practicality, pushing these to their highest-ever levels versus other manufacturers. It continues to be the highest-impact model for the brand.

The first element of integration was to investigate how public relations activity had reached Volvo's key target audience. For most of the analysis, the target audience remained broad, in order to be able to compare the XC90's performance against other competitors. Then the broad audience

was segmented into a core group of target consumers. These were men or women aged 25–44 with a household income of over £50k, educated to degree level and who have a keen sense of adventure. This target group totalled 609,000 people.

Among the general public, XC90's presence was very strong, with 85 per cent of the total adult population having an opportunity to see XC90 messages at least once. This was well above expectations. In the core target audience, 96 per cent of people had the chance to be exposed to media coverage on the XC90, and over 90 per cent had at least two opportunities to be exposed to coverage.

## **Consumer response**

Almost twice as many people claimed to be very familiar with the XC90 as either of its two key rivals. The largest increase in familiarity during the analysed period was directly attributable to its highest peak in PR in 2003. Not only did consumer awareness and familiarity of the model augment significantly, but some of its key attributes also improved in consumers' opinions. Safety was one of these, with the XC90 matching and exceeding its rivals. The favourable design coverage was also responsible for a sharp uplift in perceptions at a brand level of Volvo being a company that make stylish vehicles. See Figure 7.6.

As PR efforts translated into media coverage on the XC90, consumer enquiries increased in line. Two sources of information regarding enquiries were used: web traffic and personal enquiries. The initial peak of activity around the Detroit show saw an immediate surge of people accessing the internet to request information, which at that time was the only source. Over time, web enquiries decreased and personal enquiries began to build as models became available to view in showrooms.

Orders placed for the XC90 showed a strong growth over time, before the vehicle became available, and have far exceeded forecasts. This culminated in a peak in orders just after the final PR action, which announced the on-sale date for the model. Because demand was higher than anticipated, people ordering the vehicle at this stage were placed on a waiting list.

The small amount of advertising undertaken in October 2002 gave a minor uplift in enquiries, but not sales. However, on the basis that the orders already far exceeded forecast when the advertising was due to be aired, Volvo deferred some of its broadcast advertising budget and as a consequence made a saving of over £2.5 million. This was attributed to data showing that PR had helped to sell the required number of vehicles and they would not be able to produce many more than this in the time available. The advertising budget was then diverted to support other models. See Figure 7.7.

*This case study won the AMEC Platinum Communication Effectiveness Award in 2003.*

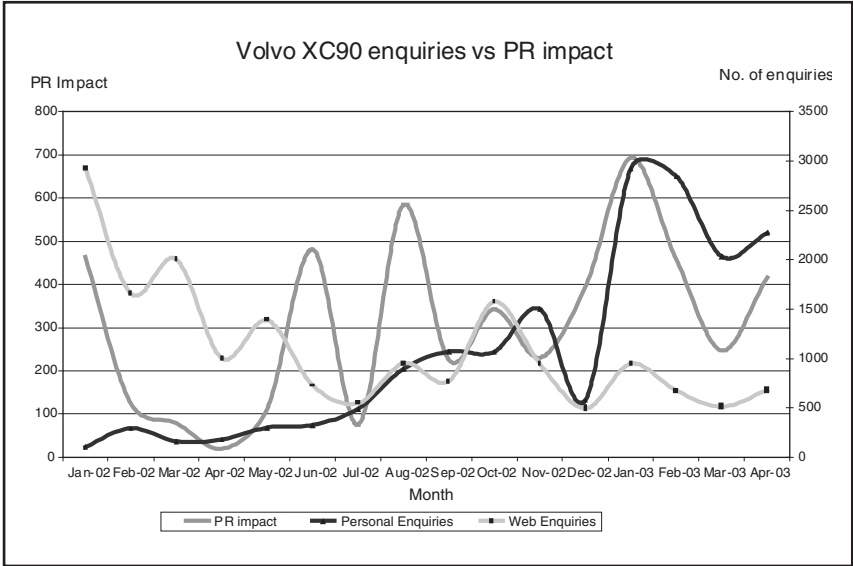


Figure 7.6 Volvo XC90 PR stimulus chart

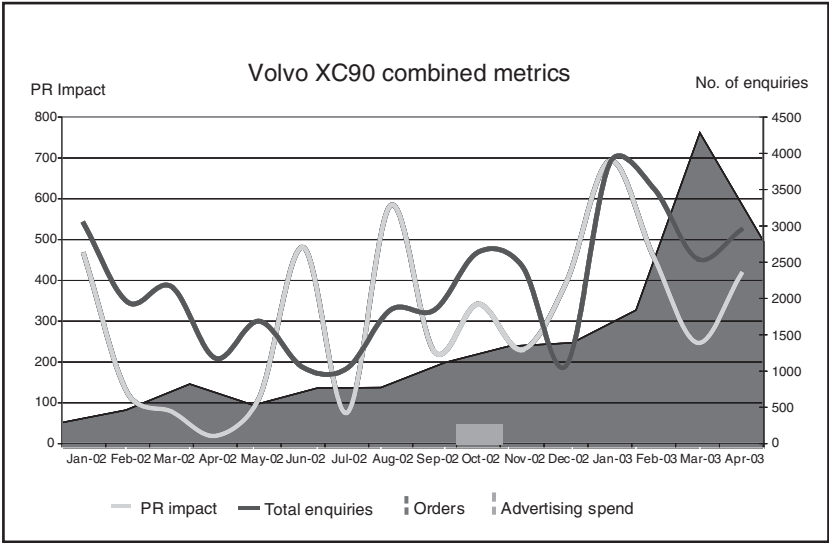


Figure 7.7 Volvo XC90 combined metrics chart

## **IFA PROMOTION**

### **Long-term consumer campaign evaluation**

IFA Promotion (IFAP) promotes the benefits of independent financial advice and how to find it (through IFAP's freephone and website service) to the British public. The TaxAction campaign, developed and implemented by Lanson Communications and in its tenth year, had four objectives:

1. to communicate the tax that could be saved by seeing an independent financial adviser (IFA) and the accessibility of IFAs (via IFAP's service);
2. to generate enquiries for IFAs;
3. to generate visits to IFAs;
4. to generate business for IFAs.

Each year, IFAP's PR evaluation processes have been refined and improved, but in 2002 the consultancy team analysed the TaxAction campaign itself, and so used a range of techniques to capture its effectiveness, from leads generated right through to actual business transacted in IFAs' offices.

In the UK, the two months to 5 April (the end of the taxation year) are the busiest for IFAs and tax is a trigger for many financial product purchases. TaxAction aims to show, in the weeks leading up to early April, that a large amount of tax is paid unnecessarily and tells how IFAs can help minimize tax costs. In 2002, the campaign's cornerstone report claimed that nine out of ten Britons pay £4 billion in unnecessary tax.

Lansons used a range of techniques to meet objectives. These included:

- 'packaged' material for national and broadcast journalists;
- a 'regional statistics' radio campaign, plus tailoring 12 follow-up regional press launches;
- monthly follow-up angles to maintain momentum;
- creative photographs to illustrate the tax waste;
- a marketing pack distributed to over 10,000 IFA offices to enable them to participate in TaxAction;

- use of IFAP's Media Services network of over 160 media-friendly IFAs (created and managed by Lansons), and network of 32 regional IFA Press Clubs, working with their local papers to raise awareness of the campaign;
- a tax-efficiency guide, free for anyone calling the IFAP hotline or visiting the website.

## **Evaluation activity**

- All media coverage was collected for analysis by media analyst Impacon.
- Details of consumer enquiries generated through the campaign launch period were collated by IFAP's fulfilment house.
- A survey of over 6,000 enquirers identified how many had seen an IFA, bought a product, how many products they had bought, and the type of products.
- Actuaries Mercers audited this data and calculated its business value for IFAP's IFA members and for IFAP's sponsor product providers.

## **Results**

1. To communicate the tax that could be saved by seeing an IFA, and the accessibility of IFAs
  - Media coverage of TaxAction in its tenth year was the highest ever with 426 items of coverage, including 28 broadcast interviews. The campaign generated 70 items of national coverage across 26 newspapers, supplemented by items on Teletext, in consumer publications and on personal finance websites. Impacon's analysis of the three-month campaign launch period's media coverage found it generated 209 million Weighted Opportunities to See (WOTS), all positive. The coverage was skewed towards the campaign's targeted ABC1s between the ages of 35 and 64. The key messages delivered were (figures aggregated):
    - amount of tax the UK wastes – 138m WOTS;
    - mentions of independent financial advisers/see an IFA/need for planning – 98m WOTS;
    - ease of finding IFA/IFAP hotline and/or website – 26m WOTS.

2. To generate enquiries for IFAs

- In the campaign launch month alone, IFAP's fulfilment company received 33,000 requests for local IFA details.
- All enquiries were logged by source. This showed that 25.3 per cent of IFAP enquiries came via the hotline, whilst 74.7 per cent came through IFAP's online 'Find an IFA' search tool, which has a co-branded version on a wide range of relevant third-party websites.

3. To generate visits to IFAs

- Follow-up research conducted among a proportionate sample of 4,922 online enquirers and 1,766 hotline callers found that 37 per cent and 43 per cent respectively visited an IFA.

4. To generate business for IFAs

- Of these, 43 per cent of web enquirers and 41 per cent of hotline enquirers went on to make an average of 1.5 and 1.2 product purchases respectively.
- Mercers calculated that, based on average commission value per sale, the campaign generated £2.4m for IFA members, and £1.7 million profit for IFAP's product provider sponsors.

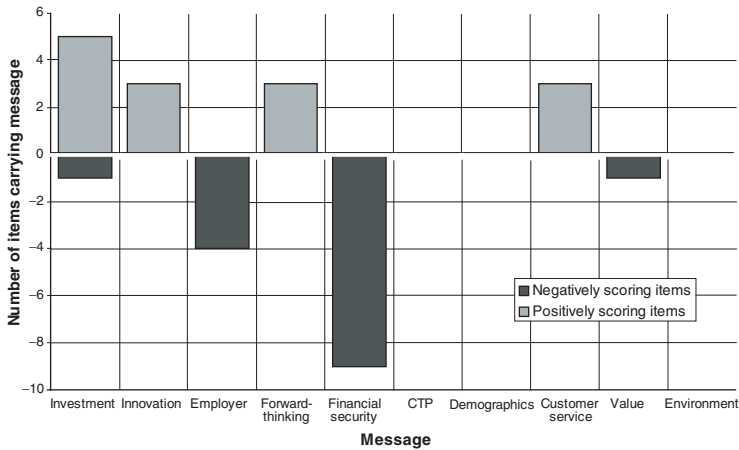
David Elms, CEO of IFAP, explains, 'For IFAP, being able to evaluate and thus demonstrate our effectiveness across all our marketing activity is vital to improving the delivery, as well as ensuring the continuing support of our 10,000 plus members and product provider sponsors. "TaxAction" has been running for 10 years and year in year out is IFAP's most successful integrated PR campaign – this year for the first time I was able to illustrate this in concrete business terms, which meant something to the bottom lines of both our members and our sponsors.'

*This case study won the Commendation for Best Use of Research and Evaluation in the Public Relations Consultants Association's Frontline Awards 2003.*

## POLESTAR

### Tracking change in fortunes

Polestar is Europe's leading independent printing company, with 28 sites across UK, Spain and Hungary. It serves the publishing, retail, travel and direct marketing sectors. However, in August 2001 it was facing a battle for



**Figure 7.8** Polestar message delivery chart 1

its future. A big property deal had fallen through, a major national printing contract was lost and redundancies at a UK plant had been announced.

The messages about Polestar, derived from media analysis by Impact Evaluation Services, were largely negative. In the cases of coverage of its role as an employer and financial security, the messages were solely negative. These were not outweighed by positive messages on innovation, investment and customer service, so the overall favourability rating was negative. See Figure 7.8.

In August 2001, a new chief executive was appointed. He was able to lift some of the gloom with the securing of a major investment in Polestar that was followed by capital investment and contract gains, but these advances were dogged by plant closures, industrial unrest and redundancies.

The company also made some changes in its approach to public relations activity, based on the media analysis. There was more emphasis on technical stories and contract wins aimed at the print trade media, which has a key role in determining industry reputation. PR manager Sarah McLaughlin said Polestar has become more open and communicative with the media, with proactive stances from the CEO and herself on both good and bad news.

In a 20-month period from mid-2001 to early 2003, coverage in the main print trade media trebled and became largely favourable. By February 2003, all messages were being recorded as positive or neutral. The negative coverage over financial security had gone and the issue was no longer referred to, employer coverage was positive and customer service was being referred to in eight articles per month in key media. See Figure 7.9.

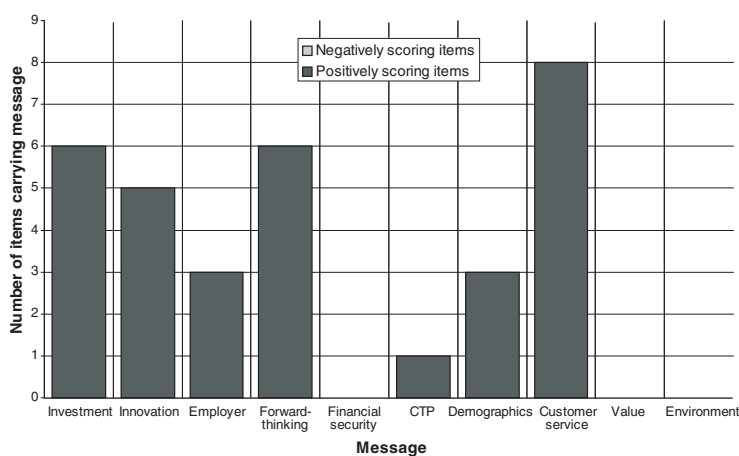


Figure 7.9 Polestar message delivery chart 2

The strong improvement in Polestar’s fortunes can be attributed mainly to a change in management, improved sales and the harnessing of the workforce’s full range of skills. The turnaround in message delivery came about from this improved company performance, a more open and media-friendly management, and good use of positive news stories. The monthly benchmarking information from media analysis helped senior management and the PR manager to monitor progress and gain confidence in their changes in communication strategy.

# CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE’S UNIT

## Linking evaluation back to key messages

In June 2003, the UK government’s Children and Young People’s Unit (CYPU) organized a regional tour entitled ‘Str8 UP’. Its purpose was to enable government ministers to meet young people and explore their views on politics and the community.

Public relations consultancy August.One Communications was tasked with supporting the tour in two ways. First, to promote the series of nine regional events which comprised the tour, and secondly to provide a platform for young people to express their views in the media.

## **PR strategy**

Because they were regarded as more trustworthy sources, it was agreed that local and regional media were the key targets for the campaign. There was some 'spill over' of coverage into national media.

The aims of the public relations campaign were:

- to improve the government's knowledge and understanding of the issues affecting young people;
- to demonstrate that the government was making a difference by engaging UK youth in a relevant and effective manner;
- to show that government is responding to feedback received from young people;
- to use the tour to underpin the government's efforts to improve the lives of children and young people.

These aims translated into three key messages for the media coverage of the tour:

- Government is listening to the views of children and young people.
- Ministers will take young people's feedback to government and policy makers.
- The tour is part of a continuing effort by the government to get the views of children and young people heard.

These messages were present in all campaign materials and were used in all briefings of spokespeople. The aim was to ensure that the coverage achieved was consistent and achieved the objectives set for the campaign.

## **Results**

Well over 100 pieces of coverage were gained for the tour in broadcast and print media. This coverage reached an audience of more than 6.3 million people.

All of the coverage was either highly positive or favourable/neutral. Articles in the latter category contained some neutral or negative content which was balanced by positive comments on related topics. Half of all coverage quoted a young person:

- 95 per cent of coverage analysed observed that government was listening to the views of young people;
- three-quarters of coverage analysed stated that young people were being granted an opportunity to make an impact on government policy;
- 72 per cent of coverage analysed indicated that the tour was part of a continuing process by the government to give young people access to ministers and policy making.

## The future

A key tactic was labelled 'Voice of Youth' which entailed the provision of articles from the young people attending press events. These were either used as stand-alone articles or incorporated into news pieces. This fed forward into a suggestion for future activity: that young people be given a proposed consultation paper for review as a hook for follow-up coverage.

Evaluation of the campaign also gave important pointers as to how future activity could be even more effective. Suggestions included: strengthening news values through more effective use of research, the involvement of more high-profile ministers, and joint events incorporating both local and national politicians to increase relevance to young people.

The report produced by the government on the tour has been received favourably by the young people and support workers involved, not least because it is a full and frank observation on not only what works when listening to young people but also how NOT to do it in future.

### Questionnaire responses

#### **Q: How does your organization evaluate online media?**

As a consultancy, we started a separate company specializing in new media, which has developed specialized tools and approaches to online media evaluation. **Dejan Verčić**

Key message delivery, hits to sites. **Alison Clarke**

Internal scanning. **Fran Hagon**

In the context of the objectives for each client programme. **Crispin Manners**

We use a media monitoring company and tend to pick a lot up ourselves. **Loretta Tobin**

We operate a media monitoring service that has, as part of the exercise, online extracts. **Ray Mawerera**

There is an assumption in the question that PR is equivalent to publicity. If an organization is going to effectively reach the public in a two-way programme, many elements will not involve publicity. Quite often publicity is used merely as an endorsement or awareness tool and is often not the core activity that makes the final impact. Online media is treated like any other element of the tactical campaign. **Annabelle Warren**

We would ordinarily work it out based on how much it would cost to advertise on that particular site  $\times 3$ . **Lurna O'Donnell**

We have a proprietary tool that allows us to monitor not only site activity but also where our hits come from and leave to go to. So, for example, if an Australian Tourism Commission story runs online in the *Auckland Herald*, we can track how many people jump from the *Herald* to the ATC site and then where they go to next, such as an airline site or travel agency site. That's pretty effective. **Clara Zawawi**

With great difficulty! **Tom O'Donoghue**

In the same way as print, but the degree of sophistication is limited. **Mike Copland**

Same way we evaluate print media – by gathering the clips, conducting content analysis, and logging them along with other media. We try as much as possible not to use circulation as a measure of 'reach' because it's so subjective, but where clients insist, we make educated guesses. **Matt Kucharski**

It would be impossible on our slender resources. Monitoring coverage online is difficult enough. We check the online news services from the major outlets and any regional sites if we have a particular case. **Richard Offer**

The Association uses online media as a point of reference or as an information tool for lobbying. However, it does not actively evaluate online media, unless there is an issue specifically related to the Association, in which action may need to be taken. **Adam Connolly**



# Objectives and objective setting

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This chapter stresses the pivotal role that objectives play in public relations evaluation. Their relationship with goals and their contribution to strategic public relations management are examined. The hierarchy of communications objectives is outlined before the concept of process objectives is introduced as part of the effort to address the complexity of objective setting in public relations.

## OBJECTIVES IN CONTEXT

The bedrock of the effective evaluation of public relations programmes and activities is setting appropriate and effective objectives. Formative evaluation is about measuring progress towards objectives and summative evaluation is about establishing whether stated objectives have been met. Indeed, evaluation becomes relatively trivial if clear measurable objectives are established at the outset. Vague, unspecific objectives lead to unsatisfactory evaluation. So objectives are pivotal to the evaluation of public relations programmes. And it is because objective setting is not simple in public relations that public relations evaluation is also not simple.

There is a widespread and almost universally uncritical assertion that effective evaluation starts with the setting of appropriate objectives.

Appropriate in this context means that the objectives are clearly defined, measurable and quantifiable. Countless authorities assert that achieving objectives is the simplest (only) way to evaluate any communications programme or campaign. This is exemplified by research specialists Glenn Broom and David Dozier (1990: 76) who state: 'To learn if your program worked, you must use the criteria established in the objectives and goals.' They then go on to point out that if at the evaluation stage the criteria for evaluation have to be refined – or even defined from scratch – then the only reason is that the criteria spelt out in the objectives were not specific enough. Indeed, a common fault of ineffective evaluation is a mismatch between (so-called) evaluation undertaken at the end of (and during) the programme, and the objectives spelt out at the start of the programme.

However, objectives are a key issue in a much broader context than public relations and communications. For example, when discussing the role of objectives in corporate strategy, marketing communications writer Chris Fill (2002: 310) outlines a number of reasons why objectives play an important role in the activities of individuals, social groups and organizations:

1. They provide direction and an action focus for all those participating in the activity.
2. They provide a means by which the variety of decisions relating to an activity can be made in a consistent way.
3. They determine the time period in which the activity is to be completed.
4. They communicate the values and scope of the activity to all participants.
5. They provide a means by which the success of the activity can be evaluated.

All of these general attributes of objectives have key benefits when specifically applied to public relations programming. In particular, the last two points cover the potential value that objectives can play in proving the worth and assessing the value of business activities.

Figure 8.1 shows how objectives (and goals) are the link between the organization's mission and values, and the strategies and tactics required to fulfil that mission. In this way, public relations practitioners do not derive objectives in isolation. They are identified and selected specifically so that their achievement makes some contribution to solving the problems and seizing the opportunities that face the organization. If a number of communications objectives can be established (and then met) that ultimately con-



**Figure 8.1** *Strategic planning pyramid (based on Austin and Pinkleton, 2001)*

tribute to an organization achieving its mission, then public relations can truly be described as playing a strategic role within that organization.

While any discussion of objectives tends to be uncritically approving, it is worth adding one note of caution. The desire to be specific and crystal clear when outlining objectives should not go to the extent of creating a straitjacket. As Mullins (2002: 135) states:

An explicit statement of objectives may assist communications and reduce misunderstandings, and provide more meaningful criteria for evaluating organizational performance. However, objectives should not be stated in such a way that they detract from the recognition of possible new opportunities, potential danger areas, the initiative of staff, or the need for innovation or change.

In other words, objectives have significant benefits in providing focus and direction for a public relations campaign or programme. But this should not be at the expense of stifling creativity or eliminating the flexibility to respond

to opportunities that were not anticipated when the plan was formulated. For example, the outbreak of a computer virus is a good opportunity for an anti-virus software vendor to raise its profile, irrespective of whether this type of activity was anticipated at that time.

## AIMS, GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The terms aims, goals and objectives tend to be thrown around as if they are interchangeable. Attempts of varying specificity are made to distinguish between the three. For example, James Grunig and Todd Hunt, while accepting that the dictionary definition of goals and objectives is the same, move on to 'define goals as broader and more general than objectives' (1984: 116):

*Goals* are generalized ends – ends that provide a framework for decision making and behaviour but that are too broad to help much in making day-to-day decisions.

*Objectives*, on the other hand, are ends in view – expected solutions to day-to-day problems that we can use to deal with that problem and to evaluate whether we have solved it.

An example given to illustrate the difference is that the goal of a PR department might be to ensure public acceptance of the organization. But the practitioners working in the department will need more specific objectives in order to enable them to plan and evaluate day-to-day activities. These might be along the lines of getting a certain percentage of an important public to understand the organization's stance on a particular issue.

Here, we will be no more precise than accepting that goals and aims are frequently slightly broader and less closely defined than objectives and concentrate on understanding and applying the latter. It may be helpful to set overall campaign goals but, by and large, these will not be measurable. Indeed, many statements that are described as objectives in public relations proposals and programmes are no more than vague goals. Typical examples are 'to raise awareness of...' or 'to position as...'. Such a goal may possibly be achievable in some loose way, but is certainly not measurable unless quantifiable elements are added. Purists might even argue that if an objective is not measurable then it is not achievable, as the fact of its achievement cannot be identified. Frequently, public relations – quite appropriately – sets broad outcomes such as raising awareness but it is unhelpful (indeed incorrect) to describe these as objectives, although they are almost universally so described.

This is a key point. Virtually every public relations plan or proposal has stated objectives that are expressed in these vague terms. This reflects not so much lazy thinking on behalf of the practitioners involved, but rather (as we will see) the peculiar challenges of objective setting in large swathes of public relations activity. Simply stated, but more difficult to implement, public relations planning frequently requires the statement of broad aims and goals underpinned with more specific – and necessarily, therefore, limited – objectives.

Note that this interpretation of the relationship between goals/aims and objectives is not universally accepted. American planning commentator Ronald Smith (2002: 69) points out that in public relations and marketing contexts, goals are indeed couched in general terms and objectives are specific. However, some other business disciplines ‘either reverse the meanings of the terms or use them interchangeably’. This is not the first time – nor will it be the last – that codifying and developing the practice of public relations is bedevilled by terminology rather than true content.

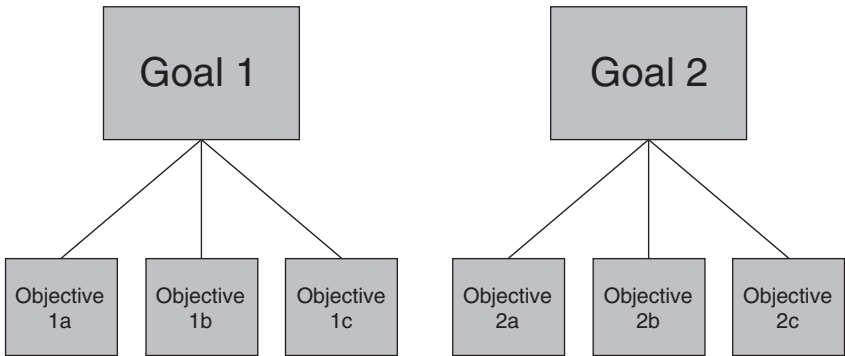
So, unhelpfully, in actual practice these terms (goals and objectives) are used differently by different people. Public relations practitioners need to decide on their preferred definition and then stick to it. We commend the use of the terms as outlined by Smith (2002: 69–72) as follows and this is the approach used here:

A **goal** is a statement rooted in the organization’s mission or vision. Using everyday language, a goal acknowledges the issue and sketches out how the organization hopes to see it settled. A goal is stated in general terms and lacks measure; these will come later in the objectives.

An **objective** is a statement emerging from the organization’s goals. It is a clear and measurable statement, written to point the way forward toward particular levels of awareness, acceptance or action. Objectives often are established by communication managers responding to broader organizational goals. Like goals, objectives deal with intended outcomes rather than procedures for reaching them. A single goal may be the basis for several objectives.

This is nothing new. Indeed, Grunig and Hunt (1984) outlined this distinction between goals and objectives while also highlighting the relationship between them. This is demonstrated in Figure 8.2.

In much the same way that the term objective is frequently used without too much care, so there tends to be confusion with the associated (but not overlapping) concepts of strategy and tactics. While the objective is the end-point that the programme, campaign or activity is attempting to reach, the



Goals are broad and abstract and cannot be tested directly.

Objectives are derived from goals. They are specific and measurable.  
Meeting an objective contributes to attaining a goal.

**Figure 8.2** *Goals and Objectives*

strategy is the overall approach to be used in pursuance of reaching that end-point: not to be confused with tactics, the particular set of actions required in order to implement the strategy.

So, if an individual desires to travel from point A (Newtown) to point B (Smithsville) then the objective is patently to reach Smithsville, probably by a specified time. This may well be in support of a broader goal, perhaps to appreciate a part of the country previously unknown to the traveller. The choices of strategy are to travel by car, train, aeroplane, bus etc. The tactics would depend on the strategy chosen: in the case of travelling by car, they could be a set of driving directions. Note that tactics are relatively easy to change, but this is not the case with a strategy. So, while the taking of a wrong turning can normally be corrected fairly quickly, abandoning a car journey in favour of going by rail can be done but is likely to be disruptive and take some time to implement.

## MANAGEMENT BY OBJECTIVES (MBO)

In a general business context, the term objective is most commonly associated with the concept of management by objectives (MBO). Indeed, this is

nothing more than common sense in public relations where we have already established that objectives play a key role before, during and after the implementation of a communications programme, and we have established that public relations is a management process.

This reinforces the central role that objectives can, and frequently do, play in modern management thinking. As marketing guru Philip Kotler (2000: 79–80) explains, while most business units pursue a range of objectives, for an MBO system to work, the business unit's various objectives must meet four criteria:

- First, objectives must be arranged *hierarchically*, from the least to the most important. By proceeding this way, the business can move from broad objectives to specific objectives for specific departments and individuals.
- Second, objectives must be stated *quantitatively* whenever possible.
- Third, goals [ie objectives] should be *realistic*. They should arise from an analysis of a business unit's opportunities and strengths, not from wishful thinking.
- Finally, the company's objectives must be *consistent* [with each other]. It is not possible to maximize both sales and profits simultaneously.

These exhortations will be echoed in much of the discussion of public relations objectives outlined below. For instance, a hierarchy of objectives implies the linking of public relations objectives, directly or indirectly, with organizational objectives. Taking another example, the encouragement for objectives to be quantified is a mantra oft repeated in a public relations context. In terms of being realistic, public relations objectives need to be communications objectives. Finally, realism also points towards being realistic about the effects sought. Public relations practitioners too often fall into the trap of promising/assuming over-optimistic results from their efforts. This may breed euphoria in the short term, but certainly disappointment and disillusionment follow in the medium to long term.

A more careful review of classic MBO thinking also throws up clear parallels with public relations evaluation when undertaken in a formative rather than summative guise. This parallel also illustrates the contention that public relations thinking is continually hampered by the need to reinvent the wheel: quicker and more effective progress could easily be made if practitioners had the confidence and good sense to borrow and adapt ideas that

have been tried and tested in related fields of endeavour (note that the phrase Management by Objectives has been in use for nearly half a century).

'The underlying basis of a system of MBO' is described by Mullins (2002) as:

- the setting of objectives and targets;
- participation by individual managers in agreeing unit objectives and criteria of performance; and
- the continual review and appraisal of results.

This introduces a number of ideas which are directly applicable to objective setting in a public relations context and will be echoed in the discussion of objective setting below. The use of the term 'targets' alongside 'objectives' is an indication of how objectives can be made measurable without a 'near miss' condemning the programme to failure. Performance criteria firmly imply that thinking about how the success of the programme is to be measured needs to take place as soon as planning starts (not when implementation has been completed). Finally, 'continual approval and appraisal' points to a dual formative and summative approach to the evaluation of public relations activities.

Translating this thinking to PR programme management, we have another plea to concentrate on the impact of what is being undertaken rather than being sidetracked into concentrating solely on the process of the programme. As discussed below, process objectives can be useful but need to be treated with caution. They can easily result in the misplaced approach to evaluation represented by the substitution game.

## **HIERARCHY OF OBJECTIVES**

Looking at this issue from a mainstream public relations perspective, Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000: 375–76) integrate the discussion of management by objectives, goals/objectives and a hierarchy of objectives:

As now applied, MBO operates at two levels of outcomes: goals and objectives. Goals are summative statements that spell out the overall outcomes of a program. ... Goals establish what will be accomplished if the objectives set for each of the publics are achieved.

Objectives represent the specific knowledge, opinion and behavioural outcomes to be achieved for each well-defined target public, what some call 'key

results'. The outcome criteria take the form of measurable program effects to be achieved by specified dates.

In fact most authorities would argue that there is no way to evaluate public relations activity *except* by comparing programme outcome with the objectives set for the programme. For example, Wilcox *et al* (2000: 192) state quite baldly: 'Before any public relations program can be properly evaluated, it is important to have a clearly established set of measurable objectives.'

They then make four general points which approach some key principles associated with public relations evaluation, including an appreciation that the nature of the objectives set is a key factor in the planning and evaluation of the campaign required to achieve them:

- Agreement on the criteria that will be used to assess the attainment (or otherwise) of the objectives set is a prerequisite.
- The end of the programme is not the time to start determining how that programme is to be evaluated; it is the beginning.
- If an objective is 'informational', evaluation involves assessing how successfully information was communicated but this says nothing about changes to attitudes and behaviour.
- If an objective is 'motivational' (which is more difficult to achieve) then it is important to demonstrate that public relations activity caused the effect and 'before and after' research might be required in order to quantify the percentage of change achieved.

This starts to indicate what Smith (2002: 74) describes as 'an ordered hierarchy' of communications objectives. They grow out of 'a logical progression through three stages of persuasion: awareness, acceptance and action'. The word hierarchy is used to indicate that higher-level objectives can only be achieved once objectives below them in the hierarchy have been achieved. For example, people will not buy your new product before they have first been made aware of it and secondly are positively disposed towards it.

Don Stacks (2002: 29) is another authority who confirms that there is a 'sequencing' of public relations objectives: from informational [or awareness/knowledge], through motivational to behavioural objectives:

Informational objectives establish what knowledge should be known or is needed by the publics the campaign or program is intended for. ... Motivational objectives test whether or not the information is having an effect and whether tactical strategies are having an impact on future behaviour. Furthermore the relationship

between informational and motivational objectives is interactive; that is, if motivational objectives are not being met, informational objectives can be changed to overcome identified blockages. The behavioural objectives are often what 'count', and they in the end define the success or failure of a campaign.

While instinctively we might appreciate that awareness/knowledge objectives are the most common and easiest public relations objectives to achieve, they can be relatively difficult to measure. Survey research is often required but frequently practitioners seek to infer (rather than prove) effectiveness by concentrating on measuring media coverage. However, efficient delivery of the message does not prove anything about changes in awareness and exposure to messages does not necessarily mean increased awareness.

Awareness objectives, and even motivational objectives, can be regarded as – and may on occasion overtly be – process objectives in pursuance of behavioural objectives. If so, the standard health warning associated with the substitution game applies. As Don Stacks points out above, behaviour is frequently the ultimate aim. However, it is not necessarily the province of public relations/communications. Product sales might reasonably be regarded as a marketing/sales objective but supported by public relations/communications objectives which concern themselves with raising awareness of the product and even motivating prospects to buy.

Behavioural objectives tend to be more difficult to achieve but ironically they are frequently easier (than awareness and motivational objectives) to measure. The former are based on clearly measurable results that can be quantified and observed directly, rather than implied (eg product sales or attendance at an event).

In short, behaviour is easier to observe than cognitive effects. However, it is more difficult to prompt. Below are examples of public relations objectives for three levels of outcomes:

- **Knowledge/awareness outcome:** within six months, to increase by 20 percentage points the number of UK homeowners who are aware that smoke detectors halve the chance of death or serious injury in a house fire.
- **Motivational/predisposition outcome:** to ensure that over the next 12 months at least 75 per cent of local residents (living in the Borough of Eastleigh) have a positive attitude towards the airport.
- **Behavioural outcome:** to increase the percentage of employees who donate to the company's chosen roster of charities through 'pay as you earn' from 13 per cent to 25 per cent by the end of the financial year.

## SPECIFYING OBJECTIVES

Perhaps the most common acronym to be applied to objectives is SMART. Even here, authorities differ in their interpretation (with at least one extending it to SMARRTT):

- **Specific** because objectives should be clear, precise and give direction about what is to be achieved.
- **Measurable** because a quantified measurement statement (eg a percentage or absolute amount to be achieved) enables precise evaluation of the campaign.
- **Achievable** because the resources must be available to achieve the objectives set.
- **Realistic** because – even with adequate resources – the objectives should be capable of being met.
- **Relevant** because objectives should be appropriate for the task at hand.
- **Targeted** because all objectives should be related to the target audiences that are being addressed (and with more than one target audience there needs to be separate objectives for each).
- **Timed** because a clear time-frame indicating when objectives are expected to be achieved enables the campaign to be monitored and evaluation to be undertaken.

The public relations department of one major FMCG retailer has 'Are your objectives SMART?' plastered across the walls of its (substantial) public relations department, and no doubt the same could be said of many other high-profile organizations. But, in spite of these exhortations, it is common practice to lapse back into the comfort of high-minded, impressive-sounding but ultimately unedifying objectives. For example, Ridgway (1996: 6–7), when discussing media relations programmes, makes a good if standard start when she states:

If an objective is to be measured effectively it needs to be defined clearly. There is no point in stating that the objective is 'to increase awareness' or 'to change attitude'. This is not enough. You must include the answers to the questions 'of what' and 'by whom?' which will lead you into defining target audiences.

Unfortunately she immediately contradicts her own advice when suggesting the objectives for the example of a media relations programme for a small company producing torches:

- i. To increase awareness of the more recent products
- ii. To show that these products are up to date and invaluable to the modern man or woman
- iii. To give the company a more go-ahead image, while retaining the dependable aspect.

In contrast, marketing academic/consultant Paul Smith (1998: 43) provides examples of communications objectives which encompass some of the SMART principles, even if they might not all be wholly achievable through the use of public relations alone:

- To increase awareness from 35 per cent to 50 per cent within eight weeks of the campaign launch among 25–45-year-old ABC1 women.
- To position the service as the friendliest on the market within a 12-month period among 70 per cent of heavy chocolate users.
- To reposition Guinness from an old, unfashionable, older man's drink to a fashionable younger person's drink over two years among all 25–45-year-old male drinkers.
- To maintain brand x as the preferred brand (or number one brand) of photocopiers among at least 50 per cent of current UK buyers in companies with 1,000+ employees.
- To include Bulgarian wines in the repertoire of possible wine purchases among 20 per cent of ABC1 wine buyers within 12 months.
- To support the launch of a new shop by generating 50 per cent awareness in the immediate community one week before the launch.
- To announce a sale and create 70 per cent awareness one day before the sale starts.

Broom and Dozier (1990: 44) go into further detail when describing the anatomy of an objective. They discuss the nature of the intended change, the target public, the outcome to be achieved, amount of change desired and a target date for achieving the outcome:

1. *Begin with 'to' followed by a verb describing the direction to the intended outcome.* There are three possibilities: 'to increase', 'to decrease,' and 'to maintain'.
2. *Specify the outcome to be achieved.* Again three possible outcomes: knowledge, predisposition or behaviour. Each objective should spell out a single, specific outcome.
3. *State the magnitude of change or level to be maintained in measurable terms.* The watchwords are quantifiable and realistic. A combination of judgement based on experience, and benchmark data is used to set outcome levels.
4. *Set the target date for when the outcome is to be achieved.* Typically, outcomes must be achieved in order with one necessarily before another.

As with SMART objectives, this guidance is frequently an ideal to be aspired to rather than anything that can be followed to the letter. Frequently, there may be major environmental influences (recession) and/or other communications efforts (failed sales promotion) that will result in a professional public relations campaign failing to (help) achieve the effects sought.

Finally, the Institute for PR ([www.instituteforpr.com](http://www.instituteforpr.com)) echoes Broom and Dozier's recommendations for an objective while focusing on the key aspect (but most frequently ignored) of SMART, measurability:

1. Specify a desired outcome (increase awareness, improve relationships, build preference, adopt an attitude, generate sales leads, etc).
2. Directly specify one or several target audiences.
3. Be measurable, both conceptually and practically.
4. Refer to 'ends', not 'means'. If your objectives outline a means by which to do something (often prefaced by the words 'leverage' or 'use'), you have a strategy, not an objective.
5. Include a time-frame in which the objective is to be achieved, for example by 1 July.

Note that this advice could be criticized for implying that one objective can encompass more than one public. Our advice is that PR planners should indeed set separate objectives for each public, but it may often be the case that different publics happen to be given similar (or the same) objectives.

## THE NATURE OF OBJECTIVES

Nonetheless, on some occasions, the achievement of public relations objectives is simple to assess. Frequently, this is when public relations is not operating in a marketing context. A campaign to amend a piece of legislation will either succeed or fail and establishing this success or failure will be a trivial matter. Similarly, a company's share price will either reach a target level or it will not and the evidence will be in the public domain.

Frequently, meeting public relations objectives is not a simple pass/fail issue. The nature of the objectives themselves has a major effect on the type of the public relations campaign required, what needs to be achieved and therefore how the campaign is to be evaluated:

- The nature of public relations objectives varies according to virtually every conceivable criterion.
- The nature of the objective will determine the techniques required to evaluate the programme concerned.
- Behavioural objectives are more difficult to achieve than objectives which seek to achieve simpler effects.

Chris Fill (2002: 313) confirms that there are differing opinions as to what communications seeks to achieve and the resulting complexity means that many managers fail to set promotional objectives at all. When they do, 'they are inappropriate, inadequate or merely restate the marketing objectives'. Setting sales-related promotional objectives, for example, fails to accept the contribution of other elements of the marketing mix: 'Two distinct schools of thought emerge, those that advocate sales-related measures as the main factors and those that advocate communication-related measures as the main orientation.'

There are a number of problems with what Fill describes as the 'sales school', the view that: 'the only meaningful measure of the effectiveness of the promotional spend is in the sales results'. These include:

1. Sales result from a variety of influences which can be marketing related or even the wider social, political or technological environment.
2. Promotional effort may influence the eventual purchasing decision but this can take some time to become apparent.

3. Sales objectives do little to assist in the development of the communications programme, that is, they do not have a formative role.

However, there is an argument that, at least on occasions, sales-oriented objectives are appropriate. This is when direct response is sought from a targeted message through clearly identified channels. Frequently retail organizations operating in mature markets can use sales response to evaluate public relations effort. Such organizations often use loyalty cards and the customer database that they represent can be powerful in trying to model and evaluate customer response to communications efforts.

Sales, of course, are not the only goal and the aim of the communications campaign is to enhance the image or reputation of an organization or product. A number of models have been developed to aid our understanding of the processes involved. The challenge now is to link communications objectives to sales objectives in such a way that they are mutually consistent yet are able to be measured while recognizing that communications by itself frequently only contributes to the sales effect.

Often, the ultimate impact of a communications programme is behavioural, but cognitive effects are sought as part of the process of achieving the organization's ultimate objectives. For instance, UK marketing professor Peter Doyle (2002: 274) argues that public relations can be highly effective and that PR campaigns frequently address changes in awareness and attitudes but 'it is very difficult to disentangle the effects of PR from the variety of other factors affecting business performance'.

For example, adopters on new products are described by Philip Kotler (2000: 355) as moving through five stages:

1. *Awareness*: The consumer becomes aware of the innovation but lacks information about it.
2. *Interest*: The consumer is stimulated to seek information about the innovation.
3. *Evaluation*: The consumer considers whether to try the innovation.
4. *Trial*: The consumer tries the innovation to improve his or her estimate of its value.
5. *Adoption*: The consumer decides to make full and regular use of the innovation.

Imagine that a distinctive new toothpaste is launched (perhaps it incorporates baking soda to deliver a fresh taste and feel). A consumer is made aware of the innovation through a television advertising campaign, is stimulated to seek more information, and does so through editorial coverage in a consumer magazine (achieved as part of the PR effort). Suitably impressed, the consumer makes a regular visit to the local supermarket and notices a sales promotion for the toothpaste (half-price trial offer) which prompts purchase.

The toothpaste would probably not have been purchased if the PR campaign had not got the right coverage in the right media. But, sales objectives could not have been set for the PR effort as it was the sales promotion that 'closed the sale' (and the sales promotion agency would quickly claim the credit). So frequently, public relations is essential to the process but not the only factor in achieving the marketing/corporate objective. So objective setting in public relations is frequently problematical, and consequently so is evaluation of public relations activity. At its simplest, evaluation is no more than establishing whether the objectives set have been achieved.

It is tempting to throw up our hands in horror and take the despairing perspective that could be described as the 'curse of public relations': that any objective which is achievable through public relations alone is not worth measuring, and that any objective worth measuring is not achievable through PR (alone). This is, indeed, most applicable when public relations operates in a marketing support role.

The purpose of a marketing communications campaign may be to move a significant number of prospects from one set to the next. However, public relations tends to be effective at the early stages of the process (raising awareness, for example) while other elements of the communications mix will be more effective at the end of the process. Thus, it is the latter that 'close the sale' and maybe receive the plaudits, but all their efforts would have been in vain if the PR campaign hadn't successfully raised awareness of our new product so that it made it on to the short list. So, public relations does not work in isolation and its effects tend to be cognitive: towards the beginning of the adoption process rather than behavioural towards the end.

If public relations evaluation is intimately connected with objective setting, then the evaluative process must take into account the varying nature of those objectives. Frequently, those objectives whose achievement is completely within the control of public relations – and therefore relatively simple to evaluate – are at best process objectives only (eg obtaining media coverage).

The contribution of public relations to the attainment of true impact objectives may well be crucial, but nonetheless often partial and early in the process. Frequently, public relations makes the ground more fertile for complementary communications activities. Under these circumstances, disentangling the public relations contribution is complex and a pure 'evaluation by objectives' approach becomes inappropriate.

## **PROCESS OBJECTIVES**

In addition to a more realistic approach to objective setting, there is a useful concept to which we have alluded but not yet explained which can help guide us through the objective-setting maze. This is the concept of process objectives: on the surface an oxymoron, as an objective is an end-point and process revolves around reaching that end-point.

US writers Crabble and Vibbert (1986: 391-92) articulate a general theme when listing Evaluation by Objectives as the last of six evaluation 'standards'; they describe it as an evaluative system that is based on management by objectives. This links the discussion back to both the pivotal role that objectives play in public relations evaluation, and the concept of MBO. 'When public relations is managed by a system of objectives, the measurement of those efforts is incorporated into the system.'

There are two key aspects to management by objectives in public relations: objectives are derived mutually, between public relations manager and supervisor; and these objectives set a series of intermediate goals that define what should be done and when. When public relations projects, programs, or problems are managed 'by objectives', those objectives are the result of consultation between public relations manager and supervisor.

This introduces the concept of process objectives (or targets): a very useful concept for public relations where the process is frequently complex and the ultimate impact is a result of range of influences of which public relations is one, but only one. Process objectives are best illustrated by our fictitious traveller from Newtown to Smithville. Having left Newtown and made substantial progress towards Smithville, the traveller comes across a milestone indicating that Smithville is now only 10 miles away. This milestone is like a process objective: it does not guarantee that the traveller will ever reach Smithville. However, it does indicate that progress is being made in

the right direction and that it is likely that by keeping on the chosen road, the desired destination will be reached (objective achieved).

So, it is possible that a combination of broad goals supported by a number of process objectives can approximate to ideal objectives. This is when the complexity of the communications process means that truly SMART public relations objectives cannot be set. Frequently, in public relations, SMART objectives are an ideal to be aimed for rather than anything that can be fully achieved.

However, there is a concomitant danger: too much emphasis on the process can prompt a mindset where communications activity is undertaken for its own sake rather than to achieve identifiable effects. So, process objectives run the risk of the substitution game. But if this risk is appreciated, they can become useful elements (but no more) of the evaluator's toolbox as they relate to milestones in the communication effort (but not the destination), to the reaching of which public relations has made a major contribution, even if other elements of the programme help us continue on to our final destination.

To reiterate this point, this discussion of objectives finishes with the case for the prosecution with regard to process objectives from the Institute for PR ([www.instituteforpr.com](http://www.instituteforpr.com)):

In general, process goals, such as 'get publicity', 'launch a product' or 'create a brochure', make poor objectives. They do not relate to broader organizational goals and are not measurable in any specific, concrete, or truly meaningful manner. ('I did it'/'I didn't do it' does not count as measurable.) A useful way to replace these 'process' objectives is to ask yourself, 'what is the purpose of (insert objective)'. The answer to this question is likely to move you closer to a clear, actionable objective.

The role of objective setting is put into context with an evaluation questionnaire for a 'sales' seminar/workshop. The objectives associated with the questionnaire (see Table 8.1) are eminently SMART and range from pure process (event administration) through to genuine impact (sales lead generation).

**Table 8.1 Objectives of XYZ sales seminar**

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At least 100 attendees, of whom 80% are decision-makers or key influencers.
80% of delegates felt their objectives in attending were met.
80% of delegates would attend another XYZ event.
The average overall rating of the event is over 3.5.
The average rating for how well the event is organized is over 3.5.
The average rating for the usefulness of information from interactive voting is over 3.5.
The average rating for speakers will be over 3.5.
80% of delegates who don't already receive them will request Loaded and Currant Bun.
80% of delegates wish to be invited to future XYZ events.
At least five qualified sales meetings arise directly from the event.
80% of journalists who attend use material in some form within six months of the event.

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### ***Interview***

Andrew Wallis sees the impetus for evaluation coming from the public relations function itself rather than from other parts of the organization. 'Compared to other people who may be asked to justify their activities, we try and set our own benchmarks or to look at how we can improve ourselves as a department.' One explanation is that evaluation is seen as costly and therefore is not a priority within the organization.

Indeed, Wallis sees evaluation (or at least process evaluation in the form of media evaluation) as the 'currency' that his department offers other areas within the organization. This currency is the profile of the organization generated by reactive and proactive media relations activity, complemented by qualitative feedback from influential people within the organization. This feedback is obtained from other influential people within the organization, people Wallis describes as 'marketing mavens' because other people seek their advice. 'I am seeking to understand not only the effect that the media in particular might be having in terms of reputation and therefore staff morale and other soft measures, but also gauging what the workforce thinks of your own performance in either promoting or defending the organization.'

Focusing back on to professional practice, Wallis stresses the integral role that evaluation plays in any form of planning or strategy. He says that the public relations process is not a linear one, but operates to a more advanced cyclical model. 'Consequently, there is some form of control, review and – indeed – learning. In a learning organization, that is one of the key ways you can contribute in a systems way, learning from what you do and improving it individually and on behalf of the organization as a whole.'

Keeping the learning theme, Wallis's advice to the junior practitioner is to take copies of anything they do that succeeds. 'Look at things that have worked and keep in your mind what has brought success because that is what you will want to replicate in the future. Conversely, you will want to learn from what has caused you, or your organization, grief and learn how to deal with that. Then there is learning from others. Not only collecting your own work, but identifying how others do things. And then there is the more systematic, research-based, approach of looking at case studies.'

Wallis devotes effort to monitoring broadcast and media coverage but appreciates it examines output with no real link to outcome. Again this comes down to organizational constraints and cost. 'Any systematic approach is going to cost so it goes on the back burner. Performing best practice: doing an audit, seeing how things are done, and improving on it normally involves cost. And in my experience, the reaction is why don't we spend the money doing some PR rather than learning. Ironically, the organization tends to put pressure on not improving.'

Wallis regards process evaluation as tactical: 'those things that you can change here and now, switching effort between one activity that isn't working and another that is.' While impact evaluation is difficult to disaggregate and expensive, process evaluation related to a specific campaign is a very 'here and now' activity. Cost is not such an issue with the latter, if only because its immediacy tends to categorize it as a campaign expense rather than an evaluation cost.

While Wallis cautions against 'expensive media evaluation dressed up as PR evaluation', he is strongly in favour of employing people with an understanding of research in public relations. 'Not everybody has to be an expert, but there is certainly a place for somebody with an understanding and appreciation of research and scientific principles.'

*Andrew Wallis is head of press and PR for Thomas Cook UK & Ireland.*

## Questionnaire responses

### *Evaluation questionnaire for industry leaders*

#### **Q: What other tips and advice on evaluation do you have for practitioners?**

You have to start doing it, do it and do it again. As you become accustomed to doing it, it becomes a part of your everyday work. Of course, education and training help. **Dejan Verčič**

It is worth doing and as you see the benefits of the results you will be encouraged to do more. **Alison Clarke**

Take the time to do it. Just because it is a process and can be tedious, don't undervalue its effect and how it ensures credibility and understanding of the work we do. It adds to our professionalism and our reputation as an industry. **Fran Hagon**

Don't use a sledgehammer to crack a nut – focus on what is important to the client and only evaluate in this area. Make the output of the evaluation process something that can also fuel the communications, marketing or sales process – rather than be a sterile report that will never be read by anyone in a position of real power. **Crispin Manners**

Package it up for clients as part of the programme – not a bolt-on. It has to be integral. **Loretta Tobin**

Textbook prescriptions, really: common sense in evaluation methods; real measures that are tangible; quantitative evaluation methods (media count: mentions, website hits, publicity, word counts, area in sq m, etc); qualitative (positive and negative opportunities to see [OTS], reading pattern studies, advertising value equivalents, etc); PR events are evaluated on the basis of attendance figures, the calibre of people and their level of participation (if it's interactive), general level of interest and feedback. **Ray Mawerera**

Step up and get at least a little bit mathematical. Use numbers in your conversation. Don't be embarrassed by a lack of information – scavenge whatever is available and use it to really counsel your clients. You can

create benchmarks over time, over previous campaigns by others or for other clients, by researching on the internet for guidelines and so on.

**Annabelle Warren**

Set targets at the beginning of the campaign in order that the clients' expectations are realistic and agree key messages before the campaign begins to allow you to evaluate quality of coverage as opposed to simply quantity. There's no point in setting goals and messages retrospectively. **Laurna O'Donnell**

Do it! Our industry will never lose its fluff and bubble image if we don't, it needs to be real and it needs to be hard core. But be creative and don't be afraid to take responsibility for your actions – it doesn't have to be expensive or time consuming. **Clara Zawawi**

Always present it to the client as a valuable investment, but ensure skilled, ethical and seasoned research practitioners are engaged. **Tom O'Donoghue**

Get it into the DNA. You can't separate it from the full analysis/planning/execution/measurement cycle. Make sure that every campaign has measurement built into it: don't let it go ahead without this, even if the degree of measurement is limited. **Mike Copland**

Evaluation of individual campaigns is important but the wider question must always be: Where are we overall? What do the public think about us? And that comes from attitude research. **Richard Offer**

Evaluation does not have to be carried out at the end of a campaign, it can be actively carried out through the planning and organizing stages of a campaign, during the campaign and post the campaign. On completion of a public relations campaign evaluation, the information obtained should be used when implementing other campaigns. It is vital to learn from experiences. **Adam Connolly**

# Future developments

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Progress in solving the ‘problem’ of evaluation has been, at best, steady. Some would say that James Grunig’s *cri de coeur* remains as valid today as when it was first issued two decades ago (see Chapter 3). The same people would be predicting the demise of the PR consultancy business with Quentin Bell’s self-imposed deadline for clients to ‘insist’ on evaluation looming on the horizon.

However, they are beginning to become isolated pockets of resistance rather than representatives of the mainstream. Slowly – yes – but also surely, public relations practitioners are getting to grips with evaluation and this chapter reports recent studies to support this assertion. This is not happening in isolation. It forms part of a broad effort to make public relations a professional and strategic discipline, one that can demonstrate, rather than simply claim, its business benefits.

This guarded optimism comes with a health warning. There will never be a time when the problems associated with evaluation of public relations activity will be completely solved. And this is in the nature of the beast. It is both the joy and the curse of public relations that it is a broad church: a wide variety of practitioners, providing a wide range of services to a wide variety of organizations. Public relations is also a complex discipline operating in a range of contexts. So, there is no holy grail, no magic bullet nor any simple solution. But there is gradual progress achieved on the back of a more sophisticated understanding of the complexities associated with public relations practice in general, and therefore its measurement and evaluation in particular.

## MEASURING ONLINE PUBLIC RELATIONS

The monitoring of online public relations is one of the 'black holes' in the evaluation lexicon. Because many practitioners were born well before the digital era, indeed started their professional careers before the digital era, they are not at ease with the internet environment. They monitor online coverage as if it were print media. Mark Prensky talks of a 'chasm between a younger generation of "digital natives" who have not known a world without computer games, and an older generation of "digital immigrants" forced to adapt to rapid changes in digital technology' (Prensky, 2002, cited in Cameron and Carroll, 2004). Readers will note the questionnaire responses by industry leaders on measurement of online media (see Chapter 7), such as: 'With great difficulty', 'Same way we evaluate print media - by gathering the clips, conducting content analysis, and logging them along with other media' and 'Key message delivery, hits to sites'.

Others have developed specialist services in this field with web crawlers that track down messages and issues using key-word searches. There are also free services from the major search engines, especially Google, and specialists like [moreover.com](http://moreover.com). In areas of strong debate such as tobacco policy, advocacy groups have established daily news services. An example is [tobacco.org](http://tobacco.org), which has daily news scans from worldwide media which are presented in categories and supported by archives. It has proved very important in linking anti-smoking and public health advocacy groups around the world, but ironically provides a free service to tobacco manufacturers who can monitor their competitors and opponents.

A more difficult challenge is monitoring newsgroups and chat rooms. These can form and re-form very quickly. The evaluation of their credence and influence is demanding on resources and is not undertaken with the ease of daily or weekly monitoring of print or broadcast media. For a more specialized view on this topic, David Phillips (2001) *Online Public Relations*, published by Kogan Page, gives a complete overview.

There are key points from Phillips (2001: 85) about the reach of a website that indicate factors for DIY evaluation. They include:

- reference in newsgroups;
- hyperlinks to the site;
- ranking with search engines;
- online media awareness of the site;
- speed by which information is carried across the internet.

These factors will help construct a matrix view of both a corporate website (news group references, hyperlinks, search engine ranking) and message transmission/conflict messages (newsgroup reference, online media awareness and speed of transmission). Because the internet is constantly expanding, it is entirely possible to have messages lost in the clutter of sites and constantly changing search engine rankings. By monitoring the key points outlined by Phillips, online public relations activity can be tested for message reception on a daily basis. Only by building in response mechanisms can processing or acceptance be judged.

Phillips (2001: 77) also notes the internet search categories that media monitoring agencies use 'heavyweight search robots' to check daily. These are: news sites and online e-zines, newsgroups and bulletin boards, and 'meta-search engines'. This final tool checks newly indexed, relevant content which has been added to the major search engines, which take up to six weeks to re-index their catalogues.

For consumer public relations, there are tracking tools that can be used. Professional Public Relations in Australia has one that can link internet enquiries directly to public relations activity. Director Clara Zawawi explains: 'We have a proprietary tool that allows us to monitor not only site activity but also where our hits come from and leave to go to. For example, if an Australian Tourism Commission story runs online in the *Auckland Herald* in New Zealand, we can track how many people jump from the *Herald* to the ATC site and then where they go to next, such as an airline site or travel agency site.' This enables the consultancy to measure the distribution and acceptance of messages and demonstrate a return on investment (ROI) to its clients.

Another challenge in online public relations, especially in the corporate sector, is the rogue site, which has been established with 'the aim of damaging organizations' (Phillips 2001: 203–05). These sites can be easily found, yet are not always accountable in terms of their accuracy, journalistic standards or editorial management. 'They have the potential to reach a mass international audience, which can be fascinated, entertained or easily led into believing half-truths as fact or ranting as a legitimate concern... these sites can address legitimate concerns, highlight real failings or expose shortcomings that need redress.'

Almost all major world brands and transnational corporations have rogue sites monitoring and commenting on their activities. One of the best-known sites is McSpotlight, which was set up to criticize the fast-food company McDonald's. It became the subject of long-running litigation in the United Kingdom, ultimately with a finding against the two activists that operated it.

However, this very large site had been mirrored into many countries and continues to operate.

By monitoring the online environment, public relations practitioners can track activist efforts. Once a rogue site is spotted, they need to evaluate its importance and decide how to respond online and offline. One problem they often face is that the critics are not identified or contactable. Negotiation and face-to-face discussion are therefore not possible in these circumstances. Among the decisions to consider are whether to respond using the corporate website and whether to take the company's case to mainstream media and stakeholders. A commonly used strategy is to include the rogue site's hyperlink on the corporate website as this is considered to demonstrate transparency.

## **EVALUATING COMMUNICATIONS EFFECTIVENESS IN A CRISIS**

The terrible events of the 11 September attacks in New York and Washington brought the effectiveness of crisis communication into sharp focus. Many organizations whose headquarters were obliterated or severely affected by the attacks in lower Manhattan completely lost their ability to communicate externally. They lost key staff, crisis plan files, internet sites and all telecommunication capacity as well as the buildings from which they operated.

This terrible example of a terrorist attack has had two outcomes. Corporations are now organizing crisis plans on a dispersed model which is not knocked out by a single act, and they are placing more emphasis on monitoring and measuring their performance in crisis situations.

The likelihood of another 11 September may be considered to be on the outer edge of probability, but there are many other crisis situations that can be considered. These range from an incident at a factory that results in injury or environmental damage, through product recall, to hostile takeover, to a major conflict with government or legal processes. This list can be developed in numerous directions of threat, which should be considered by corporate communications managers.

James Grunig comments that: 'communication with publics before decisions are made is most effective in resolving issues and crises because it helps managers to make decisions that are less likely to produce consequences that publics make into issues and crises' (Grunig cited in Paine, 2002). This could be described colloquially as planning and consultation helps avoid the 'law of unintended consequences'.

Grunig proposes four principles of crisis communication:

- *The Relationship Principle:* An organization can withstand crises if it has well-established relationships with key stakeholders.
- *The Accountability Principle:* An organization should accept responsibility for a crisis even if it was not its fault. (For example, recall a product which has been threatened or tainted by an extortionist.)
- *The Disclosure Principle:* In a crisis, an organization should disclose all it knows about a crisis or problem. If it does not have immediate answers, it must promise full disclosure once it has additional information.
- *The Symmetrical Communication Principle:* In a crisis, the public interest should be considered as equal in importance to the organization's interest.

To measure its performance in a potential crisis and against these principles, the organization needs to prepare itself by monitoring current issues in the media being discussed by employees, customers and stakeholders. The media scanning should also include internet chat rooms and news rooms as well as conventional print and broadcast media.

Using a variation of the Lindenmann's three-step Yardstick (see Chapter 5), Paine (2002) proposes three elements to measuring effectiveness:

1. Measuring Outputs and process effectiveness: Constant monitoring of media to determine if key messages are being communicated and to whom.
2. Measuring Impact: Determining if messages are having the desired effect, if they are being believed and whether they are swaying public opinion.
3. Measuring Outcomes: Has the crisis impacted on reputation, sales, employee turnover, shareholder confidence and other factors?

'Which type of measurement you select should be driven by your internal needs for better decision making tools' is the pragmatic advice given by Paine (2002: 2). In an analysis of situations that includes organizations such as IBM, Nabisco, HCA Healthcare, Levi Strauss and Kodak, Paine comments that 'a well managed crisis gets all the bad news over with up front by aggressively dealing with a problem. A poorly handled one can drag one for months'. By 'aggressively dealing', Paine means that the response is prompt, accurate and clearly communicated.

Using case studies cited by Paine, it is possible to apply three of Grunig's four principles of crisis communication with relative ease. It is more difficult, and probably inherently impossible, to apply the Symmetrical Communication principle to a crisis.

*Relationship* – Levi Strauss, famed for its branded jeans, hit a downturn and chose to close 11 plants and lay off nearly 6,400 workers. Paine says that the jeans-maker took a 'novel approach, simultaneously announcing grants to all the communities affected by the layoffs. As a result, media coverage spiked in the first week and steadily decreased after that.' Putting aside the description of best practice in stakeholder relations – simultaneous communication – as 'a novel approach', Levi Strauss' strategy minimized media comment in less than a month and allowed it to continue its negotiations and repair community relationships with less pressure than if it had taken a 'drip, drip' communication approach.

*Accountability* – The Odwalla natural juice organization was found to have sold batches of apple juice that caused illness and, in one tragic outcome, led to the death of a child. Paine argues that by 'owning' the problem and not blaming others, Odwalla was able to contain the crisis to a three-week period and avoid lawsuits. Media analysis showed an early peak in coverage that tapered away to almost nothing over 21 days.

*Disclosure* – The reverse case to Levi Strauss came when Kodak was stricken by leaks over future strategy and suffered a prolonged crisis played out in the media, as well as among other stakeholders. Paine (2002: 5) says Kodak 'suffered a series of leaks about potential layoffs, eventually announced layoffs, and then had to announce even more layoffs because the cuts hadn't been deep enough'. Again, she says, 'the result was many more weeks of bad news'. It could be argued that if Kodak had followed Levi Strauss's open and fulsome announcement, it could have built relationships that helped it manage the change. However, the outcomes of its strategy were tracked by media analysis as three spikes of negative coverage over a three-month period.

*Symmetrical Communication* – This is a new usage by Grunig of his most debated descriptor of public relations practice. In essence, it is the sum total of relationships, accountability and disclosure set into a public safety scenario. The most famous of all product recalls, Johnson & Johnson's prompt and complete removal of the Tylenol branded analgesic from sale after an extortionist tainted the product, is the closest example. But this is not the same as Grunig's normal description of symmetrical communication. In the Tylenol case, J&J's action was prompted by an ethical and commercial decision to protect consumers and save the reputation of the company and the

product. The fact that Tylenol remains a respected and popular product in North America is a tribute to that decision. It is not, however, an equally balanced, continuous dialogue between an organization and its publics as enunciated by Grunig for two decades or more.

After the crisis is over, evaluation can assist measurement of position and deliver lessons for future strategy and crisis communication. Paine suggests that questions to consider could include: 'Did consumers change their behaviour, did employees leave at a higher than normal rate? Did the stock drop?' To which could be added qualitative and quantitative judgements on the attitudes of regulators, the media, commercial partners and employees and their families.

Crisis communication is a major subject by itself but media analysis and other measurements of attitude and perception play an important role in monitoring the evolution and maturity of a crisis. They advise strategies to manage and respond. However, the principles espoused by Grunig of relationship, accountability and disclosure are the bedrock on which those strategies should be based.

## ASSESSING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS AND PUBLICS

This discussion of evaluating public relations activities in the context of crisis communications has much broader applicability. There is a consensus beginning to emerge that the ultimate goal of public relations is to build and enhance relationships between organizations and their key stakeholders. Walter Lindenmann links this emerging consensus with the developing standard view of public relations activities producing outputs, out-takes and outcomes. But he drops out-takes and adds 'measuring the success or failure of **long-term relationships**' (Lindenmann in Grunig and Hon, 1999):

As important as it can be for an organization to measure PR *outputs* and *outcomes*, it is even more important for an organization to measure *relationships*. This is because for most organizations measuring *outputs* and *outcomes* can only give information about the effectiveness of a *particular or specific PR program or event that has been undertaken*. In order to answer the much broader question – 'How can PR practitioners begin to pinpoint and document for senior management the overall value of public relations to the organization as a whole?' – different tools and techniques are required.

Grunig and Hon (1999) reviewed research that shows PR contributes value to an organization when its communications programmes result in quality long-term relationships with strategic publics (stakeholders). They identified two types of relationships, with four characteristics.

The relationships are:

- Exchange, where one party gives benefit to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future. A party that receives benefit incurs an obligation or debt to return the favour. Exchange is the essence of marketing relationships between organizations and customers. But, Grunig and Hon argue, it's not enough for a public which expects organizations to do things for the community without expecting immediate benefit.
- Communal, where parties are willing to provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other – even when they believe they might not get anything in return. 'The role of public relations is to convince management that it also needs communal relationships with publics such as employees, the community, government, media and stockholders – as well as exchange relationships with customers.' Communal relationships are important if organizations are to be socially responsible and to add value to society as well as client organizations.

## **The quality of relationships**

Grunig and Hon (1999) also nominate four outcomes that are indicators of successful interpersonal relationships but can be applied with equal success to relationships between organizations and their publics. Importance declines as we go down the list:

- Control mutuality: the degree to which the parties in a relationship are satisfied with the amount of control they have over a relationship. Some degree of power imbalance is natural, but the most stable, positive relationships exist where the parties have some degree of control. It doesn't have to be exactly 50:50. The ceding of some control is based on trust.
- Trust: the level of confidence that both parties have in each other and their willingness to open themselves to the other party. Three factors are important:
  - Integrity: An organization is seen as just and fair.

- Dependability: It will do what it says it will do.
- Competence: Has the ability to do what it says it will do.
- Commitment: the extent to which both parties believe and feel the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote.
- Satisfaction: the extent to which both parties feel favourably about each other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced. Each party believes the other is engaged in positive steps to maintain the relationship.

The suggestion is that relationships are evaluated through a questionnaire that asks a series of agree/disagree statements (using a 1–9 scale). A complete list of the relevant statements is given at [www.instituteforpr.com](http://www.instituteforpr.com) but Table 9.1 gives Walter Lindenmann's shortened list of statements used to measure relationships outcomes.

**Table 9.1 Measuring relationship outcomes**

**Control mutuality**

1. This organization and people like me are attentive to what each other says.
2. This organization believes the opinions of people like me are legitimate.
3. In dealing with people like me, this organization has a tendency to throw its weight around. (Reversed)
4. This organization really listens to what people like me have to say.
5. The management of this organization gives people like me enough say in the decision-making process.

**Trust**

1. This organization treats people like me fairly and justly.
2. Whenever this organization makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me.
3. This organization can be relied on to keep its promises.
4. I believe that this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.
5. I feel very confident about this organization's skills.
6. This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.

**Commitment**

1. I feel that this organization is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to people like me.

*Continued*

Table 9.1 continued

2. I can see that this organization wants to maintain a relationship with people like me.
3. There is a long-lasting bond between this organization and people like me.
4. Compared to other organizations, I value my relationship with this organization more.
5. I would rather work together with this organization than not.

**Satisfaction**

1. I am happy with this organization.
2. Both the organization and people like me benefit from the relationship.
3. Most people like me are happy in their interactions with this organization.
4. Generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship this organization has established with people like me.
5. Most people enjoy dealing with this organization.

**Exchange relationships**

1. Whenever this organization gives or offers something to people like me, it generally expects something in return.
2. Even though people like me have had a relationship with this organization for a long time, it still expects something in return whenever it offers us a favour.
3. This organization will compromise with people like me when it knows that it will gain something.
4. This organization takes care of people who are likely to reward the organization.

**Communal relationships**

1. This organization does not especially enjoy giving others aid. (Reversed)
  2. This organization is very concerned about the welfare of people like me.
  3. I feel that this organization takes advantage of people who are vulnerable. (Reversed)
  4. I think that this organization succeeds by stepping on other people. (Reversed)
  5. This organization helps people like me without expecting anything in return.
-

This discussion of public relations being about managing relationships has been integrated with the emergence of the three levels of PR measurement (output, out-take and outcome) in a slightly more logical manner by James Thellusson (2003: 1), former CEO of Edelman London. He retains out-takes (as well as outputs and outcomes) and simply adds a fourth 'O' to address the evaluation of relationship building.

But while the PR industry as a whole is still exploring the implications of these existing measurement frameworks, an elusive fourth question is beckoning. What really matters is: 'What effects did those actions create – on other stakeholders in the business network, on productivity of relationships, and therefore, ultimately, on total shareholder return?' This is the ROI question for PR, as it is for other marketing disciplines. I will refer to it, in the context of multi-stakeholder communications, as the 'outflow' question.

Thellusson goes on to list the four 'Os' in the context of PR measurement:

- output: volumes and quality of messages that reach defined audiences;
- out-take: what the audience understands from PR messages;
- outcome: the achievement of specific objectives;
- outflow: the establishment of a measurable relationship with stakeholders.

He also links crisis communication with relationship being 'the outcome', arguing that the value of the 'relationship asset' created by PR is a latent one that may not prove its worth until a crisis occurs that threatens the goodwill established by previous public relations activity.

Thellusson also admits that evaluating this sort of PR is 'a significant undertaking':

It requires an organization or brand to develop a relationship model of its unique web of stakeholders, which diagnoses shifts in stakeholders' level of empathy and trust, and correlates them to behaviour changes within the business web... Over time, accumulated evidence will prove which links are causal and which are mere serendipity.

## **DEVELOPING GOOD PRACTICE**

The most recent major study into public relations practice was published at the end of 2003 in the United Kingdom. This was a project jointly funded by the UK's Institute of Public Relations (IPR) and the UK government's

Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). The European Centre for Business Excellence was appointed to develop the project framework. The current issues identified in this report demonstrate how the problems and opportunities associated with evaluation are threaded through vast swathes of public relations practice:

- Increasing consensus as to the main purposes of PR and a fair degree of satisfaction as to the extent to which these purposes are achieved.
- Public relations must increasingly be seen in the context of longer-term strategic relationship management and engagement on emerging trends such as corporate social responsibility.
- Overlap between PR and other communications functions continues to be an issue.
- Lack of consensus amongst in-house PR practitioners as to the importance and effectiveness of audience research. Clearly more to be done to improve the application of research techniques to PR across the industry.
- Variations in approach to the role of communications strategy making and the extent to which it supports overall business strategy.
- Organizations now outsourcing a broad range of PR activity to consultancies. But the commissioning process is identified as a major problem area, with PR consultancies believing the quality of the brief (PR objective setting) given by clients to be fairly poor.
- Need for greater training and development in the area of PR procurement and its management.
- Study reaffirms the need for PR practitioners to be more capable across a broad range of competency areas.
- The holding of formal qualifications in communications is by no means universal across the study sample.
- Less than 50 per cent of consultancies and in-house organizations appear to have formal training and development programmes for PR professionals. This suggests a need for real progress in education and training across the industry.
- PR evaluation was seen as moderately effective across a range of indicators but both consultants and in-house practitioners felt their ability to benchmark performance between different providers of PR was relatively poor.

**Table 9.2 PR performance parameters that should be measured**

Audience awareness, understanding, attitude and response were given as important PR performance measurements.

This was supported by the general view that media KPIs are only indicators and not an end in themselves.

However, some respondents did give quality, quantity and key messages in media coverage as important audience parameters.

Relationships with journalists were also said to be an important measure.

In addition to these, it was felt that activities achieved versus plan and timeliness should be measured.

Contribution to business objectives was stated as an overall measure of performance, without specifying how the link to PR activities might be made.

Source: DTI/IPR (2003: 42)

The report argues that if public relations practitioners are to become advisers (or counsellors) at strategic levels within their client or in-house organizations, then a major requirement will be their ability to quantify the value of the advice that they offer. Turning to the issue of standard measures to evaluate PR, there does not seem to be any consistency in views on which measures are effective in assessing the impact of PR on the attitudes of target publics. While there is no particular preference, there is general approval of the measures available such as periodic surveys, individual feedback, and the use of (or sales of) products and services. So there does seem to be a consensus that there is no measure that is right for all circumstances, and that it depends on the 'issues, organizations and audiences involved'. Table 9.2 lists more detail on which parameters PR practitioners feel should be measured.

The report implies criticism of practitioners (particularly those working in-house and in the private sector) for not understanding research and not taking it seriously. It points out that there is a tendency for practitioners to place research within marketing rather than being an integral part of the public relations planning process. But the report is unequivocal in stating that research is intimately linked with evaluation and requires expertise in its delivery.

Moving to a broader perspective on evaluation, the IPR/DTI report confirms that consultancy practitioners, at least, are looking at evaluating the client relationships their public relations counsel is supporting, rather than simply concentrating on the process of public relations practice: '50% of

respondents from PR consultancies stated they measure the quality of relationships with stakeholders/publics on behalf of their client organizations' (2003: 40). This thinking is extended into the comments the report makes on evaluation in general, where (among others) the strength of relationships over time is one of the points made, alongside stressing the need again for effective and well-resourced research capabilities:

- Approaches to PR evaluation need to be consistent with the nature of the organization's operations. Effective PR evaluation for a consumer goods company will be different from that of a public service provider, for example.
- Optimum use of performance measurement also depends on the organization's management culture and good PR practitioners align their approach accordingly.
- Good PR evaluation is based on effective research capabilities, understanding changes in public perceptions over time. Effective research requires appropriate investment on the part of the organization.
- Good PR evaluation measures what is important rather than what is easy to measure. It is easy to measure PR outputs (such as coverage) rather than outcomes (such as changing public attitudes). However, impact on key individuals may be more important than overall coverage and good PR should be making an impact on attitudes and the strength of relationships over time.
- The impact of PR is often indirect and so cause and effect cannot be proven. It may also be difficult to quantify the effects of good PR, such as the value of a brand being on television or placed in a major film. Good PR evaluation does not waste resources seeking to quantify the unquantifiable but instead uses simple subjective measures of creativity, quality of work and main outcomes in these more difficult areas.
- Good PR evaluation allows space for unforeseen or unusual PR opportunities. An over-rigid evaluation framework may lead to opportunities being missed because they appear not to fit the measurement criteria.

Finally, the DTI/IPR (2003: 68) study reiterates the perspective of a future for PR practice, and therefore evaluation, which is concerned with facilitating, supporting and improving a complex web of stakeholder relationships:

a future where PR will be concerned with managing multi-stakeholder interactions. PR practitioners will be involved in interactions with many different stakeholders, whether they are within the organisation, customers or other immediate stakeholders, or one of many other publics. Within this multi-stakeholder environment, PR practitioners will need to become expert in assessing the interactions between different publics and how these affect the organisation. They will need to understand what the organisation and its actions mean to each stakeholder group.

More recently, a research study conducted for the Institute of Public Relations and The Communication Directors' Forum by Metrica Research Ltd, called *Best Practice in the Measurement and Reporting of Public Relations and ROI*, was published in May 2004. This does well to sort out – and effectively dismiss – the sloppy use of the term ROI in the context of PR evaluation:

The actual definition of ROI is a ratio of how much profit or cost saving is realised from an activity against its total cost, which is often expressed as a percentage. In reality, few PR programmes can be measured in such a way because of the problems involved in putting a realistic and credible financial value to the results achieved. As a result, the term 'PR ROI' is often used very loosely. This is not only confusing but also misleading and helps explain why the PR industry has traditionally found it difficult to demonstrate meaningful success that links PR cause to PR effect.

A considerably better alternative would be to speak of 'evidence-based PR', defined simply as the difference made as a result of PR activity. Given this broader definition, there is no question that excellent work is being conducted across the public relations industry to measure and report PR activities using sophisticated techniques. Examples of this include:

- raising awareness among target audiences (eg to support sales... );
- increasing reach and frequency (eg to support branding... );
- increasing telephone calls to a Helpline (eg to assist families... );
- driving x visitors to a website (eg to educate more people about... );
- increasing number of direct sales enquiries by x (eg to improve the new business pipeline... );
- increasing message delivery to target audiences (eg to inform new target audiences of a particular service... ).

The recommendations of the IPR/CDF study reiterate the point already discussed about the true meaning of ROI before addressing issues to do with making a business case for PR, pleading for a more sophisticated approach

to evaluation and making important points about Advertising Value Equivalents (AVEs):

- The term 'PR ROI' is rarely used correctly and should in most instances be replaced with a more meaningful and accurate descriptive phrase, such as 'evidence-based PR'. ... In order to avoid confusion, the term 'PR ROI' should only be used when a ratio of how much profit or cost saving can be directly attributed to specific PR activities.
- The cost of PR measurement should be considered against the business case of what PR programmes can achieve rather than against the budget of the programmes themselves. Viewed in this context – helping to make a strong business case – the cost of evaluation can be better justified.
- A significant change in the culture of the PR industry is required towards more sophisticated PR measurement as opposed to the 'magic bullet' approach that so many PR practitioners appear to desire.
- Many problems stem directly from an over-simplified view that 'PR is basically free advertising'. This leads to 'measures' such as AVEs (advertising equivalents), which continue to be used despite being completely discredited.
- When PR is compared with advertising, this should only be done using directly comparable measures, such as 'reach and frequency', 'cost per thousand', or changes in awareness and attitude measured through credible market research.
- The PR industry should place more emphasis on the technical understanding required to conduct proper planning, research and evaluation (PRE). On a long-term basis this should be encouraged through educational programmes that cover the technical aspects of PRE, particularly at degree level where courses are endorsed by the Institute of Public Relations. In the short term the IPR and other industry bodies, such as the PRCA and AMEC, should continue to work closely to address this problem.

## **PAYMENT BY RESULTS**

Evaluation has come under particular focus with the emergence over the past few years of Payment by Results (PBR). A key – if not essential – element of PBR is deciding on the criteria by which the achievement of results

is assessed, ie evaluation. PBR has come to the fore for a number of reasons: pressure on budgets, demand for justification of PR spend, and maybe, even, confidence among public relations consultancies in the value of the services they offer. In a sense, consultancies have always been paid by results in that clients will not continue to employ them (and therefore pay them) unless they are satisfied with the 'results' – or otherwise – that the consultancy delivers:

The idea of a payment by results (PBR) scheme is to set up a win-win arrangement that gives better, more measurable results for clients and higher earnings for consultancies. The concept is that, by focusing resources on clearly defined targets which link the level of remuneration to the consultancy's success, both parties benefit. (Owen, 2002)

So PBR is more specific than the obvious point of clients only continuing to employ providers who provide a satisfactory level of service. It is normally associated with a 'bonus' being paid for exceptional performance. In return for a possible bonus the base payment is lower than the consultancy's normal day rate. It appears, therefore, that PBR schemes are coalescing around a guaranteed reduced payment in exchange for a bonus if defined targets are met. There are no standards but one suggestion is that the guaranteed payment is in the region of 80 per cent of the normal rate; common sense would then indicate that if the relevant criteria are met, the bonus would result in a payment of 120 per cent, an uplift of a fifth on the consultancy's standard rate.

It does seem that PBR has gained a toe-hold as a means of consultancy remuneration. And there is also some indication that it suits two – very different – types of client. For the first-time user of PR it has the potential to offer some reassurance. Intrinsically, services cannot be fully assessed prior to consumption, so the clients with limited public relations experience might be attracted to the reassurance associated with payment by results. At the other end of the scale, experienced users of public relations services may have the sophisticated understanding of PR evaluation required to establish the criteria on which the results are going to be assessed. Naturally, a workable PBR scheme is completely dependent on clear criteria and measurement.

Somewhere between one-third and a half of PR consultancies in the UK offer a PBR scheme. Opinion is almost equally divided between it being consultancy initiated, client initiated or a joint decision. Some consultancies even see it as an important means of attracting new business, even if once discussions between consultancy and potential client are held, the relation-

**Table 9.3 Guiding principles of PBF arrangements**

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1. PBF should be a means of encouraging and rewarding exceptional performance.
  2. Both the client and the consultancy should benefit from PBF.
  3. PBF should be based on fairness, trust, transparency and openness.
  4. Both sides should agree on success-based components.
  5. A proper evaluation system is a prerequisite for implementing a PBF arrangement.
  6. PBF is not a substitute or replacement for existing fee arrangements.
  7. The arrangement should be kept as simple as possible.
  8. The arrangement needs to be managed once it is in place.
  9. Review the arrangements if circumstances change.
  10. Be aware that narrow measures may undermine the broader overall consultancy role.
  11. Measures can be objective or subjective or both.
  12. Choose the number of measures with care.
- 

ship is established on a more traditional basis. Even when new relationships are established using a PBR scheme, it is common for the client consultancy relationship to move on to a more traditional basis quite quickly. This is not because of any problems with PBR, but because it is no longer necessary once an effective relationship has been established.

Table 9.3 outlines the PRCA's guiding principles of performance-based fee (PBF) arrangements. PBR and PBF are alternative terms for the same concept.

However, PBR is not without problems and there are indications that, in the UK at least, the initial growth of PBR schemes has stalled at fairly low levels. One reason is the likely mismatch between points 5 and 7 in Table 9.3. It is difficult for a 'proper evaluation system' to be 'as simple as possible'; deriving a scheme that is both simple and fair can be challenging.

Also, impact measures may well only be appropriate if PR is the only communications tool to be used, and even then major external events may well reduce or negate the impact of PR activities, however skilfully deployed. In the more common situation of PR being one element in a mix of activities, then measures of media coverage could also be used, but our old friend the substitution game rears its ugly head.

Even if the adoption of a full-blown PBR scheme is not appropriate, the discussion of such an approach can be useful in itself. This is not limited to persuading 'first-time users' of PR to dip a toe in the water, but can help prompt an objective-led approach to developing public relations strategies without the need for a formal PR scheme. 'This approach can be summarized as one which focuses on the client and its business strategy, rather than the PR process' (Owen, 2002: 2).

## **MOVING EVALUATION FORWARD**

Evaluation of public relations is a complex issue that varies considerably according to a variety of factors. Here are the principles that lie behind the thinking on evaluation we have espoused in this book:

- There is no simple solution to the 'problem' of evaluation. There is no magic bullet, holy grail or an effortless way out. We are talking about a sophisticated process that requires sophisticated thinking.
- Effective evaluation starts with effective objective setting. At its simplest, PR evaluation is simply checking that objectives set have been met. It is because objective setting in public relations is not straightforward (SMART objectives are an ideal and rarely achievable) that PR evaluation is not straightforward.
- Evaluation is a research-based discipline; evaluation is research, research is evaluation. All professional public relations practitioners need to have some understanding of research methods so they can understand, commission and analyse appropriate research to support the programmes they plan and implement.
- Evaluation focuses on the process of public relations activity because the more effective the process, the more likely (but not certainly) the impacts sought will be achieved. Process evaluation is an automatic part of professional practice.
- Evaluation focuses on the impact of public relations activity because the ultimate purpose of public relations activity is not the outputs from the public relations process. It is impact of that process on the publics/stakeholders being addressed.
- Evaluation is a short-term activity because many public relations campaigns – usually of a publicity-seeking, awareness-raising nature – have

short-term effects. These are normally based on media relations, and media evaluation may be some indicator of their effectiveness.

- Evaluation is a long-term activity because many public relations campaigns – normally involved with changing attitudes and behaviours – have long-term effects. Here, media relations is frequently only part of the mix and direct measurement needs to be part of the evaluation effort.
- Evaluation is user dependent because public relations efficacy will be judged on those criteria important to the client or the employer. We may wish to educate them to be more rounded in their approach to what PR can achieve, but their current criteria are the starting point.
- Evaluation is situation dependent because the range of contexts in which public relations operates needs to be matched by the range of approaches used for evaluation. Evaluation for a national campaign to launch an fmcg product will be very different from that associated with an international public affairs effort.
- Evaluation is realistic because public relations is a pragmatic discipline operating in the real world. Resources should not be wasted on trying – and failing – to achieve the ideal when the more easily achieved possibly gives some indication of what is probably going right, and what might be going slightly wrong.

#### **PRCA top tips for evaluation**

- Encourage clients to invest in PRE. They should be spending 7–10 per cent of their budget on planning, research and evaluation. The cost of evaluation should be included as part of the total budget and not split out. The type, level and cost of bought-in research should reflect the total budget and be proportionate to the objectives set at the outset and the desired results.
- Encourage clients to use planning, research and evaluation before, during and after every campaign, depending on the level of measurement that they require and can afford. End of campaign results evaluation is meaningful against pre-set benchmarks. Measure whenever this will provide information that will be valuable to improving the quality of the programme.

- Carry out thorough audits and research to identify potential areas for exploitation, and issues that need careful handling.
- Understand your client's audiences and media. Research at the start of a campaign will give a clear indication of who needs to be targeted and how best to reach them.
- Test your client's messages. Sensible testing with a select group of the target audiences will provide invaluable information and enable messages to be tailored and targeted successfully.
- Do not use Advertising Value Equivalents (AVEs). They are weak and imply that public relations is a substitute for advertising, when the two disciplines have different roles. AVEs take no account of positive or negative coverage, nor the value (or damage) of editorial endorsement (or criticism). High-quality editorial endorsement cannot be bought, so to put a value on it by using equivalent advertising space costs is misleading.
- Define what worked and what didn't. Like any other activity, you should make sure that mistakes are not repeated, and you know what worked best.
- Improve the next campaign. Feed what you learn about the most successful tactics, the audiences that responded best, and the most appropriate timings and media into planning for the next campaign.

### ***Interview***

Pascoe Sawyers feels that the importance of evaluation is beginning to be recognized in local government. 'I get the impression that communications is much higher up the agenda in local government than it was five years ago. As a consequence, evaluation is being taken much more seriously.'

There are two main reasons. First, tools are now available which were not around a few years ago. Second, there is much more sharing of best practice. 'People are looking at what colleagues are doing. They are not developing communications strategies in isolation, they are looking at what others are doing, seeing evaluation in there, and so they are more inclined to think about it', adds Sawyers. He doesn't claim that the evalu-

ation being undertaken is as robust or as effective as it could be, but argues that the importance of evaluation is receiving increasing recognition.

Sawyers feels that the different environment in which local government operates compared to the private sector can encourage a less serious approach to evaluation. In a commercial environment, short-term financial imperatives prompt evaluation, making it almost an automatic part of the communications process. Local government is concerned with political and democratic issues, 'arguably more important but their long-term perspective means that some may think there may not be immediate pressures to examine communications effectiveness'.

Nonetheless, Sawyers reflects many of the frustrations experienced in public relations as a whole. 'It amazes me how often I see a strategy that doesn't really get to grips with evaluation, or throws it in at the end as an added extra – something we will do if we can afford it – rather than regarding it as an integral part of the whole process', he adds. Sawyers questions whether there is any point embarking on major communications projects if there is no intention to evaluate them.

Even when evaluation is undertaken, Sawyers calls for a more sophisticated approach. He is concerned that there is a tendency to look at evaluation in terms of outputs as opposed to outcomes. 'So my programme says that I must issue 50 press releases a year but what happened to those releases? How many got used? How many releases with positive messages ended up as negative stories?' The solution could, at least in part, lie in educating senior people to understand not just the business case for effective communications (relatively easy to do) but also the more difficult task of appreciating what are the features of an effective public relations campaign. 'They get a communications strategy presented to them and probably give it the thumbs up because they respect the professionals who have produced it. As they may not understand what they should be looking for, you can get problems in distinguishing between outcomes and outputs. It's one thing to get councillors to commit, it's another to get them to actually understand what they should be looking for.'

Another aspect of evaluation which Sawyers sees as benefiting from a more sophisticated approach is benchmarking. 'It really irritates me that people don't make the connection between audit and evaluation. People develop communication strategies but don't think that if they are going to evaluate it, that's going to be difficult – if not impossible – to do in a vacuum. They need to undertake an audit in order to understand

their starting point. It's really important, in terms of being able to evaluate effectively, that the audit process takes place. That's where it all starts and that's what helps make sense of the evaluation, appreciate the progress that's been made.'

Given the increasing pressure in the private sector for organizations to seek 'permission to operate' from the communities they operate in, one driver of evaluation in local government could have increasing applicability across the board. Sawyers says that consultation is a key aspect of local communications activity, and one where evaluation has a crucial role. He concludes, 'Evaluation requires two-way communication which is what consultation is all about. Robust evaluation in your initial strategy ensures you do not fall into the trap of asking the questions, going through the process, but not responding in any meaningful way.'

*Pascoe Sawyers is principal consultant at the UK Government's IDeA (Improvement and Development Agency).*

## Questionnaire responses

### **Q: How will evaluation of public relations activity develop over the coming decade?**

Today, public relations is still a soft profession. The majority of people working in it have educational background in humanities or social sciences – ie they are weak in their research training. As public relations is becoming socially (and commercially) ever more important, more people with harder research-based backgrounds will enter the profession and numbers will become as important for public relations practice as words are. **Dejan Verčič**

It will increasingly be a requirement and practitioners who don't will fall behind. That will result in being less likely to win business for consultants and less likely to get funding for in-house practitioners. **Alison Clarke**

1. More evidence based.

2. Needs to inform budgets.
3. If done well, will give credibility and increase our areas of core responsibility and organizational integration (eg corporate governance, funding strategies, risk management, high level government and political relations etc). **Fran Hagon**

It will switch from today's position of justifying one's existence after the fact to designing in success before the fact. In other words, there will be a demonstrable switch from an emphasis on evaluation to one on more effective planning. **Crispin Manners**

It will become an in-house function of PR agencies – most will have a department dedicated to it and we will have to carry the cost because clients will still refuse to pay for it! **Loretta Tobin**

It is going to become more important in coming years to demonstrate the effectiveness of PR as companies become more demanding in terms of tangible results. I see IT playing a major role, with technological evaluation techniques developing and close focus spotlighting PR activity as an inherent part of business strategy in an increasingly globalized world. **Ray Mawerera**

Hopefully it will lose the 'bogey-man' status and become part of everyday language in our industry. It should be like oxygen – something used constantly for life but not actually discussed in medical terms every day. **Annabelle Warren**

I believe it will be instrumental to campaigns. I also believe that there is a market for a more sophisticated evaluation software package that does it all for you – feed in one end and it comes out with a full analysis at the other end. **Laurina O'Donnell**

I think it will become an expectation by clients. **Clara Zawawi**

Ever-increasing effectiveness of computer-based software and tools along with more sharply defined demographic data. The downside will be a public over-researched, over-consulted, over-surveyed, resulting in low meaningful participation and questionable results. Also, the accelerating use by marketing/sales organizations to approach the public

under the guise of 'research' can be expected to further degrade meaningful quality participation. **Tom O'Donoghue**

Make it credible – become answerable to the board for its role. It will also result in a shift towards media neutral planning as real measurement of all disciplines will raise the right questions about which tools should be used where and when, and in combination with which other tools. **Mike Copland**

The tools for evaluation will continue to come down in price and become more sophisticated, but unfortunately that doesn't make the measurement any more accurate or conclusive. We're measuring changes in behaviour here – whether it's perceptions or actions – and until we can break our programmes down to target 'publics of one', truly conclusive evaluation will be difficult to achieve. That, however, doesn't mean we shouldn't try – because the sheer exercise of benchmarking audiences, developing clear objectives and measuring on the back end will result in a stronger program. **Matt Kucharski**

If I really knew, I'd set up an evaluation company! The future may lie online. Just as advertisers can get instant figures on how many people watched a particular advert online and can interrogate the data on their PCs, perhaps campaigns will be evaluated online. YouGov (a UK online research service) is already interviewing this way and producing opinion polls. Perhaps evaluation will go the same way. **Richard Offer**

Public relations is a relatively new concept and over the last two decades it has developed considerably. Evaluation has not typically been a focus for PR campaigns, yet the benefits received from evaluating campaigns will ensure that the coming decade will see evaluation techniques advanced, hence becoming an essential component of any PR activity carried out. It will develop to give an organization control over the campaign, to have increased response rates with higher conversion rates. **Adam Connolly**

It can only get better. **John Bliss**





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