Chapter XVII
Measurement in Public Relations

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ABSTRACT

Although public relations has been an established field for more than 100 years, standardized measures have only recently been introduced. In an attempt to make public-relations practitioners more accountable and to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of public relations in an era of downsizing, scholars and practitioners have called for more rigorous, reliable, valid, and quantifiable measures for evaluation. In addition, the contribution of public relations is also being measured in terms of the relationships built between an organization and its public. This chapter will review those measures and discuss the development and usage of online surveys and measurements in public relations. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the future of measurement in public relations.

INTRODUCTION

Although measurement in public relations has come a long way, it is still in its infancy. For years, measurement consisted of counting the number of press releases written or the number of news clips that mention the organization. However, these measures are not valid in assessing the extent to which public-relations practitioners achieve their objectives (e.g. inform, educate, build relationships with, or change the opinions, attitudes, or behaviors of a target audience). In other words, they are not really measuring what they would like to claim they are measuring.

According to Lindenmann (2005), public-relations academics and practitioners have been talking about measurement for nearly 60 years. He specifically traces it back to an article, published in 1947, that talked about measurement within the context of the question "Why campaigns fail." Some scholars argue better measures must be developed, while other scholars, such as Lindenmann, argue the measures exist but practitioners are not using them.

From my perspective, the biggest problem in the PR field is NOT that adequate PR measurement and evaluation tools and techniques do not exist and that they need to be invented. There are many different methodological tools and techniques available that are already being utilized in the field. In my view, the three major issues that we, in the

public-relations field need to address pertaining to PR measurement and evaluation are these:

1. *We need to more effectively train public-relations practitioners and counselors on how to measure and evaluate public-relations effectiveness.*
2. *We need to do a better job of building public-relations measurement and evaluation components into our various ongoing communications programs and activities.*
3. *We need to do a better job of convincing senior management of the importance of allocating appropriation funds to support PR evaluation efforts.* (Lindenmann, 2005, p. 9)

In the past decade, academics have been pushing for better measurement development, in part due to the increased need for public-relations programs to be accountable to management and its bottom line. Indeed, when cost-saving measures are introduced in an organization, one of the questions is, in what measurable ways do public-relations activities and programs make or save money for this organization. A push for measurement, in terms meaningful to management, helped to increase the need for better measurement and more formal research methods. The field responded. For example, according to Wright (1998), the use of formal research methods in the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Silver Anvil award winners for best public-relations campaigns rose from 25% in 1980 to 40% in 1989 to over 75% in 1998. Of course, these are the best of the best in the field. Conducting formal research is costly, and many organizations do not budget for formal research. Thus, the average practitioner too often may still rely on news clips as measurement, as if the placement of public-relations material gives any indication of whether publics are made aware of, paid attention to, understood, remembered, or acted upon the information.

Turning our gaze from the best public-relations campaigns in the field to the average practitioner, Katherine Delahaye Paine, founder of a public-relations measurement firm, said the average percentage of a public-relations budget devoted to measurement and evaluation jumped from 1% to 5% from 1994 to 2004, (as quoted in Wilcox, Cameron, Ault & Agee, 2005). She projects it will grow to 10% over the next decade. On Paine's Website, she cites a CyberAlert 2005 measurement survey as having revealed that money budgeted for public-relations measurement ranged from 26% of the respondents who said they have no budget, to 23% of the respondents who have more than $1,000 per month to spend on measuring whether they have achieved their objectives. Additionally, although 75% of the respondents reported measuring results for their campaigns, 68% of those said their measurement consisted of counting news clips (http://www.themeasurementstandard.com/issues/1105/contents1105.asp).

As argued by Stacks (2002), "public-relations research should be programmatic by nature; that is, the research should be a continuous process that continually assesses an organization's position among its publics on a variety of outcome measures" (p. 20). As Stacks further notes, most formal research in public relations, when it does happen, is reactive rather than proactive. Moreover, measuring the impact of public-relations practices has become a question of fundamental importance in need of social scientific methodology including benchmark studies that use valid and reliable measures of knowledge, comprehension, perception, attitude, opinion, and behavior. Stacks (2002) also argues that in order to facilitate a stronger drive toward continuous formal research in public relations, the familiar RACE acronym used in public relations, which stands for the linear research, action and planning, communication, and evaluation process, needs to be changed to ERASE, a circular method in which "continued evaluation leads to research that leads to action (or objectives) that leads to strategy that leads to evaluation that leads to more research, and so forth." (p. 22) In other words, public-relations