

# Research and Evaluation of PR in Organisations

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**Abstract:** *Public relations function in organisations has come under increased scrutiny and top managements are closely examining the return on investments in PR. Though the outcomes of PR programmes remain intangible in terms of reputation management, crisis communication etc, PR professionals have also realized the importance of measurement and evaluation of Public relations initiatives. Contemporary business environment piles pressure on PR managers to showcase how PR programmes benefit the organisations they serve. The competitive environment makes it critical for them to understand how to apply PR planning, research and programme - evaluation practices that help ensure success and accountability. Research - based PR practices enable managers to solve complex problems, set and achieve or exceed goals and objectives, track the opinions and beliefs of key publics and employ programme strategies with confidence that they will have intended results. The present article deals with the principles and objectives of evaluation, the role of a public relations professional in undertaking research and evaluation of the PR initiative.*

**Keywords:** PR evaluation, Measurement, Public Relations, PRSA

## 1. Introduction

Harlow (1976) defines Public relations (PR) practice as “the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communications, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics” (p.36). Besides managing problems or issues, PR helps management to be informed and responsive to public opinion. In order to do so, PR uses strategic communication activities and research as its principal tools (Cutlip et al., 2006).

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) also defines PR as “researching, conducting and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programmes of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organisation’s aims” (Cutlip et al., 2006: p.6). Broom and Dozier (1983) posit that when the communication function in an organisation is not concerned with the effects or the measuring of that function, communication is “relegated to the status of an output function that executives systematically exclude from decision making and strategic planning” Contemporary business environment piles pressure on PR managers to showcase how PR programmes benefit the organisations they serve. The competitive environment makes it critical for them to understand how to apply PR planning, research and programme - evaluation practices that help ensure success and accountability. Research - based PR practices enable managers to solve complex problems, set and achieve or exceed goals and objectives, track the opinions and beliefs of key publics and employ programme strategies with confidence that they will have intended results (Austin and Pinkleton, 2001).

ICTs have increased an organisation’s ability to gather, process, transfer and interpret information. Therefore, managements often intensify the accountability pressure on PR practitioners. Thus, research is necessary for PR practitioners in the information age (Cutlip et al., 2006). According to Grunig and Grunig (2001), evaluation research is necessary to establish the effectiveness of public affairs programmes and their contribution to organisational

effectiveness. It provides the key information inputs vital to plan PR actions. Management demands hard facts, not intuition or guesswork. PR practitioners must be able to demonstrate convincingly their ability to add value in producing a product or service (Baskin et al., 1997). Thus, the evaluation of the effectiveness of PR programmes and activities is of critical importance to practitioners and scholars. The drive towards accountability means practitioners must show that PR activities help their organisation or clients to achieve meaningful goals (Johnson, 1994; Kirban, 1983). There is increased focus on analysing PR measurement techniques. In a Delphi study conducted by White and Blamphin (1994) among United Kingdom practitioners and academics of PR research priorities, the topic of evaluation was ranked first in the development of PR practice and research.

### Evaluating PR programmes:

A systematic assessment of PR programmes and their results enables practitioners to be accountable to clients and themselves (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009). Because PR professionals have traditionally been doing line and staff functions, rather than researchers, they often assume that others see the value of their function (Baskin et al., 1997). However, others may not perceive it that way, and when economic conditions are down, PR practitioners are the first ones to be dismissed. PR practitioners claim that they contribute towards a better understanding between publics and organisations, but they do not present tangible evidence of this contribution (Baskin et al., 1997). Hence, evaluation of PR is crucial.

In order for PR practitioners to speak with authority when asked to prove their value to the organisation. PR practitioners should measure the effects of their programmes, provide sound forecasts of future needs, and account for the resources they consume (Baskin et al., 1997). Practitioners are increasingly being asked to document measurable results and returns from PR programmes compared with costs to demonstrate “return on investment” (ROI). Management evaluates PR practitioners by how much it contributes to advancing the organisation’s mission and achieving organisational goals (Broom, 2009). Despite

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the importance of evaluation research in PR, studies of successful measures of PR efforts against actual achievement are still lacking. Lindenmann (1990) found that more than 90% of survey respondents believed that PR research is still more talked about than actually done (Hon, 1998). Xavier et al. (2005) claimed that there is limited improvement of evaluation in Australia as evaluation techniques are limited to types that do not demonstrate true impact on publics or contribute to organisational goals. Australian PR practitioners appear to be driven by a lack of knowledge, skills, time and confidence to make a case for evaluation budgets with their clients or managers (Xavier et al., 2005)

The process of evaluating programme planning, implementation and impact is called evaluation, although measurement has become a buzzword in the industry. Cutlip and Center have used the terms evaluation research and evaluation interchangeably to represent the systematic application of social science procedures for assessing the conceptualisation, design, implementation and intervention of the social intervention programme.

The *Dictionary of Public relations measurement and research* defines evaluation research as:

‘A form of research that determines the relative effectiveness of a public relations campaign or programme by measuring program outcomes (changes in the level of awareness, understanding the attitudes, opinions, and/or behaviours of a targeted audience of public) against a pre-determined set of objectives that initially established the level or degree of change desired. This clearly states that PR evaluation is about measuring outcomes against the set objectives in an organized manner.

#### Four concerns

According to Paine, four concerns should be addressed when evaluating the effectiveness of a public relations campaign:

- Define your benchmark.
- Select a measurement tool.
- Analyze data, draw actionable conclusions, and make recommendations.
- Make changes and measure again.

#### Principles of evaluation

In summarizing current thinking on public relations evaluation, Noble (199: 19 - 20) has set out seven principles:

- Evaluation is research: Evaluation is research - based discipline. Its purpose is to inform, clarify and it operates on high standards of rigour and logic. As the orbit of public relations extends from publicity seeking media relations to issues of management and corporate reputation, research will play an increasingly important role in planning, execution and measurement of public relations.
- Evaluation looks both ways: Evaluation is proactive, forward looking and formative activity that provides feedback to programme management. It is also reviewing, backward - looking, summative activity that assesses the final outcome of the campaign/programme.
- 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 the function of the public relations management to understand the organisation's expectations of public relations activity.

- Evaluation is short - term: Short - term evaluation is usually campaign or project based. Such campaigns are frequently concerned with raising awareness through the media. Short term in this context means less than 12 months
- 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 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.
- Evaluation is comparative: Evaluation frequently makes the absolute judgements but instead draws comparative conclusions. For example, media evaluation frequently makes historical and or competitive comparisons as well as comparing 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.
- Evaluation is multifaceted: Public relations has been established as a multi - step process, if only because of another step represented by the media. A range of methodologies is required at each step.
- In an ideal world, the setting of specific, quantified and measurable objectives would be the panacea for effective evaluation. Evaluating public relations by comparing outcomes with objectives set becomes meaningless if public relations is only one element of the mix.

#### Objectives of PR evaluation

For effective evaluation, the point of origin and the objective must be defined as part of the programme design, the way points can be measured and the effectiveness or impact assessed.

The objectives, precise and measurable, should be closely related to the research design and data collection as well as the campaign methods and strategy used.

The five areas of questioning that should be applied to objectives

- What is the content of the objective
- What is the target population
- When should the intended changes occur
- Are the intended changes unitary or multiple
- How much effect is desired

Swineheart (1979) divides evaluation into four categories:

- Process – the nature of activities involved in the preparation and dissemination of material
- Quality – assessment of materials or programs in terms of accuracy, clarity, design, production values
- Intermediate objectives – which are sub - objectives necessary for a goal to be achieved

- Ultimate objectives, which are changes in the target audience's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

Thus he suggests that there is more to evaluation than impact. The analysis points out the need for planning and evaluation.

If you have followed the steps in the public relations process then you have already identified your audiences and established objectives for each. If your objectives are measurable then you already have the criteria by which to evaluate the success of your program. If you set the objective of increasing awareness by 40% then a benchmark has been set against which to measure. *The benchmark compares your current situation to your past.* Paine also recommends comparing the data gathered to other organizations, such as key competitors.

Comparative analysis makes the data much more relevant. Instead of knowing how much press coverage has been achieved; it can be compared to how much the competition is getting to determine what is called share of voice.

Based on this evaluation, the tools that will best help measure against stated criteria are selected. Generally, the same tools that helped establish the benchmark data are used. If primary research was used to establish benchmarks then the same methods are repeated to evaluate success. If you surveyed employees to establish awareness and attitude benchmarks, then a follow - up *survey* is the obvious measurement tool. If you used attendance at employee meetings to establish behaviour benchmarks, then *counting attendance* after the public relations program is the appropriate measurement tool.

Primary research is the most expensive and requires the most expertise, but it is the best measure of the real impact of a public relations effort on stated outcome objectives, such as changes in awareness, attitudes, and behaviour.

Probably the most popular evaluation tools used in public relations measure the output objectives. There are several ways to measure the effectiveness of communication output, but some are better than others. One of the earliest methods was clip counting. A clip is an article, broadcast story, or online message that mentions the company or product. You can either hire a clipping service or collect your own clips. At the end of a predetermined period, the number of clips obtained is examined. This measure is the most simple and convenient way to measure output and is one way to monitor media coverage. It is also the *least* informative because you do not know what the clips *mean* (they are only counted, not evaluated) except that, perhaps, it has stroked the egos of some senior management by getting their names in the media.

Many public relations measurement services will analyze media coverage to evaluate the percentage of articles that contain program key messages, the prominence of the message (for a press release, whether it was printed on page 1 versus page 16; in a broadcast, how much time was allocated to the story and where it appears in the program), the tone of the message (positive, neutral, negative), and how the media efforts compare with key competitors (share

of voice). These organizations provide metrics that help establish benchmarks pertaining to program output objectives and strategies. However, to know if these communications actually affected people's awareness, understanding, attitudes, or behaviours, primary research such as needs to be conducted.

Evaluation and measurement should not take place only at the end of your efforts. You should be monitoring the media constantly to determine whether your message is available for people to see (what advertisers call "reach, " public relations professionals call "opportunities - to - see, " or OTS). If the media strategy is not working, course corrections in the middle of the program are required, not after the program has been completed.

The preceding discussion indicates that the PR process is very structured. It suggests that formal research be conducted for formative and evaluative purposes. It requires connecting communication efforts with goals, objectives, and strategies. This process works best with planned efforts such as public relations campaigns.

Regardless of the situation, before acting or responding the public relations professional asks, "What do I know about this situation?" (situational analysis); "What do I want to accomplish with my messages?" (goals and objectives); "How will I accomplish this with my messages?" (strategy); and "What will I say?" (tactic). This process should be ingrained if the public relations professional is to become a strategic communicator

#### **Role of PR practitioner**

The public relations officer plays the role of analyst – analyzing information gathered through research. He acts as an antenna capturing signals in the environment. In other words, he is alive to the developments, changes and happenings in various environments which have a direct or indirect bearing on the organization. After an assessment of the information, the role of the public relations officer is that of an advisor counselling top management on the strategy to be adopted to meet various exigencies and address the concerns of the stakeholders. He advocates the cause of the organization with various stakeholders even as he engages the management in a dialogue.

#### **Research for measurement and evaluation**

Public relations evaluation and evaluation as identifiable social scientific activities have come under scrutiny. Public relations frequently embraces evaluation in a summative guise often assessing final programme outcome. It is a means for practitioners to offer accountability to clients and to themselves.

Dozier and Repper (1992: 186) argue that a distinction needs to be drawn between research designed to analyse a situation at the beginning of the planning process and research designed to evaluate the planning, implementation and impact of the programme. In short, a research - based culture is an evaluative culture and vice versa

Broom and Dozier criticize the style of public relations (which they confusingly describe as evaluation only)

because research is not seen as essential for planning limited to tracking and assessment

The term evaluation is a broad one. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006: 364) illustrate the scope and argue that evaluation is a research - based activity. The process of evaluating programme planning, implementation and impact is called evaluation research. Public relations uses research for a variety of purposes. Watson asserts that definitions of evaluation fall into three groups: the commercial, which is a justification of the budget spend; simple effectiveness, asks whether the programme has worked in terms of output; and objectives - effectiveness, which judges programmes in terms of meeting objectives and creating desired effects

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

### Complexity of evaluation

Evaluating public relations becomes complex because of various factors. Dealing with different people operating in different situations is challenging in most areas of decision making and judgement when faced with an array of choices and multiple possibilities. We tend to fall back on a set of rules and SOPs (standard operating procedures) that predetermine what we do. 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. Another aspect that makes evaluation complex is the presence of a large number of variables in public relations practice.

### Measurement of production

In preparation of a programme, practitioners cross check to ensure that vital information has not been missed from the original situation analysis

Readability tests are frequently used to objectively assess message [re [aratpom

### Measurement of message exposure

This phase typically includes implementation of the programme. it involves counting on the number of publications printed, news releases distributed, stories placed in the media to reach readers, viewers and listeners both actual and potential

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### Measurement of Media Impressions

In this phase how many people were exposed to the programme messages is determined or had media impressions. Care must be taken to separate delivered audience from effective audience the delivered audience included all potential readers while the effective audience included only the target publics

Measurement of audience attendance and awareness - The number of people who learn message content is clearly the logical follow up to measure how many have attended to the message

Measurement or audience attitude - Here the focus is on whether there is a change in attitude of the people towards the message/ programme

Measurement or audience action this is the behavioural part of the attitude where the action initiated by the person on receiving the message is assessed

Measurement of complaints redressal

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