

An 'Effectiveness Yardstick' to Measure Public Relations Success

By Walter K. Lindenmann

Let's get something straight right off the bat. First, it is possible to measure public relations effectiveness. Yes, there still are a handful of cynics and skeptics in our business who are convinced it cannot be done. But, I feel their number is dwindling rapidly, and—with the growing pressure throughout our field to be more accountable for what we do—I'm convinced that by the end of this decade, those few skeptics should be all but gone from our profession.

Second, 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.

If those two statements of mine are true, then, what's the hang-up? Why do so many public relations professionals break into a sweat when they start thinking about trying to evaluate what they do for a living?

The reason is because they do not approach the problem in a logical, step-by-step manner. Too many public relations professionals, I contend, envision the worst when they consider doing PR evaluations because they try to do "everything all at once"—which is impossible to do—and because they rarely

sit down and systematically think through what's involved in measuring PR impacts.

In the public relations agency for which I work, we've tried to simplify the process by developing what we call a "Public Relations Effectiveness Yardstick"—a straightforward set of guidelines or standards that the professional PR practitioner can follow if he or she wants to measure PR effectiveness.

What's involved is a two-step process: first, setting public relations objectives, and then determining at what levels you wish to measure public relations effectiveness.

Step #1: Setting Objectives

When you stop and think about it, no one can really measure anything unless they first figure out exactly what it is they are measuring that something against.

So, to begin, ask yourself: What are the goals or objectives of your public relations program? What is your PR program or activity seeking to accomplish?

In public relations, what you are trying to accomplish usually falls into one of these four categories:

1. You, or your organization, are trying to get *certain messages, themes, or ideas* out.
2. You would like these messages or ideas distributed to *certain key or target audience groups*.
3. You envision distributing these messages to your target audiences via *certain pre-selected or specific communications channels* — perhaps through the media ... by word-of-mouth ... or by using a direct mail approach.
4. And, ultimately, for what you say, for how you say it, and to whom, there are *certain short-term or long-term 'ends'* or objectives you are interested in accomplishing. Based on how and what you say and do, you would like those you reach to respond in a certain way.

To begin to assess what impact—if any—you are having in PR, you need to pinpoint your messages, your target audiences, and your channels of communication. Then you need to use each of these as gauges or markers to determine how effective you have been in achieving what it is you are trying to achieve.



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Step #2: Determining Levels of PR Measurement

After you have set your PR objectives, then you have to decide what exactly you want to measure. Is it how good a PR job you did? Is it finding out if anyone “out there” heard you or paid attention to your PR efforts? Is it determining if anyone “out there” is about to think or act differently because of your PR efforts?

These three different measures of PR effectiveness I would label:

- **Level #1**, the *Basic* level for measuring PR *outputs*,
- **Level #2**, the *Intermediate* level for measuring PR *outgrowths*, and,
- **Level #3**, the *Advanced* level for measuring PR *outcomes*.

Like marks on a yardstick or a ruler, each level identifies or pinpoints a higher or more sophisticated plateau for the measurement of PR success or failure.

Level #1 measures what you, or your organization, actually did. For example, if you are a hospital, health clinic, or pharmaceutical company, did you prepare an attractive looking brochure for your patients or prospective customers? Was the press conference well attended? Did the media pick up and use your release? Did your messages get transmitted to the specific audience groups you were trying to reach?

Level #1 measures PR “outputs.” It examines how well PR people present themselves, how they handle given activities or events. At this level, PR practitioners measure the amount of exposure their organization received in the media, the total number of placements, the total number of impressions, and/or the likelihood of having reached specific target audience groups.

This type of measurement is relatively easy or simple to carry out; that’s why I call it a “basic” measure. To measure “outputs,” PR practitioners often use content analysis techniques to track or measure publicity placements. Or, conduct simple public opinion polls to find out if targeted groups have been exposed to certain messages.

Here’s an example: A pharmaceutical company that was promoting a product that allergy sufferers could use to alleviate runny noses, itchy eyes, scratchy throats and dislocated dispoitions collected 300 newspaper, magazine, television and radio placements that were published and broadcast over a nine-month period of time.

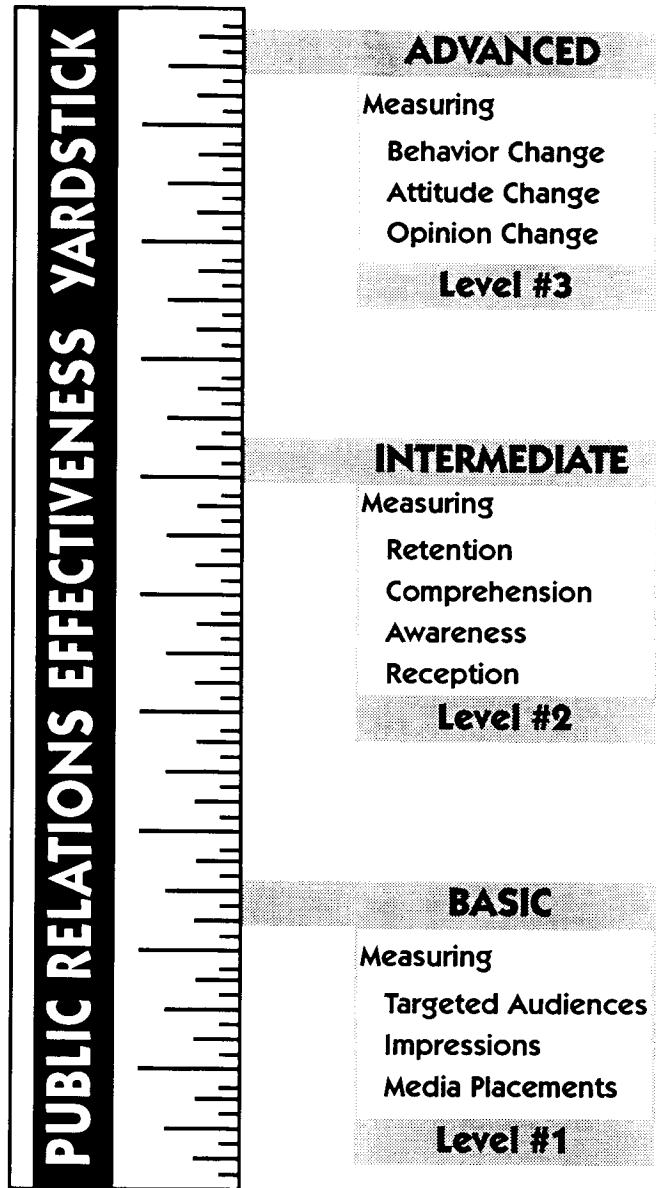
A research organization was retained to determine how favorable or unfavorable toward the company and its product those press clippings ended up being. Content analysis of the clips was the methodology used to measure PR “outputs” in this case.

The entire effort—carried out over a six-week peri-

od of time—was completed at a total cost of less than \$6,000.

Level #2 is somewhat more sophisticated. At this level, PR practitioners measure whether or not target audience groups actually *received* the messages directed at them: whether or not they paid *attention* to those messages, whether or not they *understood* the messages, and whether or not they have *retained* those messages in any shape or form.

Moving up the yardstick, I label these as PR “outgrowth” measures. To measure “outgrowths,” practitioners usually rely on a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, using such methodologies as the conducting of focus groups, depth interviews with opinion-leader groups, and extensive polling of key target audience groups either by telephone, face-to-face, or through the mails.



Another example: For years, a health group had been distributing messages through the media about the benefits of a particular medical product. The organization needed to assess the effectiveness of its publicity efforts. More than just counting clips or adding up total audience, what was needed was “impressions.” This group wanted to know if those to whom the messages about this product were directed were actually receiving the messages, understood them, and were retaining crucial aspects of those messages.

Think about evaluation *before* a PR program is launched, not after it is under way.

To obtain that information, a series of shopping center or “mall” intercept interviews were conducted. Three hundred adults at six different malls were interviewed face-to-face and asked a series of questions about their familiarity with the product. Both unaided and aided-recall questions were asked, to assess overall publicity impact on the targeted audience. The entire project was completed within a period of only five weeks from start to finish at a total budget of less than \$20,000.

Level #3 is the most advanced, or sophisticated, PR measurement level of all. When one reaches this higher end of the Effectiveness Yardstick, what is being measured is “outcomes”—such things as opinion, attitude, and behavior change.

To measure “outcomes,” the PR practitioner needs to rely on: techniques like before-and-after polls (pre- and post-tests); the development and use of experimental and quasi-experimental research designs; the use of unobtrusive data collection methods such as observation, participation, and role-playing; the use of advanced data analysis techniques (such as perceptual mapping, psychographic analysis, factor and cluster analysis, and conjoint analysis); or the conducting of comprehensive, multi-faceted communications audits.

To give an example: An academic institution that specializes in the training of health and medical care practitioners was experiencing a sharp decline in student enrollment. It needed to determine what impact, if any, its existing marketing communications efforts were having on student prospects—not only on their receptivity to the materials they were receiving, but also on how they perceived that particular medical school and how they acted toward it.

A five-stage research project was designed and carried out. It consisted of 1. a secondary analysis of opinion data collected by others; 2. a review and critique of previous surveys and questionnaires conduct-

ed internally by the medical university; 3. tabulation and analysis of data from a university-conducted survey of non-applicants; 4. conducting six focus groups with existing and prospective students; and 5. conducting a series of depth interviews by telephone with 90 key “influentials,” including selected high school and college teachers, high school guidance counselors, and selected area healthcare employers.

The result was a clear-cut understanding of target audience awareness levels, comprehension levels, opinions and attitudes, and behavior patterns which lead to the development of a new and expanded marketing-based communications program for the medical school.

This multi-faceted study was, obviously, a good deal more time-consuming and expensive than were the two earlier examples I gave you of Level #1 (Basic) and Level #2 (Intermediate) measurement efforts. But even so, the entire project from beginning to end took no longer than four months at a total cost of \$35,000. When one considers that there were five stages to this project, the costs averaged out at \$7,000 per phase.

These are just some of the ways to measure success in public relations. There are many others I could give you.

But, to put things into perspective, there are two final words of advice that I would like to pass on as you start to plunge more deeply into the “measuring PR effectiveness” arena:

First, it is important to recognize that *there is no one simplistic method* for measuring PR effectiveness. Depending upon which level of measurement is required, an array of different tools and techniques is needed to properly assess PR impact.

Finally, it is extremely important *before* you attempt to evaluate anything you do, that you first set specific goals and objectives against which the activities of your programs can eventually be measured. That’s called formulative evaluation.

The time to think about evaluation is *before* a public relations program has been launched, not after it is under way. ■

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