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## **THE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION OF PR COMMUNICATION**



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## THE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION OF PR COMMUNICATION

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### Summary

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the importance of evaluation and measurement as a vital field of public relations campaigns. The author gives an insight into the existing literature relevant to the measurement approaches and evaluation of Public Relations programs. This paper also presents the advantages and disadvantages of three different models of measurement and evaluation of PR communication — AVEs, Barcelona Principles and AMEC's (2015) new Integrated Evaluation framework. The author suggest that measurement and evaluation programs must be part of communication strategy but also it has to have a model, matrix or guideline for analysing and measuring PR effectiveness within an organisation and the targeted audience it is aiming to reach.

**Keywords: measurement, evaluation, public relations, PR communications, Barcelona Principles, AVEs, AMEC's integrated evaluation framework**



## Introduction

Measurement and evaluation have been and still are an evolving component of public relations communications. The professional organizations alike have placed increasing emphasis on measurement and evaluation in an effort to transition the public relations profession away from an intuitive art form toward greater reliance on scientific methodologies that are both valid and reliable (AMEC, 2015; IPR, 2015).

Therefore, measurement and evaluation is an imperative that transcends borders and specialisms.

Various authors developed evaluation models for public relations and applied different research methods in those models (McNamara, 2006; Cutlip et al., 2000; Watson, 1999; Lindenmann, 1993). Not only do these models serve for the better understanding of public relations value but they also meant to be used in PR practice.

From the perspective of strategic communication, methodology for measurement is often grounded on management by objectives (Drucker, 1954). Every measure should be taken with regard to the objectives of the PR campaign. Success is determined through measurement of results and achievement of objectives.

Nevertheless, evaluation is made to be consistent and to be a part of every step on the way.

## Public relations measurement and evaluation

There is no question that demand for accountability is growing in all marketing disciplines, including public relations. Clients want to measure public relations programs in order to gain insights that will enable them to refine and improve programs, to assess cost effectiveness of different approaches, and to assure a good return on these investments. In concert with growing demand, public relations measurement and evaluation is growing in sophistication.

Today, there is recognition that public relations programs can be measured and that there is value in doing so. Industry research suggests that the most common public relations measurement technique currently being used is

media analysis, assessing the quantity and quality of media coverage. Thanks to innovation in public relations measurement methods and to learning from other marketing disciplines, marketing and public relations executives now see potential to move beyond emphasis on measuring public relations outputs to increasingly measuring its effects.

Basically, it is any and all research designed to determine the relative effectiveness or value of what is done in public relations.

In the short-term, PR measurement and evaluation involves assessing the success or failure of specific PR programs, strategies, activities or tactics by measuring the outputs, outtakes and/or outcomes of those programs against a predetermined set of objectives.

In the long-term, PR measurement and evaluation involves assessing the success or failure of much broader PR efforts that have as their aim seeking to improve and enhance the relationships that organizations maintain with key constituents.

More specifically, PR measurement is a way of giving a result a precise dimension, generally by comparison to some standard or baseline and usually is done in a quantifiable or numerical manner. That is, when we measure outputs, outtakes and outcomes, we usually come up with a precise measure — a numbers; for example.

PR evaluation determines the value or importance of a PR program or effort, usually through appraisal or comparison with a predetermined set of organization goals and objectives. PR evaluation is somewhat more subjective in nature, or softer, than PR measurement, involving a greater amount of interpretation and judgment calls.

Interest in public relations measurement and evaluation has surged in recent years, as the public relations field has grown in size and sophistication, and as those who practice in the field have found themselves more often than ever being asked to be accountable for what they do.

### **Who is responsible for measuring the effectiveness?**

According to the marketing executives surveyed by PR Week and Millward Brown (2017), responsibility for measuring the effectiveness of marketing disciplines is more likely to reside with direct marketing

(46.4%) and advertising (31.3%) than with public relations (15%) departments. Because there may be sensitivities among professionals related to sharing data internally — or sharing research costs and methods — public relations professionals should be advocates for measurement without necessarily seeking to control or lead the process.

In organizations where the public relations and research professionals do not normally work together, public relations professionals should seek out executives responsible for research related to the brands, products or services on which they work. Market research or customer analytics may be a centralized or decentralized function, so the best place for public relations executives to turn to identify potential research collaborators would be the chief marketing officer or top marketing executive.

## Different Perspectives

### RESEARCH PROFESSIONALS

- May have access to sales data or other evidence of results
- Are knowledgeable about a range of marketing research and evaluation methods
- Are often aware of and/or involved in research to measure other marketing disciplines
- Can assure research is conducted according to industry standards
- Understand the limitations of various measurement methods

### PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS

- Are advocates for public relations measurement and evaluation
- Can set realistic expectations for performance based on knowledge of the public relations discipline
- Design public relations programs to achieve specific outcomes
- Are familiar with methods for public relations research and evaluation
- Can help interpret research findings and their implications for public relations



Measurement should always be considered at the outset of a public relations program, not at its conclusion. By focusing on measurement in the planning phase, public relations executives can set measurable objectives to influence sales and design the public relations program to achieve those objectives.

### **The idea of Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE) not showing the real value of public relations?**

Likely et al. (2006, as cited in Macnamara, 2014, p. 19) point out several methods used in contemporary PR practice:

- Return on impressions (ROI) — the approach assumes that a certain number of impressions in the media will raise awareness and that it will affect the attitudes and behaviours of one part of targeted audiences;
- Return on media impact (ROMI) — compares media coverage data with sales results over a longer period of time to recognize cause and effect;
- Return on target investment (ROTI) — uses survey research before and after media exposure for measurement of awareness and buying intentions;
- Return on earned media (ROEM) — the approach is based on advertising value equivalency (AVE), a comparison of gained media coverage and publicity with advertisements.

Some of these approaches were criticized for not showing the real value of public relations, as is often the case with the AVE method.

The idea of Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE) has been around for many years. It has generated much debate in the Public Relations industry, with this debate focusing on both its reliability and validity. Many people are attracted to it because it appears able to put a money value on media coverage and, by extension, allows media relations people to compare their results with advertising. (Jeffries, 2003)



AVEs are calculated by measuring the column inches (in the case of print), or seconds (in the case of broadcast media) and multiplying these figures by the respective medium's advertising rates (per inch or per second). The resulting number is what it would have cost to place an advertisement of that size in that medium. By assessing all of your media coverage in this way, and aggregating all such calculations, you can assign an overall AVE to your coverage within a certain time period.

Calculating AVEs is not a problem in itself-its problems stem from what it is called and how it is used. Calling it an "advertising equivalency" strongly suggests that a news story of a particular size has equal impact to an advertisement of the same size in that publication. There is reason to believe that there is no simple way for the relationship between news stories and advertising to be compared.

For instance, there have been many studies in the field of journalism showing that over the past two decades the credibility of the news media has been declining as an increasing number of entertainment components are introduced into news stories and newscasts. The relationship between the credibility of news coverage and advertising is not a constant one, but varies over time and by topic.

Another limitation of AVEs is that they only value what actually appear in the media. Yet it is often the case that public relations professionals counsel clients to behave in a way that purposefully results in an absence of publicity. In these cases no publicity at all is what is desired and what is valued. AVEs have no means of reflecting such value.

The final major conceptual problem with AVEs concerns the fundamentally different nature of communications involved with news and advertising. An advertisement is usually a part of a campaign in which that same advertisement or commercial is repeatedly placed in media. It is likely that a given person is exposed to that advertisement or commercial a number of times. Studies have shown that it generally requires repeated exposure to have an impact on consumers' awareness, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours.

Besides these conceptual limitations, there are still three reasons to use AVE: user experience, buyer experience, and the real checking (Wynne, 2016). In a newspaper or magazine, or on the Internet, TV or

radio, you cannot divorce the experience of ads and editorial. They are seen or watched or listened to side-by-side. To claim otherwise is simply not realistic. Second, each day businesses large and small decide how to spend their marketing budgets and resources: advertising, public relations, social media, billboards, events, etc. It's already being compared — every day. Third reason is reality.

The utility of AVE is that it is simple to calculate and suits the reporting demands of financially driven managers and clients (Bussey, 2011; Morris & Goldsworthy, 2012; Newsom, VanSlyke Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2013).

Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) explain the benefits: The advantages of AVE are that it is relatively easy to calculate... Indeed it represents the only cheap, quick and easy way of putting a concrete monetary value on PR work. This is the language which business understands and is particularly important when budgets are under pressure (p. 232).

## Barcelona Principles 2.0

The contour of standardization in public relations measurement is slowly emerging with the Barcelona Principles 2.0, which emphasize the necessity to incorporate measurable goals in PR programs, to measure outcomes and not only outputs, to associate organizational performance with PR campaigns, to use the mixed method approach, to disregard AVE as a method for PR measurement, to use social media measurement software, and to achieve a high level of trustworthiness with transparency and replicability.

The Barcelona Principles refers to the Barcelona Declaration of Research Principles (*The Barcelona Principles were agreed upon by PR practitioners from 33 countries who met in Barcelona, Spain in 2010 for a summit convened by the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication — AMEC*)), a set of seven voluntary guidelines established by the public relations (PR) industry to measure the efficiency of PR campaigns.

The Barcelona Principles provide the framework for communications

measurement and are not specific tools or formulas. However, by applying them, you wind up with a solid measurement program for communications (Wynee, 2017).

Within each Principle, there are pretty specific directions in terms of how to write measureable goals and then the techniques you apply for each type of measurement, including what are the best ways to apply those techniques. The Principles reflect the fact that communications takes many different forms, and the Principles guide you in terms of how to measure each form.

### The Barcelona Principles focused more on "what not to do" (outcome)

The Barcelona Principles identify the need for outcome, instead of output, based measurement of PR campaigns, call for the exclusion of ad value equivalency metrics, and recognize the communications value of social media.

Table 1. Changes from the original Barcelona Principles 2010 to the Barcelona Principles 2015 (AMEC, 2015)

Original Barcelona Principles (2010)	Barcelona Principles 2.0 (2015)
Importance of goal setting and measurement	Goal setting and measurement are fundamental to communication and public relation
Measuring the effect on outcomes is preferred to measuring outputs	Measuring communication outcomes is recommended versus only measuring outputs
The effect on business results can and should be measured where possible	The effect on organizational performance can and should be measured where possible: demand for models to evaluate the impact on target audiences and survey research
Media measurements requires quantity and quality	Measurement and evaluation require both qualitative and quantitative methods
AVEs are not the value of Public Relations	AVEs are not the value of communication
Social Media can and should be measured	Social media can and should be measured consistently with other media channels
Transparency and replicability are paramount to sound measurement	Measurement and evaluation should be transparent, consistent and valid. Ensure integrity, honesty, openness, and ethical practices

The principles do not mandate or even recommend any particular method, although they do criticize AVEs and provide some general guidance on other methods, such as surveys and statistical analysis. This allows for considerable flexibility in applying the principles, especially as there is no "one size fits all" method.

The seven principles follow, along with some context from the overall research discipline:

### 1) Importance of Goal Setting and Measurement

This is the simplest principle, declaring the value of setting goals and measuring how effectively various projects are getting you towards those goals.

Like most fields that used to rely on gut instinct and experience, PR is becoming more disciplined and scientific. However, measurement by itself isn't enough for success, and measuring the wrong thing or the wrong way is a recipe for disaster.

### 2) Measuring the Effect on Outcomes is Preferred to Measuring Outputs

It's tempting to measure outputs, such as number of press releases distributed, number of contacts made, or even number of stories. It's easy and quantitative, so it lends itself to charts and presentations. However, outputs only measure what you did, not whether it was worth doing. Outputs are great when there's a direct and defined link between the output and the outcomes. For example, since we know that polio vaccinations prevent polio, the number of vaccinations measures how many people won't get polio. But public relations don't have the same direct link. We can't yet get into the public's collective head and see what's going on there between the moments somebody is exposed to a message and an opinion is shaped, reinforced, revised, or discarded. So that's why we need to measure the outcomes.

Outcomes can be either beliefs, such as a positive perception of a person or organization, or actions, such as purchasing, advocating, contributing, or voting. However, the closer a belief is to an action, the better.

### 3) The Effect on Business Results Can and Should Be Measured Where Possible

Tying outcomes to business results tells you what to do more of, what to do less of, or what to stop doing. It also defines the value of public relations efforts.

4) Media Measurement Requires Quantity and Quality

Quality refers to the completeness of the data as well as the accuracy. Does it include metadata about the source, such as its audience and credibility to its readers? Does it provide metadata about the article or posting, such as tone and the prominence of the topic in an article (such as passing mentions versus substantial coverage), and where possible, semantic analysis?

Quantity has to be sufficient to support the decisions that you're going to make. For example, do you have enough data to generalize about a specific group, such as job-seeking millennials, wealthy single parents, or chief technology officers?

5) AVEs Are Not the Value of Public Relations

Aside from the reasons we discussed above, if you have enough data to truly measure the tone of the article or posting enough to estimate value, you have enough data to use more meaningful metrics.

Placement time and location are difficult to capture for social media, so much so that you're better off spending the efforts on metrics that are tied to business value.

6) Social Media Can and Should be Measured

We know tremendous amounts about how people consume social media; in many ways, thanks to automated data gathering, we know more about this than about traditional media. We also know that it can be tremendously influential.

That said, we're still in the beginning stages of understanding how social media influences beliefs and behaviors. For example, look at all of the studies about the impact of social media on the Arab Spring. Virtually every study draws a different conclusion from the same data.

7) Transparency and Replicability are Paramount to Sound Measurement

This is fundamental to any kind of research, whether particle physics, animal behavior, or optimizing packaging speed.

When analyzing a collection of articles or postings, the analyst should make the dataset available to the client.

While some measurement tools are proprietary-so not transparent by definition-they should be replicable. That is, you run the same data through them and get very close to the same result each time. Some results are more replicable than others, in the hard sciences as well as in social sciences, but discrepancies should have an explanation. For example, humans bring a huge set of assumptions and perceptions to tasks such as assigning tone, whether they're doing it manually or through a programmed algorithm. Two equally competent humans may assign different tones to the same material. However, the automated results should be consistent and the humans should be able to explain why they assigned a particular tone.

If the original set of Principles focused more on "what not to do," the updated Barcelona Principles of 2015 provide more guidance on "what to do," in order to unite the ever-expanding media landscape into a transparent, reliable, and consistent measurement and evaluation framework (Rockland, 2015):

- The Barcelona Principles outline the basic principles of PR and overall communication measurement. It reframed some of the language to emphasize that The Principles provide a basic foundation and are relevant and applicable to all organizations, governments, companies, and brands globally.
- It has been recognize that in an integrated communications environment, measurement must be integrated. This means integration across geographies (global and local), across methods (quantitative and qualitative), and across channels (including paid, earned, owned and shared media).
- The Principles made a distinction between measurement and evaluation: In addition to the role of measurement, it called out the role of evaluation — the actual process of using data to make a judgement on value and effectiveness of communication.
- More focus on qualitative: Qualitative information plays an important part in measurement and evaluation, often adding colour and context

that helps professionals understand "the why" behind the quantitative outcomes.

- Providing more specific counsel on accepted methodologies for both quantitative and qualitative approaches, as well as suggested best practices for ensuring quantitative methods are reliable and replicable and qualitative methods are trustworthy.

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## **Contemporary integrated PR measurement and evolution (AMEC's new Integrated Evaluation framework)**

To prove the value of communication in an age of accountability it is vital to move beyond measuring just the content (or 'media') analysis that largely sufficed for the previous years.

Now communication professionals must show the effect that their work has had on the objectives of their respective organisations.

AMEC's new Integrated Evaluation framework shows how to do this. The interactive element of the integrated evaluation framework guide us through the process from aligning objectives to establishing a plan,



setting targets and then measuring the outputs, outtakes, outcomes and impact of your work. At each step of the process it provides additional information and suggests potential approaches and metrics that might be appropriate.

AMEC's integrated evaluation framework provides a consistent and credible approach that works for organisations of all sizes but which can be tailored to very specific user cases and objectives.

Anyone can use it, it is free and non-proprietary, allowing any organisation, be it university, in-house department, PR agency, or Measurement Company to benefit from its approach. This framework shows how to "operationalize" the Barcelona Principles 2.0 and demonstrates how to turn Principles into action, and to finally prove the value of PR work.

How does it work? The online application does not only help organizations and PR professionals to determine which activities to place where in the model. The website also provides supporting documentation such as a taxonomy with examples. If for example, you are unsure what to put under "outputs" or "out-takes", the application will guide you through the different steps, and you will learn where these activities fit best.

The added value of this new application is that it helps organizations to develop a program that is measurable and results-oriented. The result is an integrated communications plan that is easy to carry out and can be updated when necessary.

With this in mind, education on the importance of metrics that truly reflect the value of our work must be provided for media relations practitioners and information should be provided by industry associations on suitable alternatives to AVEs that always relate back to the original objectives of each media campaign.

The development of digital technologies has revolutionised marketing and has provided a number of new ways in which performance can be measured within public relations and communications. Traditional media and offline metrics outside of AVEs, such as an increase in awareness or a change in attitude, should be combined with new web and digital metrics that relate to the digital boom.

Image 1. Lewis Wheel



Source: <https://amecorg.com/>

Table 2. ZAMEC's integrated evaluation tool

Objectivities	Like all good measurement, it should start with clear organizational objectives. These can come in many different forms, whether they be awareness, advocacy, adoption or demand related. Following on from organizational objectives, are communication objectives. These should reflect and mirror the organizational objectives.
Outputs	In outputs, this covers the core measures across PESO. So for example what was the reach of the paid advertising, how many visitors to the website, how many posts, tweets or retweets, how many people attended the event, and how many potential readers of the media coverage. This is quantitative and qualitative measure of outputs.
Inputs	This section covers two important areas. The first step is to define the target audiences of the campaign. Second is the strategic plan and other inputs such as describing some of the situation analysis, resources required and budgets.
Activities	This section is outlining what activities were carried out, any testing or research, content production etc. Importantly, the tool recognizes the importance of paid, earned, shared and owned (PESO) and gives users the ability to tag accordingly.
Out-takes	In outtakes, this refers to the response and reactions of your target audiences to the activity. How attentive were they to the content, what was their recall, how well understood is the topic, did the audience engage with the content or did the audience subscribe to more information.
Outcomes	In outcomes, this measures the effect of the communications on the target audience. Have the target audience increased understanding, has it changed their attitude to the topic, has it increased trust and/or preference, has it had an impact on the intention to do something (e.g. trial, subscribe, register) or increased online advocacy.
Impact	This final section is where impact on the organizational objectives is evaluated. So here the tool is looking to cover reputation improvement, relationships improved or established, increase in sales or donations, change in policy, or improved social change. This is a clear demonstration of business outcome and link to organizational objectives

The number of click-throughs, the volume of web traffic, the levels of social media engagement and the understanding of a customer's journey are all appropriate methods to measure the success of online campaigns. Measurement is central to our business discipline and, whilst the vast majority of public relations professionals would agree that it is time to stop the use of AVEs once and for all, it's imperative that this metric is suitably replaced by other evaluative techniques.

## Conclusion

Applying effective measurement and evaluation to communications campaigns is vital in the field of public relations. It provides justification for why an activity was carried out, allowing marketing professionals to assess whether the campaign achieved the objectives that it set out to meet. Of equal importance, evaluation provides insight to help shape the future activity of a particular organisation, service, brand or product, leading to better decisions and improved outcomes.

Advertising value equivalents (AVEs) are a metric that claim to provide practitioners with insight into the value of earned media coverage, allowing easy comparison between earned and paid-for media. It is a technique that has long been criticised, but has recently received a particularly high level of attention within the communications and public relations arena, and for good reason.

The issue of PR evaluation and measurement is a significant and challenging topic for academics and practitioners. The main issue concerns the insufficient standardization of evaluation procedures with regard to fluidity of communication processes.

Most literature presents that the first step towards successful measurement is determining measurable objectives of PR programs. Evaluation is important because it can steer a communication in the right direction. It helps in displaying the results of PR activities as represented at the senses that prove PR value. If it is properly implemented it can save money and time needed for PR activities.

Still, the real issue is how we should all measure the real results of PR. This is an opportunity for professional organizations to step forward and establish some industry wide standards. This will enable PR services vendors to adapt or develop new solutions to help organizations measure results more effectively. With a variety of new online and social media monitoring products on the market, there will no doubt be tools organizations can leverage to more easily (and accurately) measure PR.

The business objective is what should be focused on, and measured. Knowing what matters to the business means we will be better placed to build the relevant metrics framework. This is why the new Integrated

Evaluation Framework from the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) is so vital. The new interactive framework gives users; agencies and client-side teams, a clear methodology and taxonomy to develop a measurable communications plan and evaluate its success. It gives users of the tool a clear journey, and most importantly a way to demonstrate the business impact.

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