

Measurement – Is it the Holy Grail of Public Relations?

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Measurement is defined by dictionary.com as the *act or process of ascertaining the extent, dimensions, or quantity of something.*

Therefore, measurement of a Public Relations programme would simply mean the act of ascertaining the extent, dimensions or quantity of what Public Relations programme has achieved – the magical something.

So what is the magical something that a Public Relations programme is expected to achieve? Why is it considered the holy grail of Public Relations – everyone knows about its existence but not able to find it? Why is it that only a few use it to their benefit? Is it because the role of Public Relations itself is not well understood or appreciated?

I believe that Public Relations is often seen merely as the act of gaining favourable press coverage and hence the measurement of its impact is limited to the extent of the favourable press coverage it was able to garner. This is the beginning of the long journey of measuring public relations.

Given that, the measure of its success predominantly became “Advertising Value Equivalent” or AVE, which translates into the advertising value of the editorial exposure received by a company. Many continue to use this benchmark to measure the success of their publicity programme under the garb of a Public Relations campaign.

The first cousin of AVE is often “Number of Press Impressions” meaning the number of people who might have had the opportunity to be exposed to a story that has appeared in the media; usually refers to the total audited circulation of a publication or the audience reach of a broadcast vehicle. I call it the ‘thud factor’ or the success of the programme being measured by whose ‘coverage dossier’ was heavier! Though, at the point of extinction, some still continue to use this archaic methodology to benchmark their Public Relations programmes!

Time/space measures or variations of it continue to be the predominant way to measure of the impact of public relations programme and this will continue to be the case as long as Public Relations is narrowly used for mere press relations.

So is there more to it than press relations? Instead of elaborating the virtues of public relations, I want to focus on the establishing a common understanding of it that helps us understand what and how to measure the impact of a public relations campaign.

Public Relations is described in many ways but in the essence it remains *“the act of generating goodwill or mutual understanding between a company and its various publics/stakeholders.”*

In the early 1900s Edward Louis Bernays, considered the founding father of modern Public Relations along with Ivy Lee, defined Public Relations as *“a management function which tabulates public attitudes, defines the policies, procedures and interest of an organization followed by executing a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance”*

Robert L. Heath describes Public Relations in the Encyclopedia of Public Relations as a *“set of management, supervisory, and technical functions that foster an organization's ability to strategically listen to, appreciate, and respond to those persons whose mutually beneficial relationships with the organization are necessary if it is to achieve its missions and values.”*



Essentially it is a management function that focuses on two-way communication and fostering of mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics. According to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the functions of Public Relations include research, planning, communications dialogue and evaluation

It would seem that Public relations is about changing attitudes to gain public's understanding and acceptance. Publics meaning stakeholders whose understanding and acceptance is material to the success of the company. This achieved through a two-way communication.

I had earlier described measurement as the act or process of ascertaining the extent, dimensions, or quantity of something. So, if we were to put together Bernays, Lee and Heath's definition with that of measurement, what can we conclude about measuring the impact of Public Relations?

As I understand, measuring the effectiveness of the Public Relations programme should be about the change in attitude, understanding gained and acceptance received from the stakeholders of a company whilst the measurement of the efficiency of the communication process would be about the relevance of the medium and the message used between the sender and the recipient.

Shouldn't we use our knowledge of the true value of public relations to measure both effectiveness and efficiency of the communication process or continue to follow the age-old practice of time and share in the press alone?

The answer stares us in the face. Indian public relations professionals can learn from the journey that their western colleagues have made and make a leap that brings the role and impact of public relations into the C Suite.

As Bernays and Lee explain in their definition it is "a management function that tabulates public attitude..."

Effectiveness of public relations has to be about identifying the public, mapping and tabulating their 'current attitude' to seek insights into their current beliefs and sources of information that drive their understanding and acceptance of the company.

Then, to define the policies, procedures and interest of an organization followed by executing a program of action and closing the loop by measuring the changes in the beliefs, attitudes, understanding and acceptance that the programme has been able to generate. This is the continuous process of gaining trust of the stakeholders.

Our market research colleagues have made a whole industry out of it and there are several well established methodologies available for use. Public Relations professional need to embrace this and need to acquire knowledge, skills and attitude to read, understand and influence the human mind in a positive way!

Lest, you think that I am underestimating or eliminating the role of third party endorsement generated through the several mediums including the press. I am not. I am merely suggesting that we have the opportunity to do things differently in making a difference to the business of our clients.

However, if the focus of your measurement is to measure the 'efficiency' of the communication process or the media effort, we can then measure the efficiency of the communication effort through 'content analysis' across a range of parameters like share of voice, prominence, tone, focus of message, etc. within the backdrop of the most relevant medium for a set of stakeholders. There are several 'content analysis' service providers today. We, at Genesis Burson-Marsteller work with Impact



Research and Measurement to help us make sense of news and views being expressed in the press and establish our 'output objectives'.

This measure is like a milestone on the road, it is more a barometer of the progress we are making in our journey. It has its use and undertaken strategically and not merely with AVE or share of ink, it can help interpret the expected impact of the communication process. As the internet starts to play a larger role in the lives of people, content analysis helps not only deal with the information overload but make sense of it. This helps direct the resources of an organization into the right mediums and message, thereby making the conversations more engaging.

Whatever your measure, public relations needs to focus on what to measure and the answer to the how will emerge. In the world that demands ROI on everything, we can no longer afford to question whether to measure or not.

As they say "what cannot be measured, cannot be managed"

Measurement in public relations does not need to be our Holy Grail and we do not need to solve the Da Vinci code to find it! Its right here upon us; all we need to do is to have the courage to embrace it.

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