

MANAGING measurement COSTS

Aligning the goals of your communication plan with the goals of the business is the first step to demonstrating value

by Robert J. Holland, ABC, and Katrina Gill

With our combined 30 years of experience in corporate communication and research, we can easily name the most common reasons why organizations fail to develop strategic communication plans: *We don't have the money. We don't have the time. And we don't know how.*

These excuses also come up with regard to measuring the value of communication, a necessary component of a strategic communication plan.

The good news is that communication measurement is more widely recognized as a standard global practice in

public relations and communication. IABC and Benchmark Ltd. surveyed more than 1,000 communicators in 25 countries last year and found that nearly 70 percent said they measure the effectiveness of what they do. Sixty-one percent said measurement is an integral part of the PR process. And 77 percent of those who didn't measure said they planned to do so in the future.

What did respondents say was holding them back from measuring communication effectiveness? Cost, time and lack of expertise.

For an organization's communication activities to be

worth the investment, communication must have measurable goals that support business goals. In fact, the goals of the most powerful communication plans are the same as the goals of the business, so that the achievement of business goals becomes the ultimate measure of communication success.

Communicators appear ready to accept this highly valuable strategic role, but they continue to be held back by cost, time and lack of expertise. We understand that the barriers are real. But we also believe communicators can take steps to reduce or even eliminate the barriers, especially cost.

about the authors

Robert J. Holland, ABC, is the owner of Holland Communication Solutions LLC, of Richmond, Virginia, which provides communication counsel and services.

Katrina Gill is the president and founder of Gill Research LLC, a full-service research consulting firm based in Chicago, specializing in communication audits.



The challenge is to demonstrate to business leaders how communication that supports business goals might save the organization money over the long term.

Make your case

One way to overcome the cost barrier is to make a business case for strategic communication that includes a measurement component. Many business leaders consider communication to be a cost to the business from the outset. The challenge is to demonstrate how communication that supports business goals might save the organization money over the long term. An organization's communication plan must have goals that are at least linked to, if not the same as, business goals.

How can you determine whether communication has

helped to achieve business goals? This is where communication measurement comes in. Many companies regularly conduct employee attitude surveys. Adding questions to measure the impact of communication on employees' knowledge, attitudes and behaviors as they relate to the business goals is easy—if you know the right questions to ask.

For example, questions on an employee attitude survey might ask:

- Did stories in [name of communication vehicle] help you understand the importance of the company's "employer of choice" initiative?

- Based on information received through [name of communication vehicle], to what degree do you support the company's focus on being the "employer of choice"?

- Did information you received in [name of communication vehicle] assist you in telling others about job openings in the company?

Measuring how communication influences an audience's knowledge, attitudes and behaviors is more meaningful to business leaders than measuring how many copies of a publication were produced or how many people

share the knowledge

In "Do Your Homework," John Williams stresses the importance of communicating research findings: "Share the overall results immediately.... This builds credibility for the research process, lets people know their input was received, and shows people that the company has heard their input and will (hopefully) take action."

For more information, visit store.yahoo.com/iabcstore.



One way to overcome the cost barrier is by planning ahead when senior management gives you the go-ahead for communication measurement.

attended a town hall meeting. What employees know affects the attitudes they adopt, which in turn drives on-the-job behaviors.

Measuring the perceived value of communication activities also provides meaningful information. We helped a U.S. financial services company conduct a communication audit that revealed that employees felt their supervisors and managers were doing an excellent job of providing information to employees. The

audit also found that supervisors and managers had a high degree of credibility with employees. On the other hand, local company publications were not highly regarded as sources of business information. With this data in hand, business leaders could make sound decisions about which communication activities to fund and which ones to divest.

Plan ahead

Another way to overcome the cost barrier is by planning ahead

when senior management gives you the go-ahead for communication measurement. Tips for getting started include:

- Educating yourself about research by attending seminars and reading how-to books.
- Starting small by measuring just a piece of what you'd like to measure or using a smaller sample size.
- Reporting the results so that management wants to know more.
- Becoming the person people seek when they want to know about the audience (e.g., employees, shareholders, etc.).
- Making sure your proposed research addresses the decision makers' current concerns.

Hiring a consultant is not necessary for every communication project, but measurement—especially in the form of focus groups, interviews and surveys—is a task for which consultants can provide great value. The main benefit is integrity of the process. Your organization wants the most accurate, reliable information with which to make communication decisions. Having a third party conduct the research, analyze the results and make recommendations helps ensure objectivity.

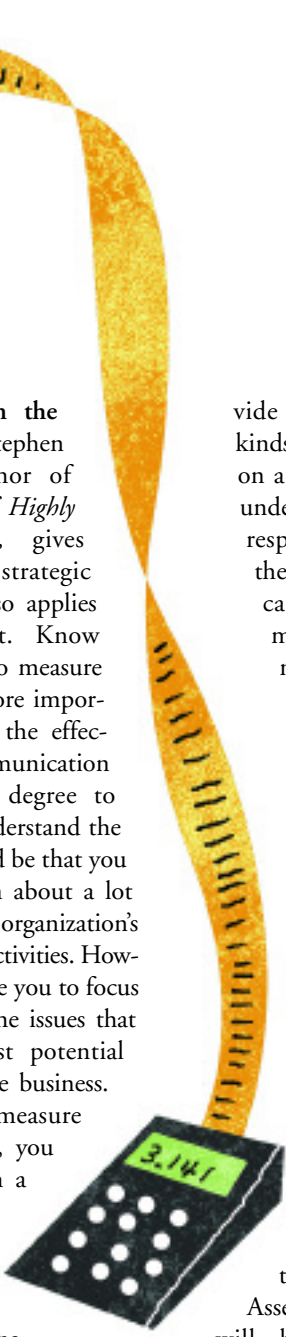
Time is usually money when working with consultants, so taking care of the following five preliminary tasks can help conserve both.

—R.J.H. & K.G.

A helping hand

Communicators today are stretched more than ever, yet we have more demands placed upon us, such as demonstrating a return on our organization's investment. This is a primary reason why hiring a measurement consultant is a good idea. Measurement experts have the experience and expertise to help you get the most out of the activity. As with any service provider, however, you should know what to look for. And there are some ways to save when working with consultants:

- **Start off on the right foot.** Provide consultants with as much information up front as you can, including background about your organization, the specific goals and objectives of the project, previous research findings, and anything else that might smooth the way.
- **Do your homework.** Educate yourself about research as best you can before the project begins. You'll know what to expect and won't waste time with things you may not want or need. You'll also have a better understanding of measurement techniques.
- **Be clear about expectations.** With the consultants' help, decide what can be done in-house and what needs to be outsourced. Let them know the areas in which you want their help and the things you can do yourself. For example, your IT department can pull random names for the focus groups or send the survey link via e-mail. The benefits of third-party consultants are the objectivity, expertise and credibility they bring to the table.
- **Tell the whole story.** Don't hide any information, including prior, less-than-stellar research findings or potential obstacles to the research process (such as people who oppose research). The more the consultants know, the more they'll be able to help you.



1. Begin with the end in mind. Stephen Covey, the author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, gives advice about strategic planning that also applies to measurement. Know what you want to measure and why. Is it more important to measure the effectiveness of communication vehicles or the degree to which people understand the messages? It could be that you need information about a lot of aspects of your organization's communication activities. However, we encourage you to focus your efforts on the issues that hold the greatest potential for impact on the business. If you try to measure too many things, you will end up with a long survey that limits participation or with focus group discussions that are too scattered.

2. Use the right tool for the job. There are many measurement tools at your disposal. One might not yield the kind of information you need to link communication activities to business goals. It could be that qualitative methods such as focus groups or interviews are adequate. Perhaps a survey is necessary. Often, a combination of tools is required. For example, focus groups can pro-

vide insight into the kinds of questions to ask on a survey or help you understand why survey respondents answered the way they did. Be careful not to use more tools than are necessary or to use so few that you come up short of information (see "Aim for Quality and Quantity," page 24). Thinking ahead about what you want to measure and why should lead you to the right tool for the job.

3. Line up resources ahead of time. You can save time and money by doing a few things in advance.

Assemble a team that will help with survey administration or focus group and interview arrangements. If you choose a survey, decide whether it will be a census survey (in which all audience members are polled) or a random sample survey (in which a representative sample of the audience is polled). Moderating focus groups and conducting interviews should be left to a third-party consultant who is trained in these roles. Otherwise, the integrity

of the information might be compromised.

4. Maximize participation. Communicators don't need consultants to tell us how important it is to communicate! This is just as true when communicating about measurement. You can save time and money by already having developed a communication plan for whatever measurement activity you decide to engage in. If a survey is coming, let potential participants know what the survey is about and how the information will be used. Be clear about the process—when it will take place, how it will be administered and by whom. Send a reminder as the closing date draws near. After the survey, thank people for their participation. Most important, communicate the results and the actions you will take based on the results. Beware of the black-hole syndrome! Use the reporting of the research findings as an opportunity to model effective communication.

The same rules apply to focus groups, interviews, focus panels and any other method of gathering information. Help people know what to expect, remind them what you want them to do, thank them for doing it, and close the loop by communicating results. Not only will this help ensure strong participation in the current measurement activity,

get started

In *Communication Research, Measurement and Evaluation*, Lou Williams Jr., ABC, APR, offers seven pointers that organizations can use to get started on measurement:

1. Start small.
2. Educate thyself.
3. Be the master at finding information.
4. Build consensus on needs/solutions.
5. Don't overstretch/overpromise.
6. Concentrate your research attention on those things that matter.
7. Tell the truth.

For more information, visit store.yahoo.com/iabcstore.

You will be tempted to ask questions that either do not produce relevant information or that produce information you do not intend to act upon. Extraneous questions cost money.

but it will also help drive participation the next time.

By maximizing participation, you will get your money's worth out of the measurement process. Higher participation yields greater reliability in the data. The margin of error decreases as participation increases. Your efforts to measure communication effectiveness

are in vain if the reliability of the data is questionable.

5. Ask the right questions in the right way. Writing questions for surveys, focus groups and interviews is an important step. Flaws in the phraseology of questions can lead to unreliable data. While a consultant provides value in helping to write questions, you

can shorten the process by being clear about what you want to know. This tip goes back to beginning with the end in mind. You will be tempted to ask questions that either do not produce relevant information or that produce information you do not intend to act upon. Extraneous questions cost money because they make the process longer—from asking the question to processing the responses—which decreases participation.

There are three golden rules for deciding which questions to ask:

1. There's no "nice to know."
2. Only ask about things that can be changed.
3. Research findings must lead to solutions.

You should have a good understanding of what's important to your specific organization. Do an analysis of the current situation. What issues and facts do you already have? What are the implications? What do you still need to know? This will lead you to the information you need and the types of questions you should ask. ●

—R.J.H. & K.G.

Aim for quality *and* quantity

The trick to conducting great communication measurement is to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Using these two techniques in conjunction is the only surefire way to unleash the power of communication research.

The key differences that exist between qualitative and quantitative research fit together so that one method's strengths balance the other method's weaknesses and vice versa.

Qualitative data

- "Soft" data and information
- Word-driven
- Interviews, focus groups

Quantitative data

- "Hard" data, statistics, trends
- Number-driven
- Surveys, questionnaires

Qualitative research reveals "where things stand." It spots issues and then uncovers what drives the issues—the details and reasons behind them. Qualitative data is descriptive and often explains quantitative findings. For example, an apropos verbatim statement captured in a focus group or an interview can clarify, or give meaning to, a survey finding.

Doing qualitative research before quantitative determines what kinds of questions to ask on the survey. What you find during the qualitative research will help build the survey questions. It will tell you not only what to ask on the survey, but also how to ask it by revealing the right language to use.

On the other hand, quantitative research provides the hard evidence and statistics to support the qualitative data. Survey data analysis reveals "statistical significance." "Statistically significant findings," as determined by various statistical tests, such as t-tests and analysis of variance, identify the most meaningful or noteworthy results and show differences between demographic groups, such as geographic locations or departments. Quantitative data also allows you to track changes over time, examine trends and establish communication metrics for your organization.