

Effective Evaluation for Complex Communication Management.

The Uses and Abuses of Evaluation

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We are living in a time of omnipresent information and communication. Our problem is no longer to receive information but to evaluate it. More than 95 per cent of the messages we are exposed to by the media and advertising day for day do not even reach us. And we actually process only a few of the remaining 5 per cent, and remember even fewer of them. From the point of view of advertising it is becoming more difficult and more expensive to reach people.

Attention is in short supply. And the scarcer the good, the higher the price. If you wish to attract attention for a product – or even more difficult for a social topic – then it is necessary to adopt a more strategic approach. And you must measure whether you have achieved your objectives.

[Communications management]

The task of public relations, or communications management – I use both terms inter-changeably – is to manage the communication between an organisation and its publics.¹ Public relations should always be goal-oriented. The sender of the message wants to achieve something, and will only be able to get the message across with goal-oriented communication. In short: Communication is necessary, it costs money, it is complex.

The same applies for the evaluation of communication:

It is important, because it is the only way you will be able to tell if you are reaching your goals and have used your resources effectively;

It costs money, so that you have to make sure that the costs and benefits are in the right relationship;

and It is complex, because the communications processes themselves are extremely complex.

Let me explain this last point in more detail.

[Communication]

As a speaker here I face the same challenge that I encounter in my daily work in the agency when I am developing a campaign.

First of all: Studies tell us that your span of attention in a talk or presentation is limited. Perhaps they show that 70 per cent of the audience is no longer listening after 5 minutes. And do men and women listen in different ways, or pay attention to different details?

¹ Grunig/Hunt 1984: Managing Public Relations. New York et al: 8.
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The addressees of my message – and in this case that means you – are not just passive receivers. You pick up the message but then change it – in the best case – into information. You process what you hear, rearrange it, draw on your own personal knowledge and experience, and then store the results to your memory. Communication is only possible together with the addressees.

Successful communication reaches the addressees, attracts their attention, and in a next step meets with their understanding and then acceptance.

[Listening, Understanding, Accepting]

It starts with listening. Listening is the first of three hurdles that a message has to overcome.

Listening can lead to understanding, that is following the line of argument and forming an attitude.

And if things go right, Understanding can lead in a third step to Acceptance. If you are accepted you will be extended long-term trust, you will be believed and you will also be able to generate active support for your objectives. If the addressees are convinced, they might act in the way you hoped and anticipated.

[Managing with your head or your heart?]

As a professional communicator, you should never rely solely on a gut feeling. Of course we gather experience and develop some sort of intuition about the ways things work and how they interact with each other. But who knows all the stakeholders in a political or social organisation, in the various media, or all their co-workers? Let alone their current discussions, viewpoints, and the agenda of important issues and challenges?

Evaluation can help here to provide signposts:

Evaluation is not only an instrument to determine, after the fact, whether I have reached my objective, it is above all a steering instrument:

It can help you to remain on the planned route, to identify diversions in good time, and to gather experience which might prove useful in the next project.

Evaluation is therefore important during and after all phases of the management cycle: from the initial analysis on which the planning is based through to the final check on whether I have achieved the objectives.

Management and measurement are therefore two sides of the same coin: If I can’t steer something I haven’t got in under control, and so I cannot manage it: In the worst case the result is up to chance – blue-sky communication.

[The Holy Grail of PR professionals]

As I already mentioned, evaluation is also becoming increasingly important in the field of political communication for ministries and for NGOs.

The American Council of Public Relations Firms noted in 2003: *"If there is a "Holy Grail" in public relations, a goal that the profession passionately seeks to achieve (indeed, must achieve) in its never-ending quest for organizational recognition, respect and support, it is this: an irrefutable methodology for demonstrating the value of what we do."*²

So what else is there to it? In addition to the search for recognition and success there is also the search for transparency. And transparency through evaluation is the basis for the legitimisation of communications work, both internally and externally. For example, why should a campaign be conducted, and why this way rather than another way, and what has it achieved when it is completed?

The point then is that when we talk about communications management, we are talking about targeted communication with uncertain effects, but which nevertheless has to be planned strategically. And with the strategic planning of communication we mean the analysis of the current situation, the formulation of measurable goals, and then on-going checks, and monitoring of the outcome.

A look at the PR-management cycle clearly shows that confirming success means being able to measure success – and of course this is only possible if realistic, measurable goals are set in advance. If you want to optimise your work then you have to observe the results of your actions and learn from this.

[3 Types of evaluation]

The evaluation of communications campaigns usually takes one of three forms:

- Firstly: Process evaluation. This investigates whether the right people do the right things at the right time. Processes should be evaluated in an on-going fashion, always asking: Are we doing the right things?
- Secondly: Efficiency analysis. This focuses on the relationship between the effectiveness and the resources used. The question that you ask at an early stage is: Are we doing the things right?
- Thirdly: The analysis of the effects and the effectiveness. How can I measure what effects of my measures are?

[Effects and effectiveness]

The effects are described in the textbooks as changes in cognitive, emotional and behavioural fields. Seen from the point of view of the communications scientist, they are the consequence of the fact that people

² Council of Public Relations Firms (CPRF), 2003. Quoted after: Reinert 2003.
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participate in a PR-initiated communicative process – whether as a direct dialogue, or indirectly through the media.

If such effects are reinforced, delayed, or even prevented then we are also dealing with effects.³ The important thing is that the effects are all the resultant changes, whether these were intended or not.

If I plan that 60 per cent of you should still remember my core statements after the lunch break then I can check this by asking you afterwards. And bearing in mind the studies on paying attention in lectures and presentations, I might even have a benchmark, because if there is an average retention rate of 30 per cent of the audience, then with the 60 per cent value I would have been quite successful.

If I have reached my goal, then my communications measure was effective. Effectiveness is the extent to which a project or a measure had achieved your objectives. However, in this case I only examine the intended consequences of a measure.

[Abuse]

When it comes to measuring the effects and effectiveness, a number of things can go wrong. An undesirable effect might be if 60 per cent of the audience here get up and leave the room. That is not my intention, of course, but it could very well be an effect of my communications measure. Alternatively, it could be a non-causal correlation and they might have a completely unrelated reason for leaving. Could the aroma of the buffet be attracting the people in the back rows, but not reaching me at the speaker’s rostrum? Or has a group had to leave to catch their plane? Apparent relationships are a risk when it comes to interpreting evaluation results, and so you always have to bear in mind what actually has to be measured, and which other variables could also be influencing the results.

Apart from this there are always interactions or interdependencies between various aspects. Not forgetting the fact mentioned earlier that a characteristic of communication is that the message and the symbols used can be interpreted differently by each recipient.

There is often the expectation that the effects of PR-measures will become apparent from one day to the next. But there is often a time lag, so that the effects only become visible in the medium-term.

It is important to be careful if too much is being demanded of simple evaluation instruments. Checklists may help to improve processes, but they do not guarantee that communication measures will be more effective. An improvement of the “production process” makes sense, but in contrast to the manufacturing industry it will not ensure that the end-product coming off the production line is better.

There is a fascinating discussion in the PR and marketing literature about the increasing use of performance management systems, for example instruments like the balanced scorecard with a lot of so-called “key performance indicators”. As they gain in popularity there is also an increasing tendency to employ them

³ Maletzke 1976
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incorrectly. The result is a return to simple communications measures because they are known and measurable.

The apparent objectivity of numbers and percentages also draws people to making rushed interpretations, and that can lead to serious errors of judgement. A good example is opinion polls at election time. Journalists like to write that Party A now only has a 2 per cent lead over Party B. But what they normally omit is that there is a typical statistical error of plus or minus 3 per cent, so they really cannot draw any such conclusion from the survey.

The obsessive collection of figures or an evaluation which is only carried out for internal reports in order to establish internal legitimisation for the activities will not lead any further – and can quickly become extremely expensive.

[Use]

So what is the right way to go about things? What are the classics that can always be met in the PR-context? And how should their results be interpreted properly? Let me proceed pragmatically and look at the favourite evaluation instruments.

Monitoring media resonance is probably in first place. And most begin by counting the clippings, that is the number of media reports in which the organisation or the campaign is featured. In addition, the quantitative analysis of the media reporting will also take into consideration the sum of all the circulation figures.

But newspapers and magazines are often read by more than one person, whether the morning paper which is discussed over the breakfast table or during the coffee break, or a women’s magazine which is passed around among friends. This effect is taken into account by measurements of the cumulative reach. The circulation is multiplied by the number of readers of each copy. This can provide very impressive numbers, but these should not be overvalued, because they only tell us about the average media contacts, that is the chance that somebody might have read the article.

A media resonance analysis can provide more if methods from sociological research are applied. A qualitative evaluation of the contents of the media reports can provide more answers. Were the reports positive, neutral or negative? What core aspects did the journalist highlight, was my organisation or my project the cause and the central aspect of the report, or did it only play a secondary role?

The so-called penetration index shows the proportion of the reports about a topic in which my organisation was mentioned – for example, whether my campaign was mentioned in connection with a general topic. Here it is possible to set targets in advance which can then be evaluated on a continual basis. In the analysis you can then ask: Is my media strategy the right one? Or you can consider how press releases, the press conference or other measures can be optimised, if the media resonance was quantitatively satisfactory, but qualitatively not in line with the PR intentions. The formative evaluation of the coverage bears the

opportunity to get informed about current issues and active public. For some clients we use a special database as a monitoring system. Each day we scan the clippings, evaluate them in the database and link them to information about our stakeholders or partners of the campaign. Then we can observe: Who is active at the moment, who raises which issues? Are there weak signal as first indicators of a communicative problem?

Media resonance analysis has particular potential if the reports are investigated in terms of the message which was defined in the planning stage. Let me give a practical example:

The German Federal Ministry for Consumer Protection wanted to inform people about what to pay attention to when it came to sustainable consumption - the German equivalent of the word ‘sustainability’ was for some time treated with scepticism by journalists, and only used in the coverage of specifically environmental topics.

So the objective was to show people directly and via the media that fair trade products, social standards, environmentally-sound production or energy efficiency are all criteria that fall under the concept of sustainability. And there are criteria and project labels that act as a guide. In all the texts, in particularly those prepared for the media, the message was packed in suitable form that was easy to digest.

The media resonance analysis showed that the defined message came across well in the media reports, and it was possible to transmit the broader approach to sustainability.

What we have been talking about is essentially the Output level. But what is it like in the heads of the people, how do they absorb the information offered to them? The Outgrowth level describes the effects in the target group. Above all at events it is possible to study this by means of surveys. You can ask about the information you have provided, how it is evaluated, and what various people take home with them in terms of content.

Representative surveys carried out together with a public opinion survey institute offer a good approach to the analysis phase or to broad scale campaigns. A baseline survey before the activities start will make it possible to assess the subsequent changes in opinion, although there is always the risk that correlations will be misinterpreted.

The Agenda-Setting approach in communication theory asks for correlations between the media agenda, the public agenda and the political agenda and for their interdependencies. However, the framing of an issue is important, too. A practical example: Three years ago we wanted to know what people in Germany think about regenerative energies. We made a survey with representative results. The great majority said that the energy from wind, sun or water is clean and environment-friendly. In the media regenerative energies was covered as a green issue, too. But economically, some people said, it does not make sense. So the target was to frame regenerative energies with economic terms, for example to focus on positive effects for the job market. After the first pre-measures there was a new framing of the issue in the media coverage. A second survey of the public agenda followed to learn more about the effects on the outgrowth-level.

It is also always worthwhile carrying out small-scale surveys among partners, active participants, or relevant stakeholders. Stable relationships and a network of active supporters are frequently based on qualitatively good information, on a win-win situation.

Exchanging information and transmitting knowledge was the Second Stage of communicative effects, which is relatively simple to measure.

Stage three, the Outcome level, addresses the changes in attitudes and thus the “Image”. Viewed sociologically, an image is simply the attitude of a person or the combined attitude of a group regarding another person, a topic or an organisation.

Such an image analysis can be carried out by a service provider, using a mix of methods which it would take too long to describe in detail here. The “image” concept combines rational and emotional elements - and existing personal perceptions are combined with new information.

You should therefore never trust consultants who claim that they can quickly change an “image”. Each of your target groups has a different view of your organisation, a different attitude to a topic; this is not least due to the fact that they have their own priorities and differing interests.

Start by finding out about these priorities by means of an analysis, discover the information deficits which might change attitudes and then go about systematically overcoming these deficits. A regular investigation of the individual images will show the effectiveness of your activity.

The more accurately you define your reference group, the better and more useful the results will be and the more transparent the evaluation.

And with the image concept we come to end of our remarks: We are dealing with the perceptions of others, with complex communications processes, with goal-oriented communication with other people, in some parts with uncertain outcomes.

Our conclusion is that the potential of evaluation lies in using the right mixture of a range of instruments.

Don’t be afraid to evaluate your communication at all levels - even apparently trivial aspects.

Don’t be satisfied with a supposedly representative evaluation at the end of a campaign.

Effective evaluation of complex communication involves five steps:

1. Set up an evaluation plan right at the start and try to identify the neuralgic points of your communications strategy.
2. Set yourself goals and agree on the performance parameters. Only then will you be able to carry out on-going checks.

3. Make use throughout of small efficient instruments. Evaluate them so that you can introduce improvements during an on-going process, not just to produce a thick final report for the filing cabinet.
4. With communication you want to reach people. Therefore you need to know about your reference groups. Keep checking whether this knowledge is adequate and correct.
5. Communications management is always the “Management of uncertainty”. Strategic communication therefore involves not only state-of-the-art methodology but also common sense, your gut feelings. The greatest challenge facing PR is something of a paradox: The complexity of communication is what makes evaluation difficult – but at the same time it makes evaluation absolutely essential.

Thank you for your attention.