Measurement in Public Relations— An Overview

In October, 1977, a National Conference on Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Relations was held at the University of Maryland, College Park, Md. The following introduction discusses the evolution of the conference, and summarizes the contents of the proceedings which are being published in this special issue of the **Public Relations Review.**

Public relations professionals are more often "doers" than researchers. They know how to work with the media, produce employee publications, release financial information, or supervise a community relations program. Until recently, these professionals have seldom been asked whether the results of these programs justify the money spent on them. Often they have not even been asked whether the programs might have been conducted in a different way, or replaced by a more effective program.

For many years public relations programs have been among the first items to be cut from a stringent budget. Likewise, they have been criticized by the media, regulatory bodies, and the public as unnecessary expenditures whose only function is to "polish the image" of a corporation or to "sell' something of questionable value.

Public relations people have argued, in rebuttal, that public relations is misunderstood. They claim that communication with the public is good for both the public and the corporation, that public relations can improve corporate-public understanding, and that public relations perhaps can increase corporate revenue. Management and critics of public relations, however, are seldom content with that answer. "If what you say about the effects of public relations is true," they assert, "then you should be able to prove it."

"Proving it", of course, requires measurement of the effects of public relations programs—and measurement requires research.

Research, however, has not been an important ingredient in the training of most public relations practitioners. Likewise, few academic researchers have a special interest in public relations research. Many commercial research firms

are available from which research can be purchased. But unless the public relations professional has a clear idea of *measuring* objectives for his programs, he seldom knows what kind of research to buy.

Development of public relations researchers—both academic and professional—and development of an understanding of the uses of research among PR professionals are among the most important requisites for the improvement of the public relations profession. Early in 1977, the American Telephone & Telegraph Co., which has been a leader in public relations research, took a first step toward filling this void by making a grant to the Research Center of the University of Maryland's College of Journalism to hold a National Conference on Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Relations. This special issue of the *Review* contains the proceedings of that conference. Its publication is made possible, in part, because of the AT&T grant.

Approximately 100 corporate and academic public relations leaders, as well as students of public relations, attended the conference held in College Park, Md., Oct. 4-5, 1977. Twelve speakers, representing both the corporate and academic worlds, addressed the conference. Some presented case studies of actual measurement programs. Others presented theoretical concepts to suggest new objectives for public relations programs and, therefore, new variables for public relations measurement.

The papers presented at this conference yielded no panacea for public relations research, no program ready for implementation by a public relations department desiring to measure its effectiveness. Rather, they yielded ideas and experiences which some PR professionals may be able to apply to their own situation and others may not. These papers represent the state of the art of public relations measurement.

Many attempts have been made to measure effectiveness. Many have yielded satisfactory results. Numerous ideas for measurable concepts are available from communication and other social sciences. Much remains to be done, however, to incorporate these ideas into an actual measurement program and to have them implemented by public relations managers. More than anything, the conference provided a benchmark for public relations measurement. Many alternative paths are available. Most, however, have not yet been adequately explored.

This special issue begins with an overview by Otto Lerbinger on how corporations use public relations research. It is followed by case studies of measurement experiences at AT&T, Dupont, Armstrong Cork, and the National Bureau of Standards. These papers are followed by three conceptual papers written by leading academic researchers. The final two papers look at common problems in evaluation research and prescribe directions for future public relations research.

Lerbinger describes three common types of PR research: environmental monitoring, the public relations audit, and the social audit. Environmental monitoring is the use of research to identify changes in public opinion which affect the organization. In the public relations audit, the organization may use research to identify audiences, to determine a corporate image among an audience, or to evaluate the effect of a specific PR program. Lerbinger calls

this last type of research a communications audit, which typically consists of a content analysis of messages, a readability study, or a readership survey. The social audit, finally, is research conducted to measure the extent to which a corporation is meeting its social responsibilities.

Three examples of corporate measurement programs are then described by James Tirone of AT&T, Robert Grass of Dupont, and Robert Marker of Armstrong Cork. The AT&T measurement program which Tirone describes, is the most extensive of the three.

When AT&T began its measurement program in 1976, it first decided that it was not possible to develop a single comprehensive measure of public relations effectiveness. According to Tirone, too many different types of activities are conducted by different public relations departments to make a single measurement meaningful. Instead, AT&T developed measurements for six broad public relations activities conducted by most operating telephone companies of the Bell System: administration of public relations programs, employee publications, media relations, advertising, community relations, and educational relations. Tirone then describes how a measurement scheme was developed for each of these areas and discusses the results to date from the studies conducted within each research scheme.

Grass and Marker describe more limited measurement programs. Grass explains Dupont's efforts to measure the effect of corporate advertising, and Marker describes Armstrong Cork's measurements of product publicity. Dupont found that corporate advertising could not be shown to have a direct effect on how people evaluate the company, but that for those people who had seen the ads, beliefs about the company had changed. Dupont also found television advertising to be more effective than print advertising. What Dupont could not answer, however, was the question of how much advertising is worth in financial terms to the company.

Marker begins by telling how he once was able to justify his media program by the feet of hallway space that could be filled with press clippings. One day, however, the marketing manager asked what all these clippings were worth to the company, and at that point Armstrong Cork began a systematic content analysis of press coverage which could be related to a marketing objective.

Although the Grass and Marker papers deal with highly specialized PR activities, the results can be related to other areas of public relations. Dupont's experience offers insight for studies of the effects of most corporate messages—regardless of whether they are delivered through advertising. The Armstrong method, which is also quite similar to AT&T's program to measure media relations, can be extended to measurements of media programs other than product publicity.

Grunig then describes a study of employee relations in a federal government agency, the National Bureau of Standards. The objective of the study, he points out, was not just to evaluate an ongoing program, but to develop a profile of types of employees with different information needs. These types then could be used to determine whether existing employee media were satisfying employee information needs, and to determine if any media were redundant. Grunig suggests that public relations programs should be judged in

terms of two types of communication behaviors—information seeking and information processing. These, he says, provide more adequate measurement of program effect than conventional readership or knowledge indicators. He then describes how this approach was implemented at the Bureau of Standards and the results which it produced.

Following Grunig's paper, Richard Franzen, chief of the Editorial Section of the Bureau, describes the problems of getting the study done in a government agency and the use that has now been made of the results.

Grunig's paper represents a transition between the practitioner's and the academic's viewpoint. Practitioners generally think of measurement in terms of specific programs which they have underway. They generally view theories as impractical unless the implications of a theory are immediately obvious for the practitioner's particular program. Academicians, however, must do research for broader purposes. Although most consult with and do research for practitioners, few work on a full-time basis with any single organization. In addition, academicians teach students concepts that can be used in varied public relations programs. To do otherwise would be impractical. A teacher simply cannot prepare a student for every on-the-job problem nor as a researcher can he limit himself to research of value to only one organization at one time.

Therefore, the practitioner develops explanations for broad classes of events —in this case for many different public relations programs. Grunig, for example, used an explanation of communication behavior of the employee public in his Bureau of Standards study. But the study should be of value beyond its application to the Bureau of Standards, and beyond employee communication. Communication behavior of publics—both internal and external —is the event which, Grunig asserts, most public relations practitioners should understand, control, and measure.

The next three papers present other broad explanations of potential use in a range of public relations programs. Of these, McCombs' paper on the agenda setting function of the mass media is particularly relevant to measuring the effects of media relations. Tichenor's paper on community structure is relevant to measuring effects of community relations, and Broom's paper on the coorientation model is relevant to setting objectives and measurements for public relations programs in general.

McCombs, along with Donald Shaw of the University of North Carolina, first tested the agenda-setting theory in a study of newspaper readers in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. In that study, they found that newspaper readers ranked public issues in essentially the same order as the coverage given these issues in newspapers circulating in Chapel Hill. Thus, they concluded that the media set the agenda of issues for the public to think about. The theory represents an alternative explanation of the extent of media influence on people. In contrast, a previous "hypodermic" theory suggested that the media have great power in shaping people's attitudes, while a "limited effects" theory held that the media could not shape attitudes. Agenda-setting differs from these because it does not try to explain attitude change. Instead, it holds that the principal influence

of the media is to "tell people what to think about, but not to tell then what to think."

Agenda setting thus holds great promise for measuring the effectiveness of media relations. What McCombs says, in essence, is that the most that can be expected from a media program is getting the corporation on the public agenda. McCombs concludes that getting on the agenda is accomplished largely through long-term, repetitive coverage in the media; and that it is accomplished more often through newspapers than through television. Television first puts an issue on the agenda, but newspapers generally keep it there. Agenda setting also has a double implication. That is, if an unflattering picture of a corporation is placed on the agenda, repeatedly trying to rebut that picture can prolong its stay on the agenda. On the other hand, as Robert Grass indicates in his paper on Dupont advertising, long-term repetition can result in a favorable picture of a corporation being put on the public agenda.

Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien then apply the results of a long-term research program to the setting and measuring of objectives for community relations programs. They say that the most common goal of a community relations program—which would also be the effect most frequently measured—is compatibility of the corporation and the community. That goal, they say, is often unrealistic. Rather, they say, research in a given community should determine to what extent the goal of compatibility is realistic and, if so, what factors should be considered in developing communication strategies that might increase the level of compatibility. Their research indicates that the following factors should be measured in planning and evaluating community relations programs: 1) conflict processes in the community, 2) structure of the community, and 3) the structure of the communication channels in the community.

Broom then explains the coorientation approach to measurement in public relations. This theory, developed initially by Steven Chaffee and Jack McLeod of the University of Wisconsin, indicates that the PR person should measure not just the public's definition of an issue—that is, what public opinion is—but also the public's perception of the corporation's definition of an issue—that is, what the public thinks the corporation thinks. In other words, awareness and understanding of a corporation's position is a more feasible public relations objective than getting acceptance of the corporation's position. Broom's paper then goes on to describe research which has utilized this approach to measurement, for example, studies to determine the effectiveness of a public relations campaign by the Army Corps of Engineers, the role of community leaders in the public relations process, and the effectiveness of an information campaign designed to raise the level of awareness and understanding in a community.

Public relations practitioners too often begin measurement at the wrong time, according to Stamm, in a paper in which he describes common errors in evaluation research. He suggests that practitioners should begin evaluation of a program before it is implemented. It is at that point where measurement can still have an impact upon the program, he explains. He then details his experience as a consultant for public relations research, and describes "when, where, how, and what" research should be done.

In a final summary of the papers presented at the conference, McElreath describes what kinds of research organizations generally do in different kinds of situations, and how the papers presented at this conference fit into those categories. Finally, he concludes that PR measurement should go beyond evaluation of specific programs to determine the overall contribution of public relations to the effectiveness of the total organization.

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