

Chapter 10:

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Pat was an ardent advocate for doing research prior to building a public relations strategy and program. He often shared his findings and thoughts about a variety of techniques to make research an integral part of public relations activities.

“Research is a function of time, money and manpower,” he realized, but advocated that *any* research you can do is better than no research at all.

A Favorite Story Illustrates Importance of Research:

A young virginal woman goes on a seven day cruise. She has never been on a cruise before and decides to keep a diary.

Day 1: Beautiful ship. Sea is calm. Nice people at my table.

Day 2: Food is great. Met some members of the crew.

Day 3: Invited to captain's table for dinner. Captain is handsome and is very attentive to me!

Day 4: Captain is pursuing me avidly. Trying to remain calm.

Day 5: Captain is obsessed. Said he must have me.

Day 6: Captain has threatened to sink the ship if I don't succumb!!!

Day 7: I just saved the lives of 700 people.

Goes to show you need to do your research before deciding on what to do!

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AT LAST: SPECIFIC RESEARCH PROVES PUBLIC OPINION MAKES A DIFFERENCE
IN PUBLIC POLICY, FINDS STUDY BY NATIONAL OPINION RESEARCH CENTER

The '64 Civil Rights Act was passed only after public support for it moved from 54% to 66%. And the '73 Supreme Court decision upholding a woman's right to seek an abortion during the first 3 months of pregnancy followed a 32% hike in public support. That measurable movement of opinion is the key:

When public opinion change is small, reverses direction or fluctuates, policy changes contrary to public opinion are more frequent. By contrast, large changes in opinion almost always result in policies that agree with opinion. "When there is opinion change of 20 percentage points or more, policy change is congruent an overwhelming 90% of the time."

Researchers, with a National Science Foundation grant, sorted thru national surveys conducted between 1935 & 1979 by Gallup, NORC, & Survey Center/Center for Political Studies. 357 instances of significant change in public opinion were found. For each of these opinion changes, researchers measured policy changes during the period beginning 2 years before the date of the initial opinion survey and ending 4 years after the final survey.

"There has been a great deal of congruence [agreement] between changes in policy and changes in opinion during the last half century; more, in fact, than initially meets the eye," write researchers Robert Shapiro (Columbia) & Benjamin Page (UChi). Policy changes corresponding to public opinion (66%) were more frequent than changes contrary to public opinion (34%).

One reason opinion doesn't always affect policy is that sometimes opinion is not translated to behavior. For instance, when Equal Rights Amendment failed to pass in the last, crucial state legislatures, pollsters studied public opinion in those states. They found large majorities in favor of ERA. But -- no one had motivated those voters to put pressure on their legislators. This lack of behavioral manifestation proved fatal. On the other hand, years of surveying indicate both anti-gun control & anti-abortion opinion is a small minority, around 15%. Yet the proactive behavior of these special interest groups has been influential far beyond their size.

-- Pat Jackson

Majority opinion doesn't always determine policy, however. Some examples:
1) From August '52 to June '56, public support for sending our allies economic rather than military aid rose 26%, but economic assistance as a proportion of total aid (military & economic) declined. 2) Altho public disapproval of economic assistance to Eastern Europe rose 10% between November '56 & April '57, US aid actually

increased. 3) During the mid-to-late 70s, the federal gov't moved toward adopting the metric system, while public opposition to it rose 15%. "Responsiveness to public opinion is not perfect," explain the researchers.

Political scientists have long classified policy moves at the state level to be specialized and susceptible to special interest groups' control. But findings show that on certain emotional issues -- abortion, divorce laws, capital punishment -- states are more likely to follow public opinion than is the federal gov't.

How Size Of Opinion Change Affects Policy

Size of opinion change %	Direction of policy change			
	Congruent		Noncongruent	
	%	N	%	N
6-7	53	(25)	47	(22)
8-9	64	(32)	36	(18)
10-14	62	(32)	38	(25)
15-19	69	(22)	31	(10)
20-29	86	(18)	14	(3)
30+	100	(10)	0	(0)

Another finding shows a strong tendency for policy to move congruently with public opinion more often when opinion changes in a liberal direction. Policy moved congruently with liberal opinion changes 86% of the time, but with conservative changes only 53%. (For a copy of "Effects of Public Opinion on Policy" by Shapiro & Page, write NORC Library, 6030 So. Ellis Ave, Chi 60637)

PROFESSIONALS NEED TO KEEP AN EYE ON WHAT NATIONAL OPINION RESEARCH CTR IS DOING

Founded in '41, NORC was the first national survey research organization to do social research in the

public interest. Since '72, it has been conducting the General Social Survey to measure trends in social characteristics & opinions. Important questions of social attitudes & behavior are combined with standard demographic info to produce a profile of American society at regular intervals. Annual surveys are planned for 1984-87. Distribution of the data is handled by the Roper Center (UConn, Box U-164R, Storrs 06268; 203/486-4881).

NORC pioneered in studies of healthcare, housing, drug abuse, aging, crime, mental health. These include program evaluation, social experiments, needs assessment. Most are conducted with gov't or foundation support. Many are archived at the Roper Center; the Inter-University Consortium for Political & Social Research, UMich-Ann Arbor; and in NORC's own library at UChi.

NORC's Research Group encompasses: 1) Cultural Pluralism Research Center, organized into 4 programs: a) family & socialization, b) religion & culture, c) social change (includes the General Social Survey), d) Hispanic studies; 2) Economics Research Center is engaged in research on a) economics of the family, b) labor markets & earnings, c) behavior over the lifecycle; 3) Social Policy Research Center's major focus is on children & youth.

NORC's library holds over 3,000 books & 100 journals in 2 areas of emphasis: 1) methodology of surveys and 2) topics of substantive interest to NORC staff. Info on NORC surveys & surveys in general is available to the public. Library is equipped to answer questions about the existence of survey data on a given topic and the nature of the info gathered. And it prepares a bibliography of papers & books.

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WHY OLD RESEARCH METHODS ARE PROVING LESS & LESS ABLE TO GATHER THE ACTIONABLE INFORMATION PRACTITIONERS NEED

The classic research model, especially for the real pros in American Association of Public Opinion Research, has been voting behavior. Resulting **polling method** has been adopted by politicians to the point of dangerous misuse. Polls to them are “instant democracy” – and they appear totally ignorant of how easily polls can be manipulated (simply by fudging the questionnaire or sample) or be just plain wrong (new events change minds or the methodology is flawed). To many officeholders, the question isn’t whether an idea is sound or a person/organization is capable and honest, but how the polls rate them – today (which may change overnight).

Politicians may be able to get away with this abdication of responsibility – let the polls decide, then blame them if it goes wrong. PR practitioners cannot, and so are seeking other means of getting the info they need to aid decisionmaking, in a form that more accurately models the real world.

BEHAVIORAL STUDIES TAKING CENTER STAGE

To market researchers, the attitudinal model has been premier – but that is being questioned. American Marketing Association held its first Annual Behavioral Research Conference in January, preceding its 21st Annual Attitude Research Conference.

However, latter was titled, “Axioms Under Review: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom of Marketing and Attitude Research.” The debate is on, spurred by new tech “behavioral” studies, e.g., bar code scanner results from check-out stands and cashier desks. The weakness is that this measures past behavior and has doubtful predictive value.

The major flaw in conventional polling and market research is they assume respondents will act according to their opinions or attitudes. Behavioral studies show that as high as 90% of people who feel this way or that will, in fact, do nothing about it in most instances. The object is not, therefore, to measure public opinion – but **actionable public opinion**: a) who is strongly enough involved in the subject to do something and b) what are they likely to do?

Though we talk about publics “voting” for a product or idea, the metaphor is flawed. In an election, everything for a product or idea, the metaphor is flawed. In an election, everything builds toward a one-time triggering event on a date certain. For 12 hours more or less you can either vote or not vote, then it’s all over. Years pass before you can do anything to “correct” the outcome. But in product/service purchase, you can correct yourself the next time you buy. In a public policy debate, you can hold strong opinions and never do anything.

Further, in an election everyone (if registered) has the possibility of acting, so a correctly conducted poll may gauge prevailing sentiment at a point in time. Since the highest number of those who actually vote is 50% (in Presidential elections; in the far more impacting local votes, woefully lower) the problem of determining who will actually go to the polls remains. If your company sells tires, or healthcare, what good are general samples – since they do not tell who will need tires or hospitalization, to say nothing of whether they’re likely to get them from you.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF NEW METHODS

Standard **statistical quantitative studies** (the academic model) are really intellectual probes, since they force responses into categories, usually presented by the questionnaire – the suppositions of the researcher – more than what’s in the hearts, minds and actions of respondents.

Open-ended quantitative studies (the sociological/anthropological model) measure human nature as encountered in the real world. They allow respondents to design the findings without categorization by recording whatever they express. Often they “follow people around” observing their actual behavior. But they may be difficult to project across a public if they lack quantitative controls.

Newer techniques frequently eschew the conventional norms entirely in an attempt to get at data that is useful without “statistical calisthenics” or hefty coding and analysis. Delphi studies, focus groups, guided brainstorming and instant walking-around quota samples are some in use now.

MORE ARE DOING OWN RESEARCH

Research is becoming like printing. Vendors do the production work after you design what’s to be produced. Practitioners are not only drafting research objectives by writing questionnaires and analyzing responses. Production houses are available nearly everywhere to 1) do the “fieldwork” whether it be mail, phone, mall intercepts or in-depth interviews; 2) select samples; 3) code and enter data, then manipulate it into the required reporting format. Formerly only research houses had this array of capabilities.

A call to **audit market research providers** was made by one research manager in the journal *Marketing Research*. Mistakes and even forged data are no longer uncommon; much research is bought on price, which can make quality suspect; fancy sales techniques have been adopted by research houses – so, “independent auditing would go far toward building trust.” CPA firms now have this procedure in place.

Once arcane tabulating and analysis methods like SPSS (statistical package for the social sciences) are now available for PCs. To stay closer to the process and thus better understand the findings, practitioners are doing their own studies – even quantitative ones. Springing up to assist is a new group of **research consultants**, often one-person or small shops who do what their name implies – consult with clients on the most appropriate methodologies, best vendors, statistical stumbers, etc.

WHAT RESEARCHERS ARE THINKING ABOUT NOW AND THE IMPACT ON PR; NEW AND REVISITED RESEARCH TECHNIQUES USEFUL TO PRACTITIONERS

1) Decision Makers Want Information, Not Data – Trend Toward Usability vs. Statistical Rigidity

Researchers seem to be realizing that a little less methodological rigidity produces more usable information. Progressives are urging their colleagues to present the big-picture findings of their studies and drop the dogmatic, chart-by-cross-tabulated-chart explanations of raw data. The question being asked: **Is there one big idea that this study points out?**

Other indications of this trend are: 1) a greater acceptance of open-ended questions (used to be viewed as “soft” and now are valued for their rich information); 2) renewed debate among researchers that may allow an interviewer to go beyond paraphrasing and help the respondent understand exactly what the question is asking; 3) the creation of “Samples Lite” at Survey Sampling Inc. (Fairfield, Ct.) where they’ve decided it’s okay if a sample is not projectable as long as you’re reaching who you need to talk to.

Implications for PR:

You don’t need large samples to get at information to guide strategic planning. Seldom is a sound public relations plan aimed at the masses, but rather tightly focused on a variety of key publics. Prioritize these publics, figure out what you need to know from each, customize your surveys, then ask the people you targeted.

2) Single Source Information Is Changing the World of Market Research

The vision behind Single Source sees a day when consumer research will operate from a single database that holds all relevant info on the individual consumer or household. In packaged goods the revolution is driven by scanner technology. In media, by people meters, especially passive people meters. In services, by database marketing systems. In all three areas, new technologies provide capabilities nonexistent ten years ago.

Though this is an unquestionably significant technological step, it raises many questions for researchers – including how to manage the information so that it is responsive to a company’s needs and provides a competitive advantage. The goal is “real-time decisionmaking” vs. time delay between data collection and results. As of today, the systems aren’t in place to produce this instant decision-making info.

Implications for PR:

Be aware that researchers are in the formative stages of deciding how to deliver decision-making information to management via single data source. If your organization or clients have access to this technology, counsel management/researchers on what you “need-to-know” vs. “like-to-know” from the data. There is a danger of too many “like-to-know” tidbits that will leave you saying “so what?”

3) Focus Groups or Personal Interviews? – It Depends

When you're looking for "group think" on a subject, then focus groups are preferred. Not that focus groups don't spark debate, they do, but you're really looking for ideas that people have in common – their shared belief structure.

One-on-one interviews allow an individual to go into more detail by sharing their in-depth experience. These detailed experiences are being listened to and incorporated into Customer Satisfaction studies – i.e. "tell me about your most recent experience in the story." A recent study shows that **about 80% of the information gathered from a focus group was gathered in just two individual interviews.**

4) Delphi Studies Can Capture Opinion Leaders' Expertise

A technique not used nearly enough in public relations holds a great opportunity to reach opinion leaders and let them help in your planning. A series of questionnaires are sent to a selected group of "experts" on a particular subject. Once the first round of responses is gathered, the results are fed back to the experts. In the second round they rank order all responses and defend their choices. After collation, responses are sent back again for another ranking. This process leads to consensus building, **shows how far respondents are willing to change their position**, and provides in-depth information verified by many experts. PRSA's committee on the Center for Advanced Public Relations Studies will be conducting such a study.

5) PR Research Results Plugged into Forcefield Analysis Chart Can Provide Prioritized Action Steps

Kurt Lewin's "T" shaped model separates Driving and Restraining forces on each side of the "T". This technique was applied to award winning research at Rhone-Poulenc, which needed to harness employee research information from ten individual sites. Main findings (based on objectives) were ranked on both sides of the "T" allowing a 1-page summation showing prioritized action steps. All ten sites were then placed on a -5 to +5 continuum to illustrate a "worse case" to "model plant" series.

6) Attitudes Still Can't Predict Behavior (and Vice-Versa)

Just a reminder that if you're relying on opinion or attitude studies, you are unable to prove causality to actual behavior. Social psychology hasn't found anything new to prove the way people feel will necessarily affect the way they act. But since your pr strategic goal is behavior, bare in mind that behaviors don't always reflect attitudes – so reinforcement techniques are critical.

First of the Year Issue

PR NEEDS ITS OWN RESEARCH MODES, NOT BORROWED ONES

As the need for adding “science” to “creativity” becomes clear in pr practice, interest in research is increasing manifoldly – to add *precision* to *decision* in both spheres. But this raises a number of questions about what constitutes *public relations research*.

All research is a function of time & money. When are the findings needed, what’s the budget. Insufficient availability of both is cited as holding back research usage. Practitioners need data immediately, in many instances. Research allocation in most budgets is embarrassingly slim. Does this inevitably push pr research toward quicker, less formal methodologies – at least for “everyday” use?

PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH IS DIFFERENT, BECAUSE ITS USES ARE

There’s confusion about pr research – partly because vendors of specific types naturally want practitioners to buy theirs, even if it may not be well suited to pr needs. PR research must be differentiated from:

- **Opinion Polling:** Often offers untrustworthy projections – latest example is miscalling key Colorado referenda questions on the Nov. ballot. Usually surfacy in its probing and its findings. Measures the wrong things for actionable response and decisionmaking, by and large. Has become a politicians’ tool – an ethically questionable one – whereas 99% of pr issues don’t get settled with a vote on a date certain but are fluid over periods of time. (See prr 4/20/92)
- **Academic research:** Seeks underlying theoretical causes, rather than useful data for immediate application. Timeframe is semesters, not ASAP. Must be replicable by other scholars, whereas pr research is usually very proprietary. Statistical overkill is the current norm. Vital for pr’s body of knowledge but rarely for use in a pr project.
- **Market research:** Has become a catchall name, but the original type seeks common denominators or norms among large, diverse publics who are potential purchasers of a product or, as marketing concepts became applied more widely, of an idea or position. Number crunching to the point of silliness is a problem. Everything is *not* quantifiable – and for pr use qualitative, evocative data is often more useful anyway. Marketers don’t care specifically *who* buys as long as projected market share is achieved. But pr practitioners must deal with static publics: employees, actual customers, shareholders, public officials et al.
- **Audience research:** Main problem here is inaccuracy. What gets measured basically is whether the set is turned on. Diary or people meter methodologies are outmoded. Buyers of tv/radio research apparently don’t *want* accuracy because it would show far fewer viewers/listeners, paying much less attention, than they claim. After all, every ratings point supposedly represents 931,000 households.

- **Advertising research:** Talk about ethical problems...have you ever seen ad “research” that didn’t show the campaign, theme or layouts were sure to do the trick? Though leaders in **pretesting** messages and materials (which pr could use far more widely to its benefit), ad studies on “most noted” or “recall” tell nothing about whether the action objective was achieved (and are being criticized by ad leaders).

Each of these may have a role at some point in pr – usually to sketch in details. None provides the basic fabric of strategy-building, **actionable** information practitioners require in order to a) build **relationships** that b) earn **trust** and c) motivate mutually supportive **behaviors**.

WHAT DIFFERENTIATES PR RESEARCH? BASICALLY, NEED FOR ACTIONABLE DATA

1. **To answer questions essential to *planning* projects, programs, campaigns**, e.g. who are the real target audiences, what’s their latent readiness to behave in certain ways, how do they get information and make decisions on the topics involved, where and how can they be reached for awareness or participation etc.

These are action-oriented, not descriptions of “feelings” or “opinions.”

2. **To test and, if possible, *deflate assumptions***. Conventional wisdom (perhaps of senior management) is so often wrong, yet too seldom checked out. Maybe we’re going in the wrong direction. Perhaps we should do nothing. Possible they do understand our position, and that’s why they’re opposing it.

This is essential strategic information, and the methods listed above do not elucidate it.

3. **Baselines to permit accurate *evaluation***. Where are we now vs. where we want to be? What’s the gap, how can we close it? Is the process working, and why/why not? Are we achieving behavioral goals?

The only acceptable way to show pr adds value.

PR research cannot just measure “public opinion” and feel it has done its job. It must provide specifics on how to reinforce or change it. Explain the linkages, *if any*, between opinion/attitudes/feelings and behavior. And most importantly, **always find out why**. Says longtime pr researcher Walt Lindenmann of Ketchum: “For most practitioners, ‘why’ is far more important than ‘what’ or ‘how’”... because we have to do something about it.

SOME TECHNIQUES (AMONG MANY) THAT MEET THE PR RESEARCH CRITERIA

- A. **Open-ended questions that provide verbatim responses.** Researchers dislike them because they're harder to code and analyze, compared to predetermined response options. But nothing rivals respondents' own words.
- B. **Mendelsohn Effect.** Shows how to make mass communication into a dialogue using intermittent surveys of target audiences. Woefully underutilized.
- C. **Pretesting.** Fog, Flesch and similar techniques eliminate ineffective communications at the front end. Lindenmann's 1988 study of actual use of research found only 8% apply pretests regularly. (See pr 10/19/92)
- D. **Survey feedback.** Basic OD data gathering method in which a facilitator interviews group members or key decisionmakers individually, then feeds back results anonymously to the group. Provides rich data that objectivizes emotions, lets people know they are heard, shows where positions are shared or dissimilar, stimulates collaborative decisions.
- E. **Gyroscope.** Research design that follows respondents through a decision cycle or process, so mid-course corrections can be made to ensure effectiveness. First used for college enrollment campaigns to find out whether materials and personal contacts were working.
- F. **Rolling research.** Rather than surveying the entire sample at one time, spread interviews out at key dates, quarterly, monthly etc. Provides a measure of change over time, allows comparison that shows direction.
- G. **800 numbers.** Better than a random sample because it sorts out those who feel strongly enough to do something, i.e. call. When responses are charted, comparison over time gives valuable data – as do topics discussed and semantics used by callers.
- H. **"Agree and disagree" asked.** A response category that captures a cell of opinion, which is often determinative – since respondents who both agree and disagree on a point have clearly given thought to the subject. In addition to noting who agrees, disagrees and doesn't know, this adds "both agree and disagree" – and then records the reasons.
- I. **Environmental scan.** First step in any planning. Charting what else is happening that will divert attention or indirectly influence behavior and thinking is crucial information. Not doing a scan implies there's a vacuum out there just waiting to deal objectively with your topic – a circumstance rarely recorded in human history.
- J. **Force-field analysis.** Formal listing of facilitating factors and barriers to provide an overview of pressure points and opportunity areas. The more research findings available to include, the more useful it is. Some researchers make it the end product of baseline or other broad studies, to put the findings in actionable perspective. Helps answer the question, exactly what should we do/not do. (See pr 2/3/92)
- K. **Delphi studies.** Discovers willingness of participants – usually but not necessarily opinion leaders – to alter behavior or opinion to conform to the group. (See t&t 6/29/92)

CLASSIC SURVEY RESEARCH: STILL RELEVANT

A quick way to answer that question is to read *The Superpollsters*. Author David Moore operates a state-of-the-art, university-based surveying facility while teaching political science. His book exposes the misuse of polls while defending the basic technique. Its many down-to-earth stories give a fascinating glimpse inside the research fraternity – and help non-researchers grasp the real issues.

Difficulties posed by question order and question wording effects, respondent refusal, media manipulation by pollsters and many other issues are presented in a historical and case-study setting that makes this one of the most practical books yet on research.

JUDGMENT IS STILL KING, NOT STATISTICS

Research can provide only a model of reality. Users must apply their knowledge and judgment – which can be done either at the front end in shortcutting around unnecessarily formal design, or at the back end in interpreting the findings.

Often even a small percentage of respondents who see a problem or oppose your position require action – so all the 42.6% vs. 12.5% is meaningless. If 5% of customers are mad, it's no good saying, well, a larger percentage is happy – unless you want to risk losing 5% of your business.

PR research, in short,

...doesn't just ask what people believe, think or feel ... but **why** they do ... **how** they developed these positions ... and, most critically, will it **translate** into behavior, and when?

As early researcher John Scott Davenport told pr a decade ago, “Informal research studies *know* *universes* (customers, employees, shareholders) for which there are *benchmarks of observable reality*.” This knowledge is “the crucial ingredient for saving time and money in public relations research.”

Purists may never give up demanding random statistical samples and “projectable” results. But then, research firms have a vested interest in selling “statistical calisthenics”: it ups the price. Anything that gives practitioners some better data than the zero they often have now, should be pursued – and embraced, so long as its level of validity is known.

¶ **It's time to codify pr research as a distinct category – then promote its widespread and continuous use by practitioners.**

Truly, all sound pr practice begins – and should end – with research.

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GAP RESEARCH: WHY AND HOW IT DOES WHAT OTHER METHODS DON'T

The purpose of most public relations research is to help make things happen: facilitate change, motivate behavior, guide decisionmaking. To do this, it must provide actionable information, not status reports.

BUILD ON OTHER METHODS

In most instances, classic survey research is limited to providing "a look in the mirror" which requires too many assumptions and leaps of faith to be useful. Example: survey methodology is often able to discern opinions and attitudes of a public. But opinion is so time-bound and changeable that it is only minimally useful. And today behaviors are so often de-linked from attitudes that knowing them still requires guesses to determine what action to take to get to behavior.

Survey questionnaires also find great difficulty in getting accurate responses. Even to questions seeking to discover behavior patterns people answer ideally or forget what they really did – thus the "false positives" or "false negatives" so frustrating to users of research.

OVERCOMING THE DIFFICULTIES

Gap questioning eliminates these problems by letting respondents state, in their own terms, what actually happened to bar a desired course of action, and what needs to be done to facilitate one now.

Typically, a gap study asks four questions for each topic being probed:

1. On a scale of 1 – 9, how would you rate us in (delivering customer satisfaction, for instance)?
2. Why did you give that rating? Cite specific reasons.
3. Knowing the organization as you do, how good could we get in (delivering customer satisfaction) if we really put our hearts into it – again, on a scale of 1 – 9?
4. What would we have to do to get there?

WHAT EACH QUESTION ACCOMPLISHES

Questions 1 and 3 establish the gap between current and ideal performance – as the respondents perceive it. Both elements are critical. If the question were being asked of customers, the result would be the *reality* response – because satisfaction is established entirely by the perceptions of this public.

If respondents were frontliners who must deliver customer satisfaction, results would establish how accurately they see their performance – easily measured by comparing with customers' responses. By extension their responses could also indicate how sensitive they are to customers.

- **Question 2 elicits** from these critical players **the reasons why** they gave a high, or low, rating: what is happening in fact, based on their intimate knowledge, that is a barrier to success, or is facilitating success. Totally actionable information. If there are misperceptions in the answers, that's also actionable because it identifies necessary clarifications.
- **Question 3's contribution** is **letting those who must deliver or receive** customer satisfaction, in this example, tell how good they believe service can get. Can it reach the heights of competitive advantage: or is it always going to be a barrier? Most importantly, they identify how much improvement they feel is possible or necessary. In the case of employees, they – not some executive – are telling how far they are willing to go!

[Rarely do respondents not identify a gap to be closed; though it is possible to get a 7 in Question 1 that declines to, say, a 5 in Question 3. But that would be really actionable data!]

- **Question 4 is best of all**, for here respondents tell **what steps must be taken** to improve, to close the gap. Nothing could be more actionable, or a better guide to decision.

SUMMARY OF BENEFITS

1. **Gap studies are, first of all, simple.** To get the information you're after, no fancy word tricks or semantic handwringing are required to get a workable line of questioning.
2. **Questions are very direct and straightforward.** Busy respondents grasp them rapidly and answer immediately. The flow of thought is obvious.
3. **Responses and ideas are the respondents' own** – and in their own words.

IN MEASURING RESPONSE TO ISSUES

Gaps can identify whether publics expect things to get better or worse, and why.

Question 1 may get a 3 rating, while Question 3 falls to a 2. . . or rises to a 5. Verbatims from Questions 2 and 4 then provide the whys and wherefores.

SITUATIONAL THEORY OF PUBLICS KEY TO EFFECTIVE TARGETING

What's the difference between audiences, publics, constituencies and stakeholders? (Another case where the language of communication is uncommunicative.) For 25 years, Jim Grunig and others have conducted studies that today enable practitioners to avoid this semantic problem and precisely target groups whose involvement and support, or lack of opposition, is critical to success.

In a paper presented to the International PR Research Symposium in Bled, Slovakia, Grunig summarizes the research for practical use:

START BY REALIZING MOST PEOPLE DON'T CARE ABOUT YOUR ISSUE

- a) **The two key questions from the beginnings of pr** have been: 1) What is a public? 2) What are the "opinions" of publics, whether expressed as attitudes, behavior, etc?
- b) **A major flaw in practitioners' and managerial thinking** is that "most people have opinions on most issues" – which led to the "mass opinion" concept, and thus to "mass communication" as *the* tactic. But as one scholar notes,

"Fifty years of survey research has overwhelmingly confirmed that the bulk of the general population is both uninterested and uninformed on most matters that could be construed as public affairs."

- c) **Large majorities on any issue are "ignorant and apathetic"** – and as a sociologist's joke puts it, if you ask them whether they are, they'll say "I don't know and I don't care." This is ever more true as people suffer from over-communication, over-business and over-organization.

THE SKILL IS TO KNOW WHO DOES CARE – AND WHY

- D. **The situational theory permits segmenting** a general population into groups pr finds relevant. Publics "begin as disconnected systems of individuals experiencing common problems" – best labeled stakeholders, since they have a stake in the problem or wouldn't be experiencing it.
- E. **When an issue or triggering event arises**, the large stakeholder group reacts by sorting itself into publics, starting with two groupings: 1) **Passive**, which processes information; 2) **Active**, which seeks it.
- F. **This differentiation is critical to practitioners** by identifying who will use communication (of whatever type) to form cognitions or shape actions; and who lets it in one ear/eye and out the other. The passive group may read or watch the news about your issue, may even know they have a stake – but are unlikely to do much about it.
- G. **One of the challenges is to engage passive publics** in cases where it may be necessary (it isn't in most). Grunig told a PRSA seminar in Columbus, Ohio, he isn't sure it's possible on any large scale.

WHAT MOTIVATES ACTIVE PUBLICS – AND HOW TO PLAN FOR IT

H. The active public can be sorted into three groups:

- 1) **All issues**, interested in the full ramifications of the topic;
- 2) **Special interest**, concerned only about certain elements of the topic;
- 3) **Hot issue**, aroused only by emotionally debated elements.

Add the **passive public** and there are a total of four groups into which stakeholders subdivide on any issue category.

Dramatic Example From Current News:

A waste disposal facility is proposed at a site near an aquifer.

- **Stakeholders** include the 4,000 residents of the host neighborhood.
- A public hearing is held, 400 attend – making 3,600 the **passive** or apathetic public.

Of 7 key points to be covered, the most interest around town is in potential groundwater pollution (the aquifer).

- After that discussion, 200 people leave – the **hot issue** public.
- Another 100 depart after various other topics, such as number of trucks per day that will come to the site; these are **special interest** publics.
- When local officials take a straw vote at the end of the meeting, only 100 residents are on hand – the **all issues** public. [Highlighting point G above.]

I. Communicating with and involving stakeholders and publics faces three tests:

- a) *Problem Recognition* – they must accept that a real problem (or opportunity) exists. The natural response to any situation one is trying to duck is, “that’s not a problem”
- b) *Level of Involvement* (or personification) – they must be convinced it affects them. The avoidance response is, “OK, it’s a problem – but it doesn’t involve me.”
- c) *Constraint Recognition* – they must believe they can do something about it and are not constrained from taking action if they choose. The typical response is, “It’s a problem and it involves me, but I can’t do anything about it.”

CONCLUSION

Meeting these tests can only be achieved with targeted communications. The role of mass communication and mass media is very circumscribed.

EVALUATION OF PR VITAL, BUT NOT BEING DONE: PAPER TELLS HOW

To evaluate the effectiveness, the worth, of pr programs, management by objectives is necessary. This was unanimously agreed by the panel which developed IPRA's Gold Paper 11, Public Relations Evaluation: Professional Accountability. Without measurable objectives, "no evaluation/measurement can take place."

"Other than media evaluation, there appears to be very little ongoing and systematic evaluation done in public relations circles anywhere in the world," reports Jim Pritchitt (Sydney, Australia), IPRA president and initiator of the just-released paper. Survey of IPRA members – by Walt Lindenmann in 1988 – reveals "there is still more talk than action":

	USA	AUST	Southern Africa	IPRA Mbrs
Agree that evaluation is more talked About than done	94%	95%	98%	95%
Is recognized as necessary	76	90	89	90
Frequently undertake research Aimed at evaluating	16	14	25	19
Feel that trying to measure precisely Is next to impossible	43	51	44	31

PAPER OFFERS INSIGHTS ON MAKING A PRACTICAL START

"While there is no panacea in evaluation, and the approach needed depends on the project itself and the circumstances, there are a number of consistent issues that should be considered and a variety of techniques that can be used." Key ingredients in proposed evaluation model:

1. Measurable Objectives (supporting organization's goals)

- a) Establish a clear starting position – current opinions, behavior and knowledge of distinctly defined target audiences;
- b) Establish what the desired position, actions and behavior of these targets would be;
- c) Decide whether this position can be achieved and, if so, over what time span and at what cost – is it worth it?

2. Input (Cutlip, Center and Broom's text calls it "Preparation"):

- a) Set objectives for quality, cost and time. This is the planning and production phase.
- b) Establish benchmarks for setting objectives.
- c) Select best medium/activities. Establish message content.

3. Output ("Implementation"): This is where the objectives of program components are met. These objectives generally relate to:

- a) Quantity (e.g., number of people in target group affected by communication)
- b) Quality (e.g., acceptance of the message by that group)
- c) Performance (were the planned activities undertaken in a satisfactory way?). Number of messages sent and received. Number who responded to messages and how.

4. Outcome ("Impact"): Here the success of the program is assessed against objectives. These objectives are usually set in one or more of the following areas which demonstrate the results of implementing the program:

- a) Action is taken by key target groups;
- b) Behavioral change is achieved;
- c) Opinions and attitudes are changed;
- d) Knowledge is acquired and applied;
- e) Problems are solved.

WHY DO PRACTITIONERS DUCK EVALUATION?

- Is it that they (1) "do not spend the time to develop the professional skills they need to do this job well, or (2) do not wish to have discipline applied to the activities they undertake?"
- It may be a "lack of professional skill that causes a "fear" of evaluation. Cutlip, Center and Broom (1994) refer to a study of Chicago practitioners where more than half of the respondents reported that "most practitioners fear measurement," because it can reveal unsatisfactory results and can challenge their logic (and presumably job security."
- But, note the authors, "without evaluation, proving worth is difficult, accountability is missing, and professional and personal rewards will inevitably be constrained."

BENCHMARKING PR: VALUABLE TOOL OR MISLEADING PANACEA?

Everyone's been doing it, but is it the right place to look for improvement? Conduct investigatory visits to other organizations – sometimes similar, sometimes not. Then compare and realign to fit the “better” pattern, if there is one.

There appear to be 4 modes of benchmarking:

1. **Executives or teams** from two or more organizations just talk to each other about what they're doing, why, what works.
2. **A 3rd party** – usually a pr or management consulting firm – visits the benchmarking partners and reports.
3. **A trade or professional association** surveys the partners using a questionnaire sponsored by the instigating partner.
4. **The big management consulting firms** or the consulting arms of the big accounting firms come in and “judge” a pr department's performance based on its “exhaustive” databases from other organizations.

The latter = danger! Too often they don't understand communications or relationships. And they tend to have a cookie cutter approach: if one outfit somewhere cut the department to three people, then clearly every organization ought to be able to get along with three people.

SOME PROS AND CONS

1. As the **antithesis to NIH** (not invented here), benchmarking can be very useful. Anything that gets inbred organizations to look outside can help.
2. As a **form of evaluation**, albeit fairly subjective, it beats not doing any (and studies tell us most don't – see [pr 12/19/94](#)).
3. Often it's seen as an **easy way around thinking holistically and indigenously** about *your* organization, *its* specific culture and values and people, plus what will work within *its* method of operation. Becomes a fad-multiplier: What worked for them will work here, too.
4. **Reinforces damaging fad management.** There's no competitive advantage, USP or differentiating factor in copying.
5. **Financial comparison is rarely done**, certainly not in auditors terms that would make it useful and trustworthy.

So often are comparisons really apples vs. oranges that, in reports we've seen, the footnotes to permit accurate comparisons are longer than the findings!

6. **Accuracy check:** are they telling it like it is or bragging a bit? Be sure to benchmark *what hasn't worked*.
7. **How to lure others to participate?** Go after data that appeals to them, too, so they're willing to take the risk of revealing themselves. By designing the line of questioning and first answering it for your outfit, you can determine a) whether others will be *able* to answer, even if willing; b) if it has real utility or is just more garbage data.
8. **Best practices are most valuable.** The processes, products, strategies, structure that make community or shareholder relations extremely effective, for instance. Or just a single program or project. Expecting to find whole pr operations worth emulating – which many senior managers are – is a kamikaze flight.

In *Managing on the Edge*, Richard Pascale gives two reasons why benchmarking is “grist for thought, not a prescription”:

1. **Managerial ideas began to acquire the velocity of fads after WWII.** He charts 26 fads between 1950-1988, eg: T-Groups, Theories X, Y & Z, MBO, Zero-Base Budgeting, Quality Circles, etc. “One unintended consequence: it fosters superficiality.”
2. In 1982, *In Search of Excellence* identified 43 “excellent” companies. Pascale charts the status of these companies five years later. By 1987, 14 were still “excellent.” Today many of those have stumbled.

EVALUATING PR : WHERE DO OUR MEASURING TECHNIQUES STAND?

If you can't measure its contribution, stop doing it, say the beancounters. So practitioners struggle to develop methods. But many are just counting clippings 90s-style – with fancy computer programs, subjective ratings of “positive” or “neutral” coverage, and outrageous speculation about “reach.”

Since communication and relationship results are totally in the hands of the *receivers* – not the sender – any respectable evaluation must be able to accurately determine impact on them, and specifically ferret out whether or not pr efforts induce *behavior*. That's the challenge.

WHAT CAN BE OBJECTIVELY MEASURED ?

1. **Awareness & knowledge** can. But they don't reveal action taken or likely to be taken. Yet awareness is an essential, & knowledge can be an important step to many behaviors, so they can't be slighted.

Bemused by our penchant to analyze everything, Robert Frost used to say, “Thank God there are some things you cannot measure.” In at least one sense, pr qualifies. Its highest value is often **what doesn't happen** – the harmful events solid pr keeps from occurring.

In some cases, they can prove behavior. For instance, a major school challenge is getting parents involved in their kids' education, which may include helping with homework. If you ask parents, “Do you help with your child's homework?” most will say yes – the politically correct answer. If they are then asked, “What assignments in math do you remember from last week?” they either do/don't have that knowledge. If not, they couldn't have helped with much homework.

2. **Latent readiness to behave** in a certain way can be probed; and *if* specific pre-behavioral indicators are known, linkage to behavior is made less speculative. For instance, serious car buyers have most likely checked out some dealers, inquired about current loan rates and asked car-buff friends. Asking them for *specific, knowledge-laden* information – “Have you talked with friends about car buying recently (yes/no)?; share some specific advice you got” – may reveal intermediate behaviors en route to buying a car. Asking “Are you aware of current interest rates on auto loans?” can be revealing evidence.
3. Interestingly, **measuring behavior is more difficult**. Relying on respondents' memories is untrustworthy in most cases, so true sociological research is required – meaning following the subjects and observing behavior or (less valuable but widely used) asking them to fill in a log of some kind (how tv viewing is measured).

ARE THERE ANY SHORTCUTS ?

All of the above requires survey research, which can be expensive and take time.

- A. **One simpler method is Dipstick Research**. While not statistically “pure,” if quota samples that reflect the universe being studied are used, solid measurement is possible. Say you're determining

whether employees are receiving and understanding important organizational programs, issues or messages. One-day dipsticking of 50 to 100 personal phone interviews ought to provide fairly solid evidence, quickly. If only a few can recite the company's vision or values, for instance, or what the lead story was in the last employee newsletter, that is telling.

- B. **Measure one sensitive element of a program**, instead of trying to evaluate the whole. In community relations, for instance, determine how many recognized opinion leaders your projects are reaching or involving. How often people from your organization rub elbows with these important folks may be the biggest payback, so evaluate that.

Attitude and approach are vital: Are we doing this to learn and improve and to check our progress? Or to provide rationale for punishment?

SAFE BET IS AN INDEX METHOD

Quite common, and in many ways most valuable, is one that measures that most

critical competitive advantage, customer satisfaction. CS indices can be constructed for internal as well as external customers. Features:

1. **Determine the objectives mutually.** Involve a realm of customers to be certain what will satisfy or delight them. If they emphasize quick turnaround, for instance, their "report cards" (probably on a Likert scale) on how you're doing has real value.
2. **Best to measure items you can check from multiple angles.** Quick turnaround, to continue the example, can be evaluated by surveying customers' *perceptions*. But also by checking assignment in/work out *records*. This dual check might show it wasn't actual cycle time at all, but some way customers were handled that led to a low rating. *This is vital in making improvements or dealing with the problem.*
3. **Timing is a judgment call.** Quarterly or semiannually? How about a rolling index to which some new data is added each month, with the earliest month's data dropped?
4. **Behavioral influence of key variables is essential to measure.** Perceptions, actual records, data are useful only insofar as they help guide steps to take to motivate behavior. Finding out what customers actually *do* in response to being satisfied/unsatisfied on key variables must be premier. And researching that reliably remains a challenge.

An index is valuable because it *systematically* charts and compares indicators. These may include the most basic data – site visits, phone calls, sales, cancellations. By providing a broader realm of evaluation, indices give perspective that single-topic or project evaluations miss.

EVALUATION: IS PUBLIC RELATIONS READY FOR METRICS?

As more organizations adopt mathematical measurement of processes – “metrics” – pr is challenged to establish methods that assume it is as consistent and repetitive as, say, manufacturing or accounting. **What in the communication and relationship-building activity *can* be evaluated in this way?**

OUTPUTS

This most basic measure is nonetheless sometimes useful.

1. E.g., if managers are sticking to their offices and not getting out with their staffs, simply **counting their MBWA, lunch-with, group meeting and similar activities** is valuable evaluation – since it may change behavior. Similarly with supervisor/team leader communication efforts.
2. **Checking message clarity** is quite often useful. Fog, Flesch and similar tests are easy now that they’re computerized. Evaluating communication outputs on the three-point effectiveness scale is rarely done – yet can greatly improve message delivery (see box below). But converting these to a numerical scale requires establishing a baseline against which progress can be numerically verified.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS SCALE

1. *Problem/opportunity recognition:* I see it is a problem.
2. *Problem/opportunity personalization:* the problem could affect me.
3. *Constraint removal:* there’s something I can do about it.

3. BUT – **counting press releases** (for those still using them) or attempted media placements is valueless. And counting clips is still only measuring outputs, since the true measure isn’t what media used but what impact it had. Computerized clip counts and “quality evaluation” (location in medium, positive vs. negative, headline or body etc) are just other output measurements, the hi-tech glitz notwithstanding.

RECEPTION

Measuring this interim stage can be done on 2 levels:

1. **Knowledge or understanding** can be measured by querying target audiences directly about the content and intended information transfer of messages delivered via any medium or combination. Did they get the point?
2. **Memorability** and longterm duration of key points simply stretches the timeframe of questioning. Is the point embedded in their consciousness – and therefore more likely to be acted upon? Applying metrics here is usually done on a percentage basis. Example: dipstick research of content retention is graded on whether 70% can recite the key point(s).

RESPONSE

The real measure is whether communicating or building relationships stimulated action. What **desired behavior** occurred (doing something, refraining from doing something, letting the organization do something).

While turning this into a metric can be relatively easy, since it is basically counting or figuring percentages, *measuring* behavior is usually the most difficult.

- Self-assessments by respondents can be highly untrustworthy.
- Observing behavior through sociological research can be costly.

**METHODOLOGIES
FOR MEASUREMENT**

While traditional survey or action research methods can be used, they are often too costly or too slow. As a result, two more modern methods are coming to the fore:

1. **Dipstick research.** As the name implies, this gives a quick reading without extensive sampling. 30-50 calls or interviews will do, and person-to-person questioning is the norm.
 - First, a simple mathematical model of the organization is constructed. This can be done by units, departments or location; by types of workers; employee characteristics such as sex, age, length of service; or any useful differentiation of the universe being studied.
 - Then a random method is employed to select the sample from among the cells of the mathematical model. As long as every name on the list has a roughly equivalent chance of being selected the sample will be sufficiently representative for the purpose of dipstick measurement. However, in ongoing dipsticks, the same persons are not queried again.
 - Calls or interviews, using a brief line of questioning, can often be done by support staff or interns.
2. **Group meeting surveys.** During a routine group session, questionnaires are passed out and collected on the spot. Result: far larger response.

**TURN METRICS INTO AN INDEX
FOR MAXIMUM USEFULNESS**

By measuring at regular intervals, say quarterly, an index of progress over time is constructed.

That is probably the ultimate evaluation – *if* you can get the bean counters to consider it sufficiently mathematical to qualify as “metrics” (and in reality, most will agree it’s excellent measurement).

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RESEARCH: POLLING NOW TAKING HEAT FOR FUELING MISPERCEPTION

Another foundation of the field, growing by the hour and bound to be part of the emerging consensus of what pr is and does, is research. But again, currently popular methods will require rigorous reexamination.

Running a government – or an organization – based on what polls say stakeholders think has become increasingly dangerous in a *research* sense – since people often don't know what they want, don't have sufficient info to answer accurately, don't follow through behaviorally on their intellectual responses, can be misled by question order and other methodological issues.

Now, more voices are questioning listening too closely to polling findings as a *strategy and policy* matter.

If the poll is king, asks a political pundit, why have elected representatives? In today's complicated environment, rarely do stakeholders understand the issue. They simply cannot keep abreast of huge topics like education reform, the national deficit, healthcare change and many others. There is a need for public officials and organizational managers whose role is to consider carefully the total outcomes of proposed actions.

Polls discover gut-level "feelings of the moment." To pander to them equates to instant democracy, better known as mob rule – quick passion over considered decisions.

Says a leftwing candidate, the next two years will bring a struggle for the soul of the political party, "and its soul must not be a poll."

This does not mean avoiding listening to stakeholders but rather using more enlightened research methods to probe their aspirations and behavior. The perils of polling reminds us that the need is for leaders and advocates, who facilitate democratic debate, which results in decisions the great majority can live with. **This is where public relations practitioners take their vital place in society.** Management by polls is a diminution of pr as well as of sound decisionmaking.

POLLING STILL GETS NUMBERS WRONG AND THAT CAN BE MORE THAN MISLEADING

early in a subject debate. That segment of democratic populations who simply want to "go along" and be with the winning side are relieved of their responsibility to consider the issue when erroneous polls show one side far more popular.

A right wing commentator pointed out early last year how far off the mark poll results can be – especially

Case: polls in the 1996 election showed Clinton over Dole by 16-30 points throughout the campaign. The vote, however, gave him a bare eight percentage points. Even the final polls, taken the weekend before the election, gave Clinton a 12-18 point lead – off by 50 to 125%.

British pollsters got the outcome wrong in the 1992 UK vote, when they predicted a Labor win that didn't happen. So in the 1997 election they tended to be cautious. They reminded voters that the

dangers in polling process must be taken into account – namely the domain of sampling error, statistical glitches and the laws of probability. To say nothing of partisan polls with questions carefully worded to provide the best result.

To Start the Year, Let's Explore This Major Challenge Together:

MANAGEMENT'S DEMAND FOR PROOF OF RESULTS AND WALL STREET'S TURN TO NON-FINANCIAL INDICATORS MAKES MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION 2000's PR TOPIC No. 1

Several attempts are underway to devise *practical* evaluation methodologies that are *meaningful* – which is vital, since both management and investors have shown a penchant for grabbing at numbers even when there's no substance in them.

■ Now being tested, in initial usage, or planned:

1. For measuring relationships, the Grunig-Hon scale ([pr 10/11/99](#))
2. For measuring reputation, Reputation Quotient ([pr 10/18/99](#))
3. For measuring overall pr effects, an IPR Commission on Evaluation and Measurement project funded by Council of PR Firms
4. For measuring employee engagement, Ketchum's Relationship Index ([pr 6/15/98](#)), Gallup's Q12 (same [pr](#) issue) and others

■ Their pioneering and theoretical forerunners include:

1. Swedish PR Association's Return on Communications ([pr 3/10/97](#))
2. Ernst & Young's "Measures That Matter"
3. Elaine Dixson's Key Matrix system ([pr 7/27/98](#))

Typically, the movement is led by publicly held corporations, since investors are demanding to know more about future prospects of the companies whose stocks they hold. But a minority of practitioners work for corporations, so methodologies must also be created for NPOs such as healthcare institutions, public service entities, schools, universities, co-ops and government agencies.

FIRST STEP, DETERMINE WHAT CAN BE MEASURED THAT DOES MATTER

For example, measuring reputation per se is dubious. To what extent can we show reputation influences behavior? When? Precisely whose behavior? And what exactly is reputation? How stable is it? Yet large, multi-faceted, across-the-board topics like reputation are appealing research targets for the hope of summing up a hugely complicated situation with one easy measurement.

Thinking of a Reputation That Matters method – i.e. meaningful reputation – one might postulate doing Q sorts ([pr 12/20/99](#)) with a structured sample of stakeholders whose behavior can undeniably impact an organization's success, such as

- | | | |
|----------------|--------------|-------------------|
| ■ Customers | ■ Regulators | ■ Neighbors and |
| ■ Stockholders | ■ Employees | the municipality/ |
| | ■ Vendors | community |

Reputation measurements tend to ask members of the general public how they perceive an organization. But many respondents have no relationship with the organization, so can hardly impact its success. It's the old mindset of treating organizations as if they were candidates for office and everyone shows up to vote.

- You may have a very low opinion of University X for some reason, but it's halfway across the nation, you have no connection with it, are unlikely to be asked to recommend students or contribute ... so its reputation with you is meaningless
- Using Q-sorts will help bring the useful aspects of reputation into focus since it allows respondents to really participate in the data-gathering "discussion" which research is

Another factor in measuring reputation is differentiating between brands or services reputation and organizational reputation. The latter – which includes management skill, policies, risk-taking, employee engagement etc – is an entirely separate, but highly important, measure from the former.

FOR STARTERS, CONSIDER CUSTOMER LOYALTY A VERY USEFUL MEASURE

In every industry and sector it has been shown that customers don't begin to pay off for the seller until their 3rd or 4th purchase. Acquisition costs, setting up customer records, getting them to understand how you do business – these eat up the gross margin in the beginning of the relationship. This is as true for schools and hospitals as for retailers and manufacturers.

- Therefore, retaining customers is one of the most cost-effective, profitable things an organization can do – which is why customer delight programs and other attempts to stimulate loyalty are rife
- Studies demonstrating it only takes \$1 to keep a customer vs. \$6 to acquire a new one add to the bottom-line punch of customer loyalty

Many programs have evolved to achieve loyalty – but how to measure it is more sophisticated.

AMONG THE MANY VARIABLES THAT MUST BE CONSIDERED

Various sectors have different types of "customers." School systems, for example – already struggling with one type of measurement, mandatory student

testing – have two levels of customers: *community residents*, all of whom support schools with taxes, so are the system's true *customers* (the ones who pay the bill); and *parents*, who pay taxes but also have an added relationship with schools and thus become *supercustomers*. But this added status ends when their kids leave school, so is a temporary variable – an always moving target.

For schools, and probably other public institutions and NPOs, customer loyalty is not defined by *longevity of purchase* but by *involvement*. Residents who pay taxes but don't become engaged in school affairs are dangerous customers – the ones who vote down bond issues and improvement initiatives. Parents – who would appear to have a naturally limited span of interest as supercustomers – must also be engaged, but then a longevity possibility opens up. Can schools keep them engaged *after* their own kids have left?

SCHOOLS MAY BE SPECIAL CASE, BUT BUSINESS IS NO LESS COMPLICATED

- Measuring businesses' customer loyalty levels must be tailored to each *type of purchase*
- Assume a measure of loyalty is *repeat purchase*; how else can loyalty be evaluated *behaviorally*?
- The evaluation purpose is to discern how *stable* the customer base is likely to be

Consider these purchase cycles – and don't confuse *choice* (when the purchase is decided) with *use*:

- a) Soft drinks = daily choice and use, or very regular purchase cycle whatever the interval
- b) Long distance calls = daily use but infrequent choice (how often do you want to change vendors?)
- c) Cars = daily use, 3 - 10 year choice (new-car-every-year buyers have mostly disappeared)
- d) Real estate = very infrequent choice

Take car buying as a case. The implication is that loyalty here needs to be measured in multi-year cycles, or this is at least one variable to be considered. (For real estate, in contrast, measuring the extent of word-of-mouth recommendations that stimulate referrals could be the item to evaluate.)

To determine repeat car purchases, state auto registration records may be the key. If John Jones bought Oldsmobiles in 1989, 1994 and 1999, that's a trustworthy indicator. If neither he nor anyone of the same surname at his address registered any other brands, that's pretty good proof of loyalty.

How to structure the audit of these records is another nuance, but since non-financial indicators may be part of the annual financial audit, the big accounting firms can figure that out.

APPLY THIS BREADTH OF THINKING TO HEALTHCARE, EDUCATION, UTILITIES ETC

Drag out your old marketing text to review purchase decision models and the other variables involved – e.g. high social and ego involvement vs. low. It may guide you in designing customer loyalty and similar evaluations for your specific organization.

Immediately another variable pops up: does the consumer *have* a choice, as a practical matter? If not, loyalty is not a meaningful measure. Even with **electricity** dereg, the T&D utility (transmission and distribution, or the company whose wires come into your house or business) will not change in the foreseeable future. You may have a choice of Gencos (companies that generate power and put it into the grid) but they're apt to be miles away and, depending on the billing system, you may have little contact with them (pr 11/29/99).

In healthcare, you can usually choose a PCP (primary care physician). As a rule, however, the doctor will send you to a facility of her choice for special tests, in-bed treatment, surgery. Then there's the issue of how to predict how many people will need which treatments, when. There are epidemiological statistics giving averages, but usually they're years old and not necessarily relevant to Hospital X. So perhaps an involvement measure of some type will be the loyalty measure for healthcare, since repeat "purchases" omits many variables.

Final point: while the state of customer loyalty may be a critical non-financial indicator for execs, investors and trustees/directors, for practitioners there remains the issue of the extent to which pr activities contribute to this state. For what will we – never mind *can* we – be held responsible?

RESULTING RULES FOR MEASURING CUSTOMER LOYALTY (FIRST DRAFT) :

1. To measure customer loyalty, or any similar characteristic, you must first
 - (a) Establish a list of all the *variables*, then
 - (b) List the *influencing factors* on each variable. This means
 - (c) Walking step-by-step through a *psychological and behavioral model* of the purchase environment
 - This type of incisive, scientific thinking has not been standard operating procedure for practitioners. It is hard intellectual work. BUT – if we don't do it and set our own standards and procedures, someone else will – with results we may find onerous.
2. No method can be applied universally, but must be tailored to each type of purchase, e.g.
 - (a) A *spur-of-the-moment* purchase, like a soft drink or candy bar
 - (b) A *discretionary* purchase, like a set of golf clubs or extra clothing
 - (c) *Essential* purchases like an automobile or a house (and note that the line here between essential and discretionary must be marked, since one may have a perfectly good car but want to use funds in a discretionary way to get a new, or better, or different car)
 - (d) *Repeat or habitual* purchases, like food items
 - (e) There may be *other types* (Check your marketing text to see if it offers such a list.)

OTHER ITEMS THAT NEED TO BE MEASURED

All this covers only one measure, customer loyalty – i.e. the probability your organization will remain a viable entity by having a willing market for its goods and services. While it will most likely be included in whatever evaluation protocol evolves, there are other items to be measured.

Measures That Matter lists eight categories, including

- Strength of organizational culture
- Quality of management
- Quality of investor communications (read donor communications for NPOs, taxpayer communications for government)
- Level of customer satisfaction (loyalty is a better measure since it's behavioral)
- Quality of products and services

PR has a role in each, so pr activities will be a factor in measuring them.

THANKFULLY, WE'RE NOT STARTING WITH NOTHING

1. Some **behavioral measures naturally exist** – e.g. who shows up at an event pr was responsible for, or which opinion leaders were persuaded to support an issue campaign. Also whether employees

demonstrate engagement by volunteering to be ambassadors, participate in community or trade relations efforts and similar.

But these are not necessarily **outcomes**. 20% of your employees can be active in structured community efforts, and still you can't get support to improve the road to your loading dock.

- **Question:** to predict likely future success for an organization, is it enough to show that it has relationships with opinion leaders, has engaged employees? After all, stakeholder publics may deny an organization something it feels it needs even though they are generally supportive of it. So must measurement show that processes led to outcomes?
 - Remember, outcomes *is* the rule we apply to counting clips. "So what?" we ask, seeing your big publicity scrapbook. Did anyone *do* anything as a result? Is consistency necessary, or "the hobgoblin of little minds"?
2. **Measuring outputs and the awareness they create has long been standardized**, though quicker, cheaper methodologies are needed – e.g. dipstick research using mathematical models or structured samples vs. the time-consuming, costly "pure" statistical sample
 3. **Demonstrating likelihood to act in certain ways is possible** – though again, more trustworthy and simplified methodologies need to come into standard use
 - **IPR's three volumes describing existing methodologies ought to be in practitioners' libraries.** They are:
 - a) *Guidelines and Standards for Measuring and Evaluating PR Effectiveness*
 - b) *Guidelines for Setting Measurable PR Objectives*
 - c) *Guidelines for Measuring Relationships in PR*

(Order from Institute for PR, 352/392-0280, www.instituteforpr.com)

CONCLUSION

It's reasonable to believe ultimate evaluation protocols will feature:

1. **Objective measures** – elements that can be planned for and then measured without too many caveats
2. **A review of processes and systems** – are the organization and its pr staff organized along best practice lines
3. **Have these systems delivered positive outcomes**, given the industry or sector and the current environment; here such caveats are essential to accurately evaluate pr
4. **Are relationships established** that will ease the organization over the inevitable bumps in the road

SOME PREDICTABLE BARRIERS

- A. **Refusal rates.** As more research on stakeholder groups is conducted, more resistance to responding is occurring. Refusal rates are reported from 30% all the way to 70% – and the written response rate is abominable, by and large. E-mail surveys may ease this situation – but it is becoming a major source of overcommunication itself, so maybe not (pr 11/29/99)
- B. **Survey weakness.** Measurement research will be far more critical to organizations – and practitioners – than any other. Programs, jobs, paychecks, position in the organization will be at stake. Skewed response situations, or low response rates, cannot be permitted. Question: **To what extent can measurement be done without having to conduct surveys?** This may be the ultimate solution, since objective databases and behavioral outcomes are far less subject to researcher error.

In fact, the thought arises that any surveys done for evaluation demonstrate a weakness in the system, because it indicates no objective or behavioral measure is available (or possible). Take strength of relationships as a key measure. How might they be measured without having to ask a sample of stakeholders?

- C. **Privacy vs. transparency.** While organizations strive for transparent communications with stakeholders as a vital element in earning trust, stakeholders are greatly concerned about their privacy. This is demonstrated behaviorally in refusals to respond to surveys, in the high rate of unlisted phone numbers, and in opposition to access to databanks. But it could also manifest itself in a general antipathy to all the number crunching and testing or measuring now flooding society. People are tired of being treated as demographic statistics and constantly being rated or evaluated.

If key stakeholders don't care whether management or investors or whomever can get accurate evaluation data, the M&E thrust could be hindered.

PEER REVIEW A POSSIBILITY ?

Research institutions and university departments have long been evaluated by peer review teams, made up of acknowledged experts in the subject matter. There's usually some objective data available to the team – e.g. enrollment statistics, course completion rates, publications and citations. But basically the team sits with staff and management and delves into all the topics covered here – and more. Could it work for pr?
