Where Are We Now? Public Relations Professionals Discuss Measurement and Evaluation

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Abstract

Increased conversation is underway about how to best measure and evaluate public relations. In an industry that is dependent on research, measurement, and evaluation, professionals recognize that thoughtful measurement and evaluation programs can provide valuable insight. Unfortunately, public relations research, industry case studies, and trade journal articles still highlight the profession's focus on output-level metrics and the difficulty of measuring more telling outcomes. The purpose of this research was to address the gap between what measurement and evaluation should be and what it is. Drawing on literature from Excellence and role theories, this study explored how professionals who possess different roles within communications departments view measurement and evaluation and the extent to which they use measurement and evaluation findings to influence organizational effectiveness. Twenty in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 executives—and junior-level communications professionals from agencies, corporations, and nonprofit organizations across the United States along with four distinguished measurement and evaluation thought leaders. Comparing findings from executive—and junior-level professionals, this study addressed the following questions: How do professionals in this study measure and evaluate public relations? Are they focusing on output, outtake, or outcome-level metrics, and why? Why is advertising value equivalency (AVE) still used to measure public relations? What measurement and evaluation challenges do professionals face? What are suggestions for measurement and evaluation improvement? Findings from professionals and insights from thought leaders provided immediate takeaways for public relations/communications professionals.

Executive Summary

Increased conversation is underway about how to best measure and evaluate public relations. In an industry that is dependent on research, measurement, and evaluation, professionals recognize that thoughtful measurement and evaluation programs can provide valuable insight. Unfortunately, public relations research, industry case studies, and trade journal articles still highlight the profession's focus on output-level metrics and the difficulty of measuring more telling outcomes. The purpose of this research was to address the gap between what measurement and evaluation should be and what it is.

Drawing on literature from Excellence and role theories, this study explored how employees who possess different roles within communications departments view measurement and evaluation and the extent to which they use measurement and evaluation findings to influence organizational effectiveness. Twenty in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 executive—and junior-level professionals from agencies, corporations, and nonprofit organizations across the United States along with four distinguished measurement and evaluation thought leaders. Building on decades of public relations measurement and evaluation research, this study sought to address the following questions: How do professionals in this study measure and evaluate public relations? Are they focusing on output, outtake, or outcome-level metrics, and why? Why is advertising value equivalency (AVE) still used to measure public relations? What measurement and evaluation challenges do professionals face? What are suggestions for measurement and evaluation improvement?

Findings revealed that professionals in this study see value in output-level metrics such as media placements, reach, impressions, or share of voice. However, they indicated a shift toward measuring outtakes and outcomes to better understand the attitudes and behaviors of target audiences. Though some professionals said they use AVE, they noted that they consider it a supplementary metric. The executive-level professionals, especially, underscored the importance of measuring outcomes like reputation, relationships, or advocacy. Junior-level professionals said well-built relationships with executive-level professionals lead them to feel more comfortable advocating for measurement. The challenges mentioned paralleled what is found in literature such as cost and time. Additional challenges professionals discussed included the need to set clear goals up front; the need to consistently educate clients or other departments about the importance of measurement and evaluation; and the need to integrate measurement across departments. In terms of improving public relations measurement and evaluation, this study found that professionals desire employees trained in data analytics. They would also like professional associations to provide access to case studies and guidelines on how to measure and evaluate public relations. Participants impressed upon the importance of research to measure outcomes as well as needed transparency across the profession when discussing measurement and evaluation practices. Insight from measurement and evaluation thought leaders provided immediate takeaways for public relations professionals.

Introduction

"Ask any group of PR practitioners around the world to list the major issues facing their discipline, and it is almost certain that evaluation of PR activity will be ranked highly, if not the number one topic" (Watson & Noble, 2014, p. 1). Public relations measurement and evaluation have long been discussed and debated. In the early days, professionals compiled press clippings and put them into books (Watson, 2012). Today, measurement and evaluation require strategic planning, setting measurable objectives, and interpretation of results that can be used to improve communication strategy.

Public relations professionals recognize the importance of measurement and evaluation; however, research revealed common challenges they face including cost, lack of time, and lack of expertise (Buhmann, Likely, & Geddes, 2018; Macnamara, 2014a). Additionally, research indicated that professionals tend to focus on output-level metrics rather than outcomes (Schriner, Swenson, & Gilkerson, 2017; Wright & Hinson, 2016; Global Communications Report, 2016). Though professional organizations have developed guidelines and standards for measuring and evaluating public relations, unlike other professions like marketing or advertising, "Public relations professionals have consistently failed to achieve consensus on what the basic evaluative measures are or how to conduct the underlying research for evaluating and measuring public relations performance" (Michaelson & Stacks, 2011, p. 1).

As scholars have called for more qualitative contributions on this topic to provide deeper insight into the day-to-day practice of professionals (Volk & Buhmann, 2019; Macnamara 2014a), in-depth interviews were conducted with junior—and executive-level professionals to explore how employees who possess different roles within communications departments view measurement and evaluation and the extent to which they use measurement and evaluation findings to influence organizational effectiveness This study captured how some professionals measure and evaluate public relations, the challenges they face, and their suggestions for improvement. Interviews with four distinguished measurement and evaluation thought leaders provided additional insight and recommendations for professionals.

Literature Review

Defining Public Relations Measurement and Evaluation

Before discussing measurement and evaluation, it is important to define what the terms mean and how they differ. In his *Guidelines for Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Relations Programs and Activities,* Lindenmann (2003) defined public relations measurement as "a way of giving a result a precise dimension, generally by comparison to some standard or baseline and usually done in a quantifiable or numerical manner" (p. 2). Macnamara (2015) provided a similar definition: "Measurement is the taking of measures such as counting items, collecting ratings on a scale, or recording comments in interviews and analyzing these. Measurement involves two key stages – data collection and data analysis" (p. 8). In short, measurement is what can be directly observed of a public relations program or campaign.

Different than measurement is evaluation, which Lindenmann (2003) said is more subjective and usually involves deeper interpretation. According to Lindenmann (2003), "Public relations evaluation determines the value or importance of a public relations program or effort, usually through appraisal or comparison with some predetermined set of organization goals and objectives" (p. 2). Similarly, Macnamara (2015) explained that both the Oxford and Merriam-Webster dictionaries define evaluation as "to judge" or "to make a judgment" about the value of something (p. 8). Though metrics may inform evaluation, "value is perception" (Macnamara, 2015, p. 8) The evaluation process requires taking a holistic look at communications efforts to determine how they are contributing to fulfilling an organization's mission, strategy, and overarching goals (Buhmann & Likely, 2018). Evaluation has long been considered an imperative function of the public relations profession, as evidenced in almost every acronym for the public relations process, including Hendrix's (2000) ROPE (research, objectives, program, evaluation) model; Marston's (1979) RACE (research, action, communication, evaluation) model; and Cutlip, Center, and Broom's (1984) four-step process that concludes with program evaluation (as cited in Stacks, 2017). The purpose of evaluation is to gain deeper insight into the meanings behind the data and then use that insight to improve communication strategy.

Outputs, outtakes, and outcomes

Public relations metrics are often divided into three categories: outputs, outtakes, and outcomes. According to Lindenmann (2003), "outputs are usually the immediate results of a particular PR program or activity" (p. 5). Examples of output-level metrics include media placements or hits, impressions, reach, share of voice, and advertising value equivalency (AVE). However, researchers and professional organizations have discredited the use of AVE and multipliers in public relations (AMEC, 2015; Michaelson & Stacks, 2007). Outtakes go beyond dissemination of messages and determine whether target audiences received, paid attention to, understood, comprehended, retained, or can recall the messages that were presented to them (Lindenmann, 2003). Examples of outtake-level metrics discussed in public relations measurement and evaluation literature include unique visitors, views, likes, followers, fans, clickthroughs, downloads, comments, tone, and sentiment (Macnamara, 2014a). Outcomes measure whether public relations efforts resulted in opinion, attitudinal, or behavioral changes of target audiences (Lindenmann, 2003). Examples of outcome-level metrics discussed in public relations measurement and evaluation literature include influence, impact, awareness, trust, loyalty, reputation, and relationships (Macnamara, 2014a).

Further explaining the role of outputs, outtakes, and outcomes in communication strategy and evaluation, Buhmann and Likely (2018) differentiated among three levels of evaluation research. Formative evaluation research occurs at the situational analysis and strategic planning stages when outcome-level objectives are set. Process evaluation occurs at the implementation stage when professionals track outputs and outtakes to determine whether "processes are 'on track'" (Buhmann & Likely, 2018, p. 4). Summative evaluation occurs when professionals (1) gauge the outcome of communication efforts and determine the extent to which objectives were met and (2) assess the effect of communication on the organization as a whole. At this stage, professionals also extract insights or feedback that can be used to improve future strategy (Buhmann & Likely, 2018).

Most public relations measurement focuses on output-level metrics (traditional or social media analysis) (Buhmann et al., 2018). As Watson (2012) observed in his review of public relations measurement over 110 years, this form of measurement has been present for decades. The 2016 Global Communications Report stated, "Current measurement models are still alarmingly focused on measures of output—such as total reach or impressions—rather than business outcomes" (p. 10). In an annual longitudinal analysis study of how social and digital media use are affecting public relations practice, Wright and Hinson (2016) found that "most of the measurement currently taking place focuses on outputs and content analysis with only about one quarter of the organizations employing outcome-based methodologies" (p. 1). In a content analysis of 526 Silver Anvil award-winning cases from 2010 to 2014, Schriner et al. (2017) concluded that despite consistently high measurement of campaign outcomes, "award-winning campaigns place even greater emphasis on output measures within their campaign evaluations" (p. 7). The researchers also found continued use of AVE in campaign evaluations (Schriner et al., 2017).

Linking communications to organizational effectiveness

The concept of moving beyond program-level evaluation to evaluating the effect of public relations on organizational effectiveness is exemplified through Excellence theory (Grunig, 2006). Excellence theory, which is rooted in situational theory of publics, organizational theory, the symmetrical model of public relations, and evaluation research states that public relations should help an organization achieve its goals (Grunig, 2006). Excellence theory explains that organizations must engage in environmental scanning to identify stakeholders, solve problems and satisfy goals of stakeholders and management, and engage in symmetrical communication with different audiences within stakeholder categories to foster relationships with them (Grunig, 2006). In short, Excellence theory focuses on empowering the public relations function, its role in strategic management, and the value of cultivating relationships on organizational effectiveness (Grunig, 2006). As Grunig (2006) explained, "It is possible to manage processes but not outcomes. The best we can do is influence outcomes by managing processes" (p. 167). In other words, nothing would be accomplished without processes, and processes are within a public relations professional's control. However, public relations professionals should determine how those processes are influencing outcomes to evaluate the impact of public relations on organizational effectiveness.

The importance of linking communication strategy to organizational goals or outcomes has more recently been emphasized by Volk and Zerfass (2018). The authors defined and created a conceptual framework for the concept of alignment in strategic communication, differentiating between primary alignment (of communication strategy and overall organizational strategy) and secondary alignment (of communication strategy and communication activities). Alignment "is considered desirable as it is commonly agreed that alignment is a key precondition for organizational success" (Volk & Zerfass, 2018, p. 443). Alignment was also noted by Swenson, Gilkerson, Likely, Anderson, and Ziviani (2019). In interviewing communication executives at organizations that have demonstrated leadership in communication measurement and evaluation, the researchers found that the executives move through three steps to progress to sophisticated measurement and evaluation programs: adjustment, alignment, and integration. At the adjustment stage, executives use measurement findings to access communication activities and then adjust communication strategy. At the alignment stage, executives align communication measurement with the work of other business units. At the integration stage, executives integrate communication measurement and evaluation programs with organizational objectives and priority plans (Swenson et al., 2019). In doing so, communication executives are able to advance their measurement and evaluation practices and align their work with organizational goals and plans (Swenson et al., 2019).

Measurement and Evaluation Within Communication Roles

Further discussing public relations as a management function, literature on role theory differentiates between a communication technician role, which entry-level professionals typically assume, and a managerial role, which senior-level professionals typically assume (Dozier & Broom, 1995; Broom & Smith, 1979). Both roles are vital in helping a communication program function (Dozier, 1992). However, while research has found that both scientific (social science research) and seat-of-the-pants (subjective, informal research) evaluation styles were correlated with the managerial role, neither evaluation style was correlated with the technician role (Dozier, 1984; Dozier, 1981). Recent literature suggests that measurement and evaluation may be more important skills for today's entry-level public relations professionals. In a content analysis of entry-level employment ads in public relations, Brunner, Zarkin, and Yates (2018) suggested that employers desire a new communication role. This role, which they called "the manager's apprentice," combines the skills of both a communication technician and manager, and familiarity with measurement and data collection are required skills (Brunner et al., 2018). In the 2016 Global Communications Report, 62 percent of in-house and agency professionals said that analytics is a needed skill for communicators. Additionally, Swenson et al. (2019) found that strong evaluation expertise at all levels is a component of successful measurement and evaluation programs.

Measurement and Evaluation Challenges

Across studies on public relations measurement and evaluation, professionals commonly cite similar obstacles that prevent them from measuring outcomes, such as cost, time, and lack of expertise (Buhmann et al., 2018; Macnamara, 2014a). However, Nothhaft and Stenson (2019) argued that there may be other barriers to measurement and evaluation, and scholarly research that repeats these same barriers may signal "functional stupidity." It is true that professionals have said public relations measurement has become increasingly complex with the rise of social and digital media. In a qualitative study of 25 public relations and communications executives, DiStaso, McCorkindale, and Wright (2011) found that participants felt they had more questions than answers about social media measurement. Specifically, participants questioned how they should measure "behavioral outcomes, not just reach" and how to "get concrete and meaningful measures of impact…influence behavior" (DiStaso et al., 2011, p. 327). Ethical issues further complicate the evaluation process. In a qualitative study of 22 public relations professionals in the United States, Place (2015) found that while some professionals prioritize truth and fairness in their evaluation practices, others have felt the need to selectively represent data to save an organization's reputation or relationships. The challenge of incorporating measurement and evaluation into communications programs has also been noted in industry reports. In the 2017 Global Communications Report, 54 percent of respondents who worked at agencies and 57 percent of respondents who worked in-house said lack of quantifiable measurement was preventing growth. And in a Cision and PR Week (2018) global survey of communication professionals, 77 percent of respondents indicated that professionals could be better at measuring and demonstrating impact on business objectives.

Measurement Standards

To address these challenges, professional organizations have developed guidelines, standards, and recommendations for best practices in public relations measurement and evaluation. The International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) released the Barcelona Principles in 2010 and updated them in 2015. The seven principles address goal setting, measuring outcomes as opposed to only outputs, the importance of measuring effect on organizational performance, the need to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methods, the rejection of AVE in communication measurement, the need to measure social media consistently with other media channels, and the statement that "measurement and evaluation should be transparent, consistent and valid" (AMEC, 2015, para. 7). The Coalition for Public Relations Research Standards provided an extensive list of commonly used terms in traditional and media measurement, their descriptions, and their applications (Institute for Public Relations, n.d.). And Stacks and Bowen (2013) developed a *Dictionary of Public Relations Measurement and Research.* As Michaelson and Stacks (2011) argued, "In order to succeed, the industry has to go beyond soft guidelines and accept specific measures that can be universally applied" (p. 19). They explained that the basis of standardized measurement systems is comparative evaluation, meaning that with consistent use of reliable, valid, standardized measurement systems, one can evaluate whether communication goals are being met ("absolute measures"), identify whether changes in measures are significant based on comparison with similar programs and campaigns that were considered successful ("relative measures"), and continuously measure progress and adapt as needed to ensure goals are achieved (Michaelson & Stacks, 2011, p. 4).

In a critical analysis of emerging international standards for measurement and evaluation of communication, Macnamara (2014a) acknowledged the progress the profession has made but addressed gaps and issues, including a plethora of inconsistent, often confusing terms and a focus on media measurement. Research on whether professionals are adopting standardized measures from professional organizations indicates some progression. In a survey of 347 communication professionals, one quarter of respondents reported adopting standardized measures (Thorson et al., 2015). In interviews with communications executives, Swenson et al. (2019) found that while some professionals reported familiarity with industry standards, others said they do not find them valuable.

A review of measurement and evaluation literature led to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do professionals in this study measure and evaluate public relations?

- Are they focusing on output, outtake, or outcome-level metrics, and why?

RQ2: Why is AVE still used to measure public relations?

RQ3: What are common measurement and evaluation challenges?

RQ4: What are suggestions for improving measurement and evaluation?

Method

In total, 20 participants contributed to this study. Sixteen of the 20 participants were public relations/communications professionals across the United States who work in various settings, including at corporations, agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Nine of the 16 professionals held executive-level public relations or communications positions. Examples of their titles included chief communications officer, vice president of marketing and communications, and senior vice president of public relations. The executive-level professionals were contacting the researcher made through networking. The other seven participants were junior-level public relations/communications professionals who had 4 to 5 years of public relations experience and held positions such as account manager, account supervisor, and marketing and communications specialist. Some junior-level professionals were contacted because they are members of the Public Relations Society of America's New Professionals Section. Snowball sampling led to additional participants. Additionally, four public relations measurement and evaluation thought leaders contributed to this study. Thought leaders were contacted because they are members of the Institute for Public Relations Measurement Commission. With Institutional Review Board approval, each participant engaged in a 30-to-60-minute semi-structured interview with the researcher. Participants were not compensated for their time. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) to form emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checks were conducted with all participants.

Results

How Public Relations Professionals Define Measurement and Evaluation

Public relations professionals were initially asked how they define measurement and evaluation. The purpose of this question was to determine how professionals perceive public relations measurement and evaluation and begin to explore whether professionals in this study focus more on output, outtake, or outcome-level metrics.

When asked to define public relations measurement and evaluation, junior-level professionals who worked at public relations agencies tended to discuss measurement and evaluation in relation to public relations campaigns. For example, an account manager at a tourism agency said, "I'd say measurement and evaluation is taking a look back at your campaign, not only at the end but throughout the process and seeing what's working and what's not." A public relations research associate at a global communications firm said it is "measuring the impact and success of PR campaigns." Junior-level professionals at companies tended to use the term "analytics." For example, a communications consultant at a technology company said, "I would say something along the lines of using analytics to measure the impact of communications tactics." A corporate communications manager at a retail real estate agency said, "Analytics comes to mind right away and measuring engagement and reach." Junior-level professionals who worked at nonprofit organizations tended to use the terms "results" or "success."

Executive-level professionals defined measurement and evaluation quite differently, often using terms like "value," "ROI," "investment," "business," or "reputation." For example, a senior vice president of corporate communications at a financial services company said, "Measurement to me is looking at the strategies and initiatives we put in place. Looking at those and really determining the value of what we've achieved. It's determining the value and it's also tracking progress and tracking setbacks." A vice president of marketing and communications at a health care system focused on reputation and cost effectiveness:

> It's the value of reputation and really brand from a brand-strength-and-equity standpoint. So, I feel a lot of activity happens in the name of quote, unquote brand building, but how can you tell that it was worth the investment? And that's where the measurement piece comes in.

A vice president of public relations at a boutique agency said, "I would define it as a true return on investment, ROI, and showing really the impact of our communications strategies and stories."

Analysis of junior—and executive-level professionals' definitions of measurement and evaluation indicated that workplace setting, and level of experience influenced how professionals in this study perceived measurement and evaluation. While junior-level professionals focused more on campaigns, analytics, tactics, or results, executive-level professionals focused more on bottom-line business goals, value, or return on investment.

How Junior-Level Professionals Measure and Evaluate Public Relations

Table 1-1. Metrics any junior-level professional mentioned at any point during interviews.

Outputs	*Outtakes*	*Outcomes*
Reach	Followers	Awareness
AVE	Traffic	Impact
Circulation	Mentions	Attitudes
Impressions	Tone/Sentiment	Opinion
Hits/Placements	Views	Attendance
Share of voice	Ratings	Conversions
	Unique visitors	Advocacy/Testimonials
	Engagement	
	Clickthroughs	
	Subscribers	
	Open rate	

Most metrics junior-level professionals mentioned fell into the outtake-level category, many of which had to do with social or digital media. During interviews, some junior-level professionals read off of extensive measurement reports that included metrics such as clickthroughs or unique visitors. Additionally, junior-level professionals often discussed how they observe what content and messages are performing best on websites and social media platforms and then tailor future content to reflect their observations. For example, an account manager at marketing and communications agency said, “As we're working on content once a month, we'll look back at which posts we sent out last month performed well and say, ‘Let's do more of those’ or ‘Let's not.’” Other junior-level professionals discussed conducting audience analysis to determine if they are reaching their intended audiences through social or digital media.

When discussing output-level metrics such as reach, impressions, or share of voice in relation to print or digital media placements, junior-level professionals noted that although they think these metrics are valuable in a sense, they are not always sufficient metrics and are better paired with other metrics. For example, when discussing share of voice, a public relations research associate at a global communications firm said, “I don't like it. I understand the reasoning behind using it, and I think it's great when coupled with other measurements, but I just don't think standalone share of voice is a great measurement option.” That being said, several junior-level professionals discussed the emphasis they place on media content analysis to determine the quality, tonality, or sentiment of coverage.

Of the seven junior-level professionals interviewed, three said AVE and multipliers are used at their places of work. Reasons junior-level professionals said they use AVE included because media monitoring systems include them in reports, because of pressure from senior-level employees or clients, or because outside agencies their organizations employ provide them. However, all junior-level professionals said they do not think AVE is a strong or even valuable metric. For example, a marketing and communications specialist at a nonprofit organization explained that the media monitoring system at his place of work includes AVE in its reports, but he does not think the metric carries much value except as a supplemental metric:

> I don't really go around saying, “Hey, we got this.” There are just, I think, other things to worry about and to focus on. And I think we can make our case for the success of something maybe with that number being supplemental.

An account manager at a tourism agency also said she does not think AVE is a strong metric, but she feels pressured to provide it:

> Unfortunately, when you're thinking about the clients we're working with, they all have a board of directors or a C-suite who are spending money to employ our agency and, at the end of the day, even if we tell them that an ad equivalency is not the way to track results, they still are dead set on it, the dollar value in their mind, and they really want the ROI and whatnot . . . it varies by client, how open they are, and how understanding they are of that feedback that we're giving them.

Some junior-level professionals who said they do not use AVE described conversations they or their coworkers have had with clients or the C-suite about the profession constantly evolving, meaning that metrics that were once popular are not necessarily considered valuable today. For example, an account supervisor at a public relations and social media agency said:

> We did at one point have to tell our client . . . that we would no longer be using that metric because it wasn't really a valid measurement. And then they ask, well why was it being used before? And this conversation comes up. Well, public relations measurement is continuously evolving, and the industry is always trying to find better ways of measuring our results and showing the ROI, and this isn't one that shows the true value of the work.

In sum, whether or not they used AVE, professionals did not place much value in it, and those who said they did use it expressed desire to replace or do away with it.

Seemingly viewing themselves as messengers to other employees and departments, junior-level professionals explained that they often have ears to target audiences. They use insights they gain through social listening or web analytics to make recommendations to others at their organizations that they believe will help in reaching organizational goals or improving business outcomes. For example, a corporate communications manager at a retail real estate company described how social listening allows him to gain insight about what stores consumers want at certain retail properties. He said he takes that information to leasing in hopes that they can convince retailers to sign new leases. A communications consultant at a technology firm discussed how she used web analytics to determine what content a target audience engaged with most on a client's website. Using that data, a team at her company developed a mobile application with similar content for that client's audience that had more than 18,000 installs at the time of the interview.

Other junior-level professionals discussed their efforts to tie output—and outtake-level metrics to outcomes. For example, a marketing and communications specialist at a nonprofit organization provided an example of when he secured a local news interview promoting a pediatric health fair. At the fair, he asked people where they heard about the event to gauge whether the interview contributed to awareness and event attendance. An account supervisor at a public relations and social media firm discussed a campaign her team launched for a national food client that involved hosting events at participating restaurants. She said her team was able to track restaurant traffic and sales before, during, and after events at participating versus non-participating locations to determine that the events contributed to a spike in restaurant traffic and sales during that time period.

Unexpectedly, several junior-level professionals said strong workplace relationships lead them to feel more comfortable advocating for public relations measurement. For instance, a marketing and communications manager who works in education described how he helped launch the implementation of UTM codes at his organization, but without the support he had from leadership and other departments, he said that change might not have occurred:

> I was like, "This is where we're at. This is where we need to be." I think having a really flexible boss who understands and gets it and is comfortable putting me in front of some of our leadership is sometimes even better because I think sometimes the directors are so high-level that they're not always doing the day-to-day tactical and strategic work. They're in meetings. They're floating around. So, I think it's important to have those junior-level professionals kind of in there explaining because sometimes they have a better grasp on it.

Some junior-level professionals discussed helping conduct evaluation research to measure outcomes. For instance, a public relations research associate at a global communications firm discussed her involvement conducting pre—and post-campaign surveys to gauge audience awareness. A marketing and communications manager who worked in education described polls and annual opinion surveys he had direct experience working on. However, other junior-level professionals discussed formative research only (such as market research), claiming that budget constraints at their organizations have resulted in lack of summative evaluation research.

How Executive-Level Professionals Measure and Evaluate Public Relations

Table 1-2. Metrics any executive-level professional mentioned at any point during interviews.

Outputs	*Outtakes*	*Outcomes*
Hits/Placements	Clickthroughs	Advocacy/Influencers
AVE	Readership	Reputation/Thought leadership
Circulation	Tone/Sentiment	Awareness
Impressions	Engagement	Attitudes
Reach	Viewership	Crisis management
Share of voice	Followers	Relationships
	Mentions	Conversions
		Cost effectiveness
		Contract renewals
		Trust

Executive-level professionals said output-level metrics like impressions, reach, or hits are useful if they align with their clients' or organizations' overarching goals. When they did discuss output-level metrics like media placements, executive-level professionals emphasized that message delivery is salient in evaluating their success. For example, a communications director at a nonprofit organization said she evaluates her team's media relations efforts by gauging whether her team is helping tell the organization's story "so that it's meaningful and impactful but adheres to our guidelines and practices."

Of the nine executive-level professionals interviewed, four said they use AVE. Those professionals worked at agencies or nonprofit organizations. However, two of the four said they do not use multipliers. Reasons for using AVE included to provide perspective about the value of media placements to clients or the C-suite, to help explain public relations to those who do not have a public relations background, and to demonstrate return on investment. Yet, like the junior-level professionals, executive-level professionals who reported using AVE said they do not think the metric is strong or even valid. A president of a public relations agency described AVE as a "necessary evil." A communications director at a nonprofit organization said she is "trying to get away from it."

Executive-level professionals especially discussed the need to measure outcomes and demonstrate how public relations efforts contribute to business goals. Common outcomes they discussed included reputation and crisis management, relationships, trust, and advocacy. For instance, in terms of reputation and crisis management, some executive-level professionals said they felt their public relations efforts were successful when they were able to divert negative stories. Others said they compared their organizations' media coverage with their competitors' to consistently evaluate reputation in the media.

Executive-level professionals stressed the importance of maintaining relationships with clients and stakeholders (including the media), perceiving the strength of these relationships as a measure of public relations success. Additionally, several executive-level professionals explained that when they feel they have trusting relationships with clients or the C-suite, there is less need to focus only on output metrics. For example, a vice president of marketing and public relations at a health system said:

> If you've got a CEO who fundamentally values good public relations, you don't have to bother yourself with a lot of useless activity. And if you don't, I think you just grab hold of whatever it is that gives people permission to believe.

Executive-level professionals also described evaluating trust through research, such as annual stakeholder surveys, team member surveys, or focus groups with samples from target audiences. A vice president of corporate communications at a financial services company provided examples of reflective questions one might ask to informally evaluate the level of trust he or she has within an organization or with clients: "How often are you brought into the loop on something or asked for your opinion? Are you told after the decision is made, or are you making the decision with the team?"

Other executive-level professionals said they evaluate whether they are securing influencers or advocates for their organizations. For example, a senior vice president at a global public relations firm said:

> Are we getting the influencers that we identified to begin with? And how are they helping us make whatever difference we are trying to make? Whether that's on Capitol Hill in terms of behavior change and then, more on the public affairs side in terms of advocacy, are we bringing people on board?

Executive-level professionals also discussed using UTM codes or funnel metrics to determine whether public relations efforts drove individuals to behavior change. For example, a vice president of marketing and communications at a health system said her team launched a shoulder-pain campaign in which they were able to track calls that came in after individuals heard a radio advertisement to appointment generation, appointment attendance, imaging studies, and surgeries. She explained, "That takes months, but if you stick with it, then you've got a story to tell, and you can track it all the way through." Others discussed putting UTM codes on external content like news releases, Facebook posts, or blog posts, which can be tracked to outcomes, including sales.

Still, executive-level professionals said that there are instances in which they have felt their public relations efforts were successful, though formal evaluation research was not conducted. For example, a vice president of public relations at a boutique agency said staying in constant communication with clients and asking them if they have seen changes in sales, calls, donations, etc., allows her to gauge whether her work is making a difference. For instance, she said one of her clients told her he received about 60 phone calls after an earned media placement she secured for his company went live. Other executive-level professionals discussed the power of storytelling, which has the ability to capture broader audiences and provides emotional value that cannot necessarily be measured.

Measurement and Evaluation Challenges: Junior-Level Professionals

When asked about their levels of satisfaction with their measurement and evaluation efforts, overall, junior-level professionals said they were satisfied. Common challenges they mentioned included: the need for planning and funding for research at the beginning of programs or campaigns; the need to ensure that goal setting occurs up front; and the need to demonstrate that public relations efforts contribute to bottom-line goals. For example, a communications consultant at a technology company explained that if funding for research is not included at the beginning of a campaign, demonstrating outcomes becomes challenging if not impossible:

> I think it's so crucial to research. But we didn't factor in money and didn't tell the client because, you know, with client service, everyone is trying to be the cheapest bid . . . And to be honest, I think if we had, our project wouldn't be coming to an end.

A public relations research associate at a global communications firm explained the need to set goals before beginning a new project, concluding, "We'll think of a great way to measure something, but we'll do so after the fact." A corporate communications manager explained the difficulty of demonstrating that public relations efforts contribute to bottom-line goals:

> So, I think on a micro level, it's really easy for us. There are tons of opportunities to show that we can affect change in an organization and improve this, do this instead of that. We've got an ear to the people. We've got an online community that's telling us these things that they want, don't want, like and dislike. But how do I ever do something that people who care only about revenue are going to really turn their head and say, "Yeah, that's a true top three difference maker at this company"? That's a challenge.

Measurement and Evaluation Challenges: Executive-Level Professionals

Executive-level professionals also said they were satisfied with their measurement and evaluation efforts overall but noted that there is always room for improvement. In addition to the time it takes to conduct research, challenges they mentioned included the need for staff trained in data analytics; the need to develop stronger, more creative ways to measure (beyond outputs); and the need to integrate measurement and evaluation. A vice president of public relations at a boutique agency described the time it takes to conduct research, referring to it as a full-time job that would require staff trained in research and analytics: "It's hard to say, 'Hey, let's stop and do a survey.' It's like, 'I need you to work on this next news release that's going out.' It becomes lower in priority in a practical sense." When discussing the need to develop better ways to measure, a senior vice president at a global public relations firm explained the difficulty she has experienced in trying to get her clients to think beyond impressions: "I think there are different ways to accomplish the goal, but it's challenging. What we have to do with this client is move them away from these numbers . . . There are different ways we can look at this." Some executive-level professionals discussed the need to integrate measurement and evaluation. For example, a chief communications officer at an airline said:

> We all went scurrying after collecting data. And then from that, we all decided well, here's a marketing insight. Here's a communications insight. Here's an operational insight. The next thing we now have to do is say, okay, well, I'm going take that marketing, communications and operational insight and truly try to understand what the employee is trying to tell me. What is the consumer trying to tell me by putting all of that together and arriving at one insight? Not necessarily all this disparate data telling me different things.

Professionals' Recommendations for Measurement and Evaluation Improvement

Some professionals said they felt they were doing the best they could with the resources and tools they had. Junior—and executive-level professionals who provided suggestions for improvement discussed the need for increased transparency across the profession; the need to stand up for stronger measures; and the need for rigorous research, measurement, and evaluation. When discussing the need for transparency across the profession, some professionals explained that knowing how other professionals are measuring and evaluating public relations and examples of successful measurement and evaluation practices could assist them in their own work. These professionals suggested case studies demonstrating productive, cost-effective measurement and evaluation efforts, summaries of top measures used across the profession, or networking opportunities/webinars that allow for open discussion about this topic.

When discussing the need to stand up for stronger measures, an account manager at a tourism agency said, "I wish that we would take a larger stance to say to our clients, 'We're not going to report on advertising equivalency, and here's why.'" A chief communications officer at an airline said professionals must become "catalysts for change" who are willing to "change the conversation." Other professionals said they believe research is imperative to the profession's continuous improvement. A vice present of public relations at an insurance agency said:

> PR professionals need to invest more in, bottom line, just surveying. Surveying your stakeholders, your customers, the community, and really ask them questions about your PR effort. Whether it's specific about, "We made an announcement last week in your area. Do you recall what it was?" Things like that. "There was a crisis in your area about this company. What did they do?" Really, you'd see the impact of the PR effort. You can get 10 news stories, but is that impacting your audience?

Most professionals said standards from professional organizations that leave room for creativity and adaptability based on their organizations, clients, or industries could assist them in their measurement and evaluation efforts. They emphasized that resources or tools that are backed by professional organizations make for a better argument for their importance when speaking with clients. Additionally, professionals expressed a need for common language across the profession, some explaining that it would assist in client relations. For instance, an account executive at a public interest communications agency described a time when her agency and another agency were working on different portions of a campaign for the same client, resulting in different calculations of reach and impressions and a confused client. Lastly, some professionals said that measurement and evaluation education during their undergraduate programs was lacking.

Insight from Measurement and Evaluation Thought Leaders

After the majority of interviews with professionals were completed, the researcher discussed preliminary findings with four measurement and evaluation thought leaders (Dr. Don Stacks, Dr. David Michaelson, Dr. David Rockland and Katie Paine) who provided insights and practical implications. Key takeaways from their interviews are below.

Understand Target Audiences/Define Objectives and Measures

Thought leaders stressed the importance of first understanding a client's or organization's needs, the issues they are facing, and their overarching goals. This process requires conducting formative research. Rockland said, sometimes, a client or organization may already have useful data, and secondary research may prove to be helpful. With a strong understanding of a client's or organization's needs, one can then write objectives based on where target audiences are and where one would like them to be. Michaelson and Stacks differentiated among informational (awareness), motivational (knowledge, relevance, action) and behavioral (advocacy) objectives rooted in the BASIC model of a communications lifecycle (build awareness, advance knowledge, sustain relevance, initiate action, create advocacy).

As Stacks stated, "If you can define it, you can measure it." When answering the questions: "What do we want our target audience to do? And how are we going to measure and evaluate what our target audience is doing?" Paine said each measure should be clearly articulated. In her words, "If your measure is engagement, define that first." Furthermore, "You have to define quality. What is a good article?"

Measure and Evaluate Message Delivery

At the core of every successful public relations effort, program, or campaign is messaging that reaches and resonates with target audiences. After breaking down audiences by specific demographics, psychographics, etc., Stacks said messages should be altered for each audience. Michaelson explained:

> We sometimes try to get overly complicated when in fact what we're dealing with are very simple problems. Do I understand the issue? Have I developed messages which could impact and influence people's decisions? Have I distributed that message? Is the message well received? And does the message have an impact?

He added that it is just as important to determine whether there were missed opportunities to deliver a message, if the messages were negative, or if erroneous messages appeared in media coverage that are counteractive to what one was trying to achieve. Moreover, when discussing AVE, Rockland said it would be better to reframe AVE as ACE (advertising cost equivalency), and then adjust that number based on whether intended messages were reflected in media:

> If you stop calling an AVE the *value* of PR or communications or media and instead you call it an *alternative cost*, that brings you much closer to what it really is. The second part of that is if you then adjust that number to reflect how good your coverage was . . . If you didn't get any of your messages or what you wanted in those articles that were placed, why would you think that has any value at all? So, adjusting that 10 million dollars by percent of perfect because advertising is perfect (You can say and do whatever you want

> because you're buying it. Whereas in earned media, you don't.) So, if you take that 10 million dollars and go, okay, 25% of the time we got what we wanted and you cut the 10 million to 2.5 million and then you call it, "This is what it would have cost to buy this much advertising," you're closer to being true, theoretically, or being truthful.

Integrate Measurement/Run Correlations

Thought leaders underscored that measurement cannot be conducted in silos. Collaboration and access to other departments' or internal data are critical to understanding the relationship between public relations efforts and business outcomes. Ideally, teams and departments should work toward common business goals while focusing on their specializations to help meet those goals. As Paine explained:

> Rather than having five different measurement systems that have nothing in common, instead, you start with four business goals and then four communications metrics and then, yes, every department can have its own three or four metrics that it keeps track of. But what it does is it gets everybody focused on the business, and then it gets everybody focused on those three or four metrics so that they do more of what they're focused on and less of the stupid stuff.

With access to other departments' or internal data, one can then determine correlations between output/outtake metrics and business outcomes. For instance, Stacks explained that with a standardized measurement tool that has been tested for reliability and validity and the ability to run correlations, one would be able say, "Look, we've got X number of placements. That was great. Unfortunately, product acceptance went down. That's a negative correlation. What's wrong with the message strategy here?"

Reframe Measurement and Evaluation with a Focus on Interpretation and Improvement

Thought leaders noted that the purpose of measurement and evaluation is not to prove the value of public relations. Rather, it is to help determine which messages, strategies, and tactics are working and which are not to ensure continuous improvement, which Rockland described as "performance optimization." In terms of interpretation, Stacks emphasized the need to explain *why* something is not working and being willing to ask questions like: "Have you thought about this? Have you tried this?" Interpretation is imperative if one is to draw insights and make meaningful recommendations for improvement that are rooted in data.

Practical Implications

A reoccurring theme throughout the interviews was that professionals in this study recognize that output-level metrics like hits or impressions are useful but are not always sufficient. Therefore, they are typically coupled with other metrics, or professionals attempt to tie outputs to outtakes and outcomes. Rather than focusing on hits, reach, or impressions, professionals stressed the importance of evaluating message delivery or tonality. Additionally, even those who said they use AVE noted that they do not think it is a strong or even valid metric. These findings indicate a possible shift toward stronger measurement practices as clients, stakeholders, and organizational leaders demand to know how public relations efforts are impacting audiences and contributing to bottom-line goals.

It is important to note that output-level metrics like media placements or reach are not poor metrics. Measuring outputs is a necessary first step. However, for public relations measurement to continue to advance, professionals will need to take measurement a step further by linking output— and-outtake-level metrics to outcomes. It seems that UTM codes, funnel metrics, and correlations are where public relations measurement is heading. However, to do this, measurement cannot occur in a bubble. Rather, integrated measurement is imperative if professionals are to determine how public relations efforts, combined with other touchpoints stakeholders are exposed to, are helping organizations achieve their goals.

Though professionals in this study recognized the importance of tying public relations and communications efforts to business outcomes, some mentioned that conducting research was challenging, costly, or brushed to the side as everyday work demands become all-consuming. Those who did discuss conducting research noted that they had a research department dedicated to this work or employees at their organizations planned to conduct research regularly, such as before and after a campaign, once a year with stakeholders, after an event, etc. Planning for research, including designating a group of employees or outside agency to this task and setting aside a research budget, appeared to be keys to ensuring it becomes a regular part of practice. Additionally, those who mentioned that they did conduct or use research to inform public relations practice seemed to be more satisfied with their ability to demonstrate that their work was contributing to positive change and continued growth than those who said they relied more on instincts or anecdotal instances.

An unexpected finding of this study was that both junior—and executive-level professionals said strong relationships with senior-level professionals, the C-suite, and clients lead them to feel that they can spend more time developing and advocating for better ways to measure and evaluate public relations and communications efforts and less need to focus only on output-level metrics. Therefore, conversations in the workplace about the importance of measurement and evaluation and shifts in best practices seem necessary as professionals strive to become "catalysts for change," as a chief communications officer previously mentioned.

Additionally, there was a noted difference between junior—and executive-level professionals' perspectives of measurement and evaluation. Generally speaking, junior-level professionals focused more on output— and outtake-level metrics related to media relations, social or digital media, often using terms like "reach" or "analytics" while executive-level professionals focused more on outcome-level metrics and the bottom line, often using terms like "reputation," "relationships," or "return on investment." This finding is likely the result of the nature of the work junior—and executive-level professionals are involved in on a daily basis, reflecting literature on role theory that found that professional experience is positively correlated with the assumption of a managerial role (Dozier & Broom, 1995). However, junior-level professionals perceived measurement as critical to their work and had experience collecting data and providing insights, which more closely aligns with the "manager's apprentice role" (Brunner et al., 2018) and suggests that measurement is becoming an imperative skill, even at the entry level.

Several professionals explained that a lack of transparency in the profession makes it difficult to know what best practices for measurement and evaluation look like as competition is inevitable, and some are not willing to share what they are doing. However, this transparency is necessary if the profession is to continue to advance and evolve. Professionals in this study called on those who believe they are successful in their measurement and evaluation efforts to explain what they are doing so others can follow. This call to action creates an opportunity for professionals who are confident in their measurement and evaluation practices to become industry thought leaders on this topic. Learning by example may be helpful for professionals who feel their measurement and evaluation efforts could improve.

Theoretical Implications and Direction for Future Research

Measurement and evaluation have long been reviewed in public relations and communications literature (Volk, 2016; Watson, 2012). To expand on and challenge what has been found in previous literature, Volk and Buhmann (2019) suggested measurement and evaluation research that employs a practice perspective. This study complemented past research about measurement and evaluation barriers and provided unique contributions from both junior—and executive-level professionals to better explain the role of measurement and evaluation in their day-to-day work.

Previous literature noted that public relations measurement has consistently emphasized media relations and media analysis – important aspects of public relations but certainly not its only purpose (Zerfass, Vercic, & Volk, 2017; Macnamara, 2014a). However, most professionals in this study seemed to move beyond focusing only on media relations metrics and explained efforts to link their work to organizational performance. This phenomenon is essentially what Macnamara (2014b) proposed in his toe-bone-to-head-bone logic model for public relations and corporate communication measurement, suggesting that output-level metrics should be linked to outcomes and business goals "the same way that the toe bone is connected to the foot bone, to the leg bone and all the way to the head bone in the human" (p. 13). Likewise, professionals' desire to link communication strategy with corporate strategy (i.e. the junior-level professional who took social media insights to company leaders or the executive-level professional who used funnel metrics to determine that communications efforts contributed to appointment generation at a health system) coincides with the concept of alignment as Volk and Zerfass (2018) defined it. The executive-level professionals, especially, viewed public relations as a management function and focused their discussions on the importance of outcome-level metrics, building relationships, and satisfying stakeholder needs, which reflects Excellence theory and the idea that public relations efforts should contribute to organizational effectiveness (Grunig, 2006). This finding also mirrors that of Swenson et al. (2019) who, in their study, found that communication executives "felt there was danger in regularly reporting measures [such as traditional media or social media effectiveness measures] that do not directly inform the decision making of organizational leaders and boards" (p. 10). Notably, this study's finding that junior—and executive-level professionals said strong relationships with higher-level employees or the C-suite lead them to feel more comfortable advocating for measurement and evaluation is also in line with Swenson et al. (2019) who found that strong evaluation expertise at all levels and a culture that encourages this has positive effects on both employees and the progression of measurement and evaluation programs. Future research should further explore the relationship between organizational culture and measurement and evaluation progression.

Despite the optimism that these findings bring, several professionals – including those who said they struggled to incorporate research into practice or measure outcomes – said they were satisfied with their measurement practices. Therefore, more work needs to be done to address the public relations measurement and evaluation "deadlock" (Macnamara, 2015). Several professionals mentioned that case studies on this topic would be useful and would help contribute to transparent discussion across the profession. Additionally, because some professionals mentioned a lack of training or education about public relations measurement and evaluation in school, a future study might look at public relations pedagogy to determine what is being taught about this topic at universities. Furthermore, because this study found that public relations measurement and evaluation have various meanings for professionals depending on their places of work, future studies that explore how professionals in specific settings (e.g. corporate, agency, nonprofit) measure and evaluate public relations would provide more in-depth analysis.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, recommended steps for public relations professionals include: determining what success looks like up front by initially defining objectives and key performance indicators; increased planning for and implementation of evaluation research at the formative, process, and summative levels; integration of measurement among departments and platforms to gain clearer, deeper insight about audiences; determining correlations between outputs and outcomes, rather than relying on anecdotal measures or inferences; and a willingness to be critical of what has been done in the past, making room for stronger ways to measure and evaluate public relations. For instance, less commonly mentioned ways of evaluating public relations included benchmark comparison to previous campaigns or programs, benefit-cost ratio, and demonstrating cost effectiveness (Likely, n.d.), but these methods can be useful. It is also helpful to expand one's view of how public relations might be contributing to organizational effectiveness. Buhmann and Likely (2018) noted often overlooked strategic communication contributions, including "corporate listening, issues management, internal communication consulting, and preventing or mastering crisis situations" (p. 11). Measuring the effectiveness of these communication strategies is just as important as what we may typically think of when we think of measurement, such as traditional or social media analysis. Referencing industry standards, learning new tools, and staying up to date on the progression of measurement and evaluation will also help professionals move their measurement and evaluation programs forward. As evidenced through this study, strong measurement and evaluation sometimes begin with professionals who advocate for its significance, even if that means abruptly putting an end to AVE, making the effort to learn how to put UTM codes on public relations content, or insisting on research to measure outcomes. Junior-level professionals can stand out in the workplace by relaying the insight they gain about audiences through social listening or analytics and explaining how that insight can inform organizational decision making. Executive-level professionals who are welcoming of junior-level professionals' suggestions may find that junior-level professionals are more willing to share. Due to its sample size and qualitative nature, the findings of this study are not generalizable to all public relations professionals. Further, this study looked only at communications professionals in the United States, and findings are based on participants' self-reported data. However, this study built on decades of literature suggesting an industry-wide focus on output-level metrics, contributing new knowledge about the current state of public relations measurement and offering focused suggestions for continuous improvement.

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