

PRJOURNAL

Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 2016)

Levels of Evaluation: An Agency's Perspective on Measurement and Evaluation

Alexander V. Laskin, Ph.D.
Professor
Department of Strategic Communication
Quinnipiac University

Introduction

The issue of measurement and evaluation is probably the most commonly discussed topic in public relations. Manning and Rockland (2011) note that almost every year is proclaimed to be the “year of measurement” in public relations. Yet, the issue of measurement and evaluation still remains a mystery for many public relations professionals whether it is because of lack of knowledge or lack of interest. It is rare to see an agency’s pitch built around a solid system of measuring results – more often, it is an afterthought: “Yet, as professionals, we still find ourselves putting measurement on the to-do list” (p. 30).

Other fields, such as marketing and management, also struggle with measurement and evaluation. For example, a survey of marketing executives showed that 80% of CMOs are unhappy with their ability to measure performance (Stewart, 2009). While organizations continually face the need for greater accountability, the actual performance measurement efforts remain unable to provide a comprehensive solution (Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2004).

One of the reasons for poor professional adaptation of measurement and evaluation may be a lack of standard approaches for measuring results. Some scholars and practitioners simply claim that public relations cannot and should not be measured because public relations effects are not easily observable and may take long time to present themselves through changes in attitude or behavior. Some also do not believe that it is possible to isolate the effects of public relations from other corporate communication activities such as, for example, marketing. Others say that public relations should not be tied to the bottom-line metrics at all because its goals are reputational and not commercial. On the other hand, some propose a “magic bullet” – a one-size fits all approach, such as Return on Investment, as the

ultimate measure of public relations and the golden standard of evaluation (for review, see Watson, 2012; Watson & Zerfass, 2011; Likely, Rockland, & Weiner, 2006).

This study aims to offer a possible solution by proposing that the answer may lie in between these two extremes. Public relations can and should be evaluated, but by a system of metrics rather than one measure. Such a system can include quantitative and qualitative measures aimed at intermediary effects, target audience influences, organizational bottom-line measures, as well as industry-level metrics. In fact, the study proposes a standardized hierarchical approach to measurement and evaluation of public relations called “Levels of Evaluation.” Although levels of evaluation are developed in an agency setting, they can also be used by internal public relations departments to measure the results of their efforts.

Literature Review

There is no doubt that measurement and evaluation is on the forefront of an industry debate: clients demand accountability (Watson, 2012; Manning & Rockland, 2011; Kim, 2001; Hon, 1998; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Stacks (2011) summarizes that without measurement and evaluation public relations professionals “quite simply...cannot demonstrate the efficacy” of their work (p. 6). In fact, one of the main goals of the Excellence study was “the elusive goal of determining the value of public relations” (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 90). Even more, the project was initiated to evaluate how public relations can help “in the achievement of organizational objectives” (p. 4).

Indeed, organizations, including public relations agencies, have to demonstrate how their efforts contribute to the bottom line. The Barcelona Declaration of Measurement Principles adopted at the 2nd European Summit on Measurement in June 2010 may well be

the first step in this direction. The seven principles, referred to as Barcelona Principles, or Principles of PR Measurement, cover such important topics in measurement and evaluation as transparency and replicability, moving away from AVEs, effect on business results, and so on. But, arguably, the most important principle is principle number 1: “Importance of Goal Setting and Measurement” (AMEC, 2010, p. 5).

As Lewis Carroll famously noted if you don’t know where you need to go, it does not matter what road you take. In other words, if a public relations agency does not have a strategic plan on how it can build value for its client, it does not matter how it measures the campaign’s results – the answer is still not going to be satisfactory. Thus, every campaign should focus on large organizational goals. Broom and Dozier (1990) summarize: “You plan, produce, and pay for a public relations program in order to achieve objectives and – finally – goals. In other words, your program is intended to cause observable impact – to change or maintain something about a situation” (p. 72-73).

Barcelona Principles talk about the need to have clearly stated goals and objectives addressing “who, what, when and how much the PR program is intended to affect” and include “changes in awareness among key stakeholders, comprehension, attitude, and behavior as applicable; and effects on business results” (AMEC, 2010, p. 5). Public relations can focus on different goals and objectives – supporting sales, improving reputation, attracting members, increasing volunteer hours, and so on. Depending on the goal, measurement and evaluation may also be different and involve different metrics. Indeed, Michaelson (2007) wrote that “significant variations continue to exist with the varying range of approaches to public relations measurement and evaluation” (p. 1).

Yet, such variability in measurement and evaluation can harm the profession of public relations. It creates significant difficulties in comparing and replicating public relations results. It also makes it virtually impossible for clients to have a clear understanding of what public relations success actually is. As a result, attempts to standardize public relations measurement and evaluation have been made for years – but without much success. Michaelson and Stacks (2011) explain that “the concept of standard measures is increasingly debated within the public relations universe, but attempts to develop these measures remain primitive and possibly misunderstood by significant proportions of public relations professionals and academics, as well as by the measurement and evaluation community itself” (p. 1).

One such standardization attempts was conducted by the UK Central Office of Information in cooperation with Public Relations Consultants Association, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, and the Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication. The authors claimed that the result was creation of “the first ever mandatory core standards for PR evaluation” (COI, 2009, p. 1). This standard included eight mandatory metrics that public relations professionals were required to use in the measurement and evaluation process. These metrics included the amount of coverage pieces published as a result of campaign, exposure of target audience to these messages, frequency of exposure by one person and by all, ratings of coverage, cost per impact, and sources of coverage.

Although this standard of evaluation was a positive step forward as it focused on the actual target audience rather than overall circulation metrics or advertising-value equivalency, it had many significant drawbacks. First of all, it was focused on measurement and evaluation of media relations rather than public relation in general. Some of the public

relations sub-functions, such as, for example, investor relation or fundraising, do not place strong emphasis on publications in the media instead focusing on interpersonal or small group communications. Thus, COI's metrics would be virtually impossible to use in these specializations.

In addition, all metrics were predominately based on measuring the media – but having an article in a newspaper does not guarantee that the message is actually understood, liked, and acted upon by the target audience. Furthermore, the actual business results or other bottom-line measures were not even included in COI's standard. Indeed, if a company engages a public relations agency's services to conduct a campaign in support of sales of a new product, the company wants to see increase in sales rather than just increase in media mentions.

Broom and Dozier (1990) looking at *Silver Anvil* entries also observed this problem: stated objectives often did not correspond to evaluation criteria – objectives focused on organizational needs while evaluation criteria simply tracked media placements. Baskin, Aronoff, and Lattimore (1997) note that in public relations, volume is sometimes confused with results – but the amount of media coverage can in no way guarantee actions on behalf of the target publics. In other words, it is essential to build a link to actual business results in measurement and evaluation standards.

As a result, COI's standard can serve as a good starting point for measuring public relations but it lacks more advanced measures that would go beyond media placements to evaluate actual changes in the target audiences and impact on a company's business.

At the same time, COI's standard also lacks measures of what a PR agency actually produces. For example, having three articles published in a newspaper can result from three press releases sent or from 100 press releases sent depending on a client, issue/product, deadlines, other events happening in the world, and so on. Public relations agencies have a need to demonstrate to their clients the actual work performed to be properly reimbursed, but COI's approach did not provide this opportunity.

Another approach to standardizing public relations measurement and evaluation process was developed by Walter Lindenmann in 1997 and published in the final form in 2002. The goal was stated as finding "a uniform 'ruler' we can all use for measurement" (p. 1). Lindenmann (2002) proposed measuring three distinct areas: outputs, outtakes, and outcomes. Outputs were defined as results of public relations programs: for example, "in media or press relations, *outputs* can be the total number of stories, articles, or 'placements' that appear in the media..." (p. 5-6). Outtakes were defined as measures of target audience actually receiving and retaining a message. Outcomes were once again measures of the target audience but this time if a message resulted in changes of opinion, attitude or behavior in the target audience. Finally, Lindenmann (2002) also called for measuring outcomes on an organizational level – whether PR efforts can in fact advance the overall goals of the organization.

This approach had significant advantages – first of all, it took into account organizational goals and moved beyond just media relations. Also, it clearly distinguished between what appeared in the media and how it was actually perceived by the target audience. However, it also had its weaknesses. The approach did not measure the actual work performed by the agency – in other words, how much effort was invested to achieve whatever

coverage was generated. Second, it had inconsistencies in its measurement areas – outcomes and outtakes represented two different measurement areas but both called for measures of the target public. At the same time, outcomes as a single area had two distinct measures: measures of target publics and organizational results.

One of the earlier scholarly approaches to standardizing public relations measurement and evaluation was developed by Broom and Dozier in 1990. The authors proposed to use the same evaluation criteria as professionals often use in writing objectives: “knowledge (including awareness and understanding), predispositions (opinions and attitudes), and behavior” (Broom and Dozier, 1990, p. 77). A recent modification of this approach was presented by Michaelson and Stacks (2011). Michaelson and Stacks adopted an awareness, interest, desire, and action model to public relations. As a result, their measurement approach focused primarily on target publics measuring their awareness, knowledge, interest and relevance, relationship, intent, and advocacy. In addition, they included intermediary measures based on media or other third-party communications.

Once again, the authors did not take into account the amount of work that went into the campaign – the actual activities that public relations professionals were engaged in. On the other side of the spectrum, the authors of this approach did not attempt to evaluate the actual business results of the campaign – something that clients of public relations agencies were, in fact, very much interested in.

Finally, most recently, AMEC proposed guidelines for measurement and evaluation. AMEC (2014) proposed three stages: outputs (public relations activity), outcomes (intermediary effect), and target audience effect. These stages used similar terminology as some previous models but implied different meanings for the terms. What AMEC standards

lacked were the stages that, arguably, were the most important for the clients and agencies – what was the actual impact on the clients’ business/operations and how it helped the client vis-à-vis its competitors.

AMEC (2011), also, in one of its recommendations, proposed measuring business results as part of the target audience effect – however, such an approach is ambiguous. A target audience’s intent to purchase a product does not automatically mean an actual purchase – thus, to measure actual business results one should measure the actual sales by the company. As a result, it is warranted to have it as a separate level of evaluation that would focus on measuring the company’s business results and not the target audience.

Finally, as explained above, changes in sales (or donations, votes, or anything else) could be caused by factors outside of an agency or client’s control. On a very cold day, fewer people may vote; when the economy experiences a downturn, sales of some products may decline, and an increase in sales of other products may be explained by changing technologies. Thus, industry level measures are important to better understand the contribution of the public relations agency to the company’s bottom line. Yet, all of the previously described approaches to measurement failed to incorporate any industry level metrics.

As a result of this review, it is possible to suggest that diverse public relations metrics can, in fact, be organized in a standardized system of measurement and evaluation. However, such an approach should take into account the weaknesses observed in earlier models. It is important to measure broad public relations activities rather than just media relations or any other separate sub-functions. Thus, the measurement and evaluation standard should allow for variability of specific metrics, while still presenting a unified structure of measurement.

Such standard should also include measures at various stages: from the actual activities of public relations professionals to the final bottom-line measures for the organization.

Consequently, the proposed approach below to measurement and evaluation is a standardized hierarchical structure that can be applied across contexts and organizations. This hierarchical structure, referred to as *Levels of Evaluation*, could help achieve standardization of public relations measurement and evaluation and allow agencies to bring the campaign results to the forefront of a campaign's pitch. At the same time, this model of *Levels of Evaluation* does not limit the variability of actual public relations activities. Instead, levels of evaluation define the hierarchy of levels at which any campaign should be evaluated, while the actual activities at each of these levels can vary across clients and campaigns.

Levels of Evaluation

The Levels of Evaluation approach consists of five hierarchical levels. Each of the levels measures the effects of public relations efforts from the start to approaches through intermediaries, such as media hits, to target audiences. An example is the change in awareness, attitude or intended behavior, such as changes in sales, and effects on the whole industry. The agency level is labeled *Output*; intermediary level – *Outreach*; target audience level – *Outcome*; business results level – *Outgrowth*; and industry level – *Outperform*.

Agency Level: Output

Every public relations campaign is based on the actions that a public relations agency takes to achieve campaign objectives. Public relations activities can include sending out news releases, organizing special events, building relationships with opinion-leaders, designing online presence, and so on. Each of these activities may require significant efforts on the part

of the agency's staff and commitment of other agency's resources. Thus, it becomes important for an agency to measure and demonstrate to a client the actual work involved in the campaign – the amount of work, energy, goods, or services produced – in other words, the output of the agency.

Thus, the focus of this level is a public relations agency itself and what it produces – the output of its efforts. However, the actual metrics can vary based on the campaign objectives. It is possible, of course, to present clients with an actual count of what was produced: for example, in media relations campaigns, 30 press releases were written; in opinion-leader campaigns, 50 phone calls with opinion-leaders were conducted; or in social media campaigns, 150 tweets were posted. More often, however, agencies use the hour method – presenting the client with the amount of hours dedicated to the client's account.

It is also possible to narrow down the measurement: one news release is not always equal to another one. One can be 400 words while another can go over 1,000 words, thus word count produced on behalf of the client can be measured. Qualitative measures can also be incorporated: for example, some news releases can be about the products of the clients, some about the corporate structure, and some about research and development.

No matter what exact measures are used, what is important is that the agency presents to the client the work done on its behalf. This level becomes the foundation all other levels of evaluation are built upon because here is where the agency has the most control and, as a result, the foundation for evaluating the success of the agency's work. Indeed, the campaign aimed at a sales increase can fall short of its goal because of the lack of communications produced or because of the general economic downturn with the decline of sales across the whole industry. Without looking at the agency's actual work, evaluation won't be able to

answer this question. Measuring the output can help the agency and the client understand the answer to what went right, what went wrong and what should be done next.

Intermediary Level: Outreach

All the efforts public relations agencies put into campaigns are useless if the outputs of their work do not go anywhere beyond the agency. The goal of many public relations campaigns is communicating a client's message to the target audiences. In order to reach these target audiences, agencies usually rely on intermediaries: mass media, bloggers, opinion-leaders, and so on. Thus, the second level of evaluation focuses on the intermediaries and the channels of communications to measure how far and wide the produced message was able to reach.

For example, when talking about the first level, *Output*, we can note that the agency produced 30 news releases on behalf of the client, but let's say only five of these releases were actually picked up and published in media outlets. Then, when measuring intermediary level, *Outreach*, the agency would report that five news releases were published.

Once again, the actual measures may differ as long as they focus on the intermediaries. Instead of the amount of news releases picked up, one can measure readership of newspapers where the stories were published or viewership of TV programs. In addition, different media outlets have different readers – a client may be interested in targeting females 18 to 25 years old rather than males 60 to 75, and, as a result, a story in *Cosmopolitan* may be more appropriate than a story in the *Wall Street Journal*. Thus, measures of circulations, measures of readership/viewership can and should be incorporated during the measurement and evaluation at the outreach level.

Intermediary measures can apply to blogs, comments on Facebook, re-tweets and so on – how many people wrote, commented, and re-tweeted, who these people were, how far they spread the message and whether the message went to the right audiences.

Qualitative measures may and should also be used. For example, the stories that appear in the media can be positive, negative or neutral; they can briefly mention the client or focus on the client exclusively. In other words, these qualitative measures can significantly enhance the relevance and accuracy of the measurements on the intermediary level.

Target Audience Level: Outcome

Having a release on the topic important to a client prepared and published in an appropriate outlet is insufficient, however, in order to call a campaign successful – at minimum, this message should actually produce a change in the target audience. Thus, the target audience level measures the effects of the campaign on publics. Instead of the reach of the intermediaries, we will be measuring the actual target publics and if they have become aware of the message, understood the message, developed an intended attitude toward the message, and, in fact, now plan on acting the way we want them to in regard to this message. In other words, what was the outcome of all our efforts?

Indeed, placing a message in a news story does not guarantee that a member of the target audience will actually receive the message. So, here, we move from measuring the media/intermediaries to measuring the actual target audience.

Measure of the target audience can be based on awareness. If the client produced a new model of a cell phone, we want to know if the target audience is aware of this new model. But simply knowing about the new phone is not enough - we also want to measure the

comprehension – if the target audience understands what is new about this cell phone, what features it has and what features it does not have, as well as how it is different from earlier models or competitors' models.

However, knowing the features of the new cell phone and how the phone is different from other phones does not guarantee that members of the target audience will actually like the features the new device has to offer. Thus, measures of attitude can and should be used at the *Outcome* level – is there a perception that these features are in fact needed? Finally, despite knowing about the new phone, understanding its unique features, liking its capabilities, one still may be fine with his or her old phone and have no desire to purchase the new device.

Thus, another important measure is the purchase intention. Indeed, there is little value in making sure the target audience is aware of the product, knows its features, and likes it, if, at the end of the day, members of the target audience do not wish to buy it. Of course, intending to purchase something and actually purchasing it are two very different things. However, the actual purchases will be discussed at the higher level of evaluation because to measure the actual purchases we would need to go beyond the target audience measures.

Organizational Results Level: Outgrowth

As already mentioned earlier, the clients are interested in actual sales of their products. Thus, the organizational results level moves away from measurement of the target audiences and focuses on measuring the client's business results – what is often referred to as ROI, return-on-investment. Instead of measuring intention to purchase among target publics

we measure the actual sales based on the company's data. This level evaluates what actually grew out of the seeds of the campaign and what return was generated for the client.

Again, the specific metrics can vary based on the goals of the campaign –in the case of sales, it may be the actual sales in units or dollar amounts, or a sales increase in comparison with a previous period; in the case of nonprofit organization, it may be donations or volunteers, or the percentage increase in both of these measures from the previous period; in the case of political campaigns, the amount of votes received, or campaign contributions; and so on. The measures must reside within the organization and show the return for the organization based on the goals of the campaign.

It is also important to take into account the cost of the campaign. For example, a campaign that generates \$1 million in sales and costs \$100,000 is more successful than a campaign that generates the same \$1 million in sales but costs \$500,000.

Industry Level: Outperform

The final level of evaluation goes one step above the organization and measures the whole industry where this organization operates. For example, for an automaker, sales can go up as a result of the overall economic recovery or go down as a result of the economic downturn, whether public relations campaigns were successful or unsuccessful. It is possible to have increased car sales simply because people have more disposal income and more consumer confidence, and thus they buy more cars across the board. Thus, this increase in sales will have nothing to do with the campaign efforts but rather with the state of the economy. The same would be true if sales are decreasing across the board in the industry because of the economic downturn or technological changes. If campaign evaluation

measures were limited only to the first four stages, it would be impossible to identify the influence of the factors outside of the organization's control. Thus, adding the fifth level lets public relations agencies capture this important information.

Looking at the overall industry and the client's competitors can help identify if the industry is growing or declining as a whole; which competitors are growing; and which competitors are declining and why. As a result, we can see the changes in the client's market share. In this situation, a successful campaign can help make the growth larger than one of the competitors or have the downturn smaller also in comparison with the competitors. As a result, looking at the overall industry, when evaluating a campaign, makes the measurement more valid and reliable.

The actual metrics can again vary and include an organization's sales versus its competitors' sales, as well as changes in the market share, a product's competitive position, stock price in comparison with other companies in the industry, and so on. Once again, it is important to supplement these metrics with qualitative measures. In fact, identifying the reasons for changes in competitors' position can enormously help the client. For example, Kodak started as the leader in camera sales but was losing its market share for years until it finally ended on the verge of bankruptcy. Industry analysis would allow the company to identify the technology change as the reason behind the sales decline and, thus, respond to this challenge appropriately.

Levels of Evaluation: The Model

The *Levels of Evaluation* model enables the public relations industry to develop standardization across various measurement and evaluation approaches, and at the same time,

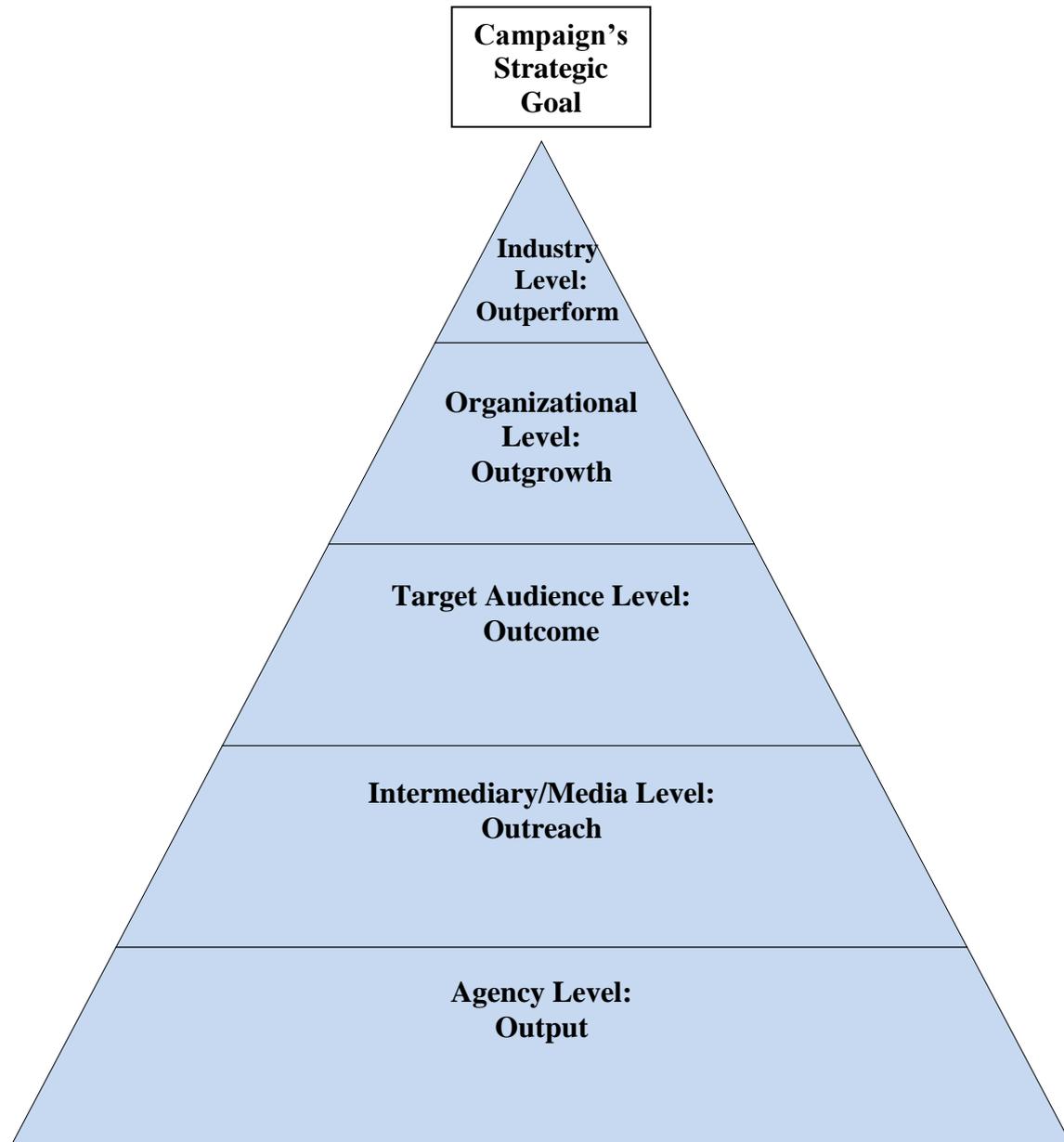
supports the variability of specific metrics most appropriate for various clients and campaigns. More importantly, *Levels of Evaluation* can help agencies not just after a campaign is over, but also can help incorporate measurement and evaluation into the heart of campaign planning and pitching. It can also be used during a campaign as a monitoring tool.

One of the main strengths of *Levels of Evaluation* is coverage of all stages in the public relations process as presented on Figure 1: from a creative idea to the actual changes in the client's competitive environment. Each of the levels requires measurements taken among different publics/environments. The first level is a measure of the public relations agency activity – so, the measure focuses on public relations professionals' efforts. The second level is a measure of how far the message was able to reach in the media, on the Internet, or among the opinion-leaders – thus, the intermediary publics are measured. The third level measures outcomes in the target audiences and, as a result, the measures focus on the target audiences' awareness, attitude, and behavior. The fourth level looks at the organizational results – thus, the focus is on the client's business. Finally, the fifth level puts the campaign's results into the context of the overall industry and the economic environment in which the client operates.

The model of *Levels of Evaluation* always focuses on the organizational goal. It starts with the goal and ends with measuring how the campaign helped to achieve it. It still does not allow establishing a definite causal relationship between measures taken at the output level, such as how many press releases were written, and the campaign's final results. An example of the latter is an increase in sales. By presenting the client with the quantitative and qualitative results for each level of evaluation, an agency can help build this connection

between public relations actions and final results.

Figure 1: Levels of Evaluation



Furthermore, *Levels of Evaluation* can also serve as a campaign development and monitoring instrument. Having *Levels of Evaluation* as part of the campaign's pitch builds the connection between public relations activities and organizational goals and objectives from

the early planning stages and helps make campaigns more strategic and relevant to the client's needs.

The model also does not take a stand on what is the best way to measure each of the levels. Indeed, a campaign to increase donations by a nonprofit would require completely different measures than a campaign aimed at increasing perception of reliability for a car manufacturer. The same is true for different campaign delivery methods: social media campaigns will use different metrics at the agency or the intermediary levels than campaigns using traditional media. Yet, results for all of these campaigns can be organized following each level of *Levels of Evaluation* model. Some campaigns would require quantitative metrics; some would be more appropriate for qualitative measures. However, a combination of both quantitative and qualitative metrics is likely to be the most effective.

Method

To test the model of *Levels of Evaluation*, a survey of public relations professionals was performed. The online survey recruited 122 public relations professionals from one large international public relations agency. The study relied on a volunteer sample, in which every employee of the agency received an email invitation to participate in the study. A volunteer sample limits the ability to generalize the results. The study and the sample is based on just one agency. While the agency is large and international, it makes the results even less generalizable. This study can serve as a pre-test of the model and pave the way for future testing of the model at agencies, corporations, nonprofits, different sub-functions of public relations from travel to investor relations and in different environmental contexts. The data was downloaded into SPSS and analyzed for descriptive statistics, as well as correlations.

Results

The survey asked respondents about each level of evaluation. Specifically, the respondents were asked to answer the following question: “In your opinion, how important each of these levels of evaluation is for your clients?” The survey used the scale from 1 to 10, where 1 was not important at all and 10 was very important. Table 1 indicates that public relations professionals believed that every level of evaluation proposed in the model is important for public relations clients.

In fact, the lowest scored item was the first one, *agency level: output* ($M = 6.54$; $sd = 2.832$; $n = 122$), yet the item’s mean still indicates the respondents mostly agree that measuring agency’s production is important with 44% percent of respondents agreeing with the importance of measuring the agency level of evaluation for clients; only 17% of respondents disagreed with this statement.

All other levels of evaluation scored higher. 85% of respondents believe *outreach* measures of placements in intermediaries are important ($M = 8.84$; $sd = 1.688$; $n = 122$); 71% agree with the importance of *outgrowth* measures of business results ($M = 7.99$; $sd = 2.320$; $n = 122$); 68% agree with the importance of *outcome* measures of target audience ($M = 7.88$; $sd = 2.173$; $n = 122$); and, finally, 67% agree with the importance of measuring industry level results at the *outperform* level to gauge the client’s position change against its competitors ($M = 7.78$; $sd = 2.414$; $n = 122$).

Table 1. The descriptive results for the importance of different levels of evaluation for public relations clients.

	Mean	Median	SD	Skewness	n	Agree (8-10)	Neutral (4-7)	Disagree (1-3)
<i>Output</i>	6.54	7	2.832	- .497	122	44%	39%	17%
<i>Outreach</i>	8.84	9	1.688	-2.306	122	85%	12%	3%
<i>Outcome</i>	7.88	9	2.173	-1.049	122	68%	29%	3%
<i>Outgrowth</i>	7.99	9	2.320	-1.367	122	71%	25%	5%
<i>Outperform</i>	7.78	8.5	2.414	-1.094	122	67%	27%	6%

Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

These findings indicate that measures on every level of evaluation are important to the clients in the public relations agency relationship. As a result, each one of these levels should be retained for the model of measurement and evaluation, and used in measuring public relations results.

Furthermore, the survey also asked public relations professionals about the overall importance of measurement and evaluation for the agency's clients. The item was also measured on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating not important at all and 10 indicating very important. The overall response to the question indicated that the issue of measurement and evaluation is very important for the public relations clients ($M = 9.04$; $sd = 1.265$; $n =$

122) with more than 85% of all respondents agreeing with this statement and none of the respondents disagreeing with it.

What is interesting, however, is the discovered correlation between the question of the overall importance of evaluation and the importance of different levels of evaluation. The higher the respondents rated the overall importance of measurement and evaluation for the public relations clients, the higher they rated the importance of two of the highest levels of evaluation: the *organizational level*, measuring results for the company's business ($r = .323$; $p = .000$), and the *industry level*, measuring the results in the company's competitive position ($r = .328$; $p = .000$). Both of the results are statistically significant ($p \leq .001$); see Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation results between the overall importance of measurement and evaluation and importance of different levels of evaluation.

	r	p	n
<i>Output</i>	.036	> .05	121
<i>Outreach</i>	.079	> .05	122
<i>Outcome</i>	.281*	≤ .05	122
<i>Outgrowth</i>	.323*	≤ .001	122
<i>Outperform</i>	.328*	≤ .001	122

This finding indicates the importance of these two highest levels of evaluation. If a public relations agency has a client that values measurement and evaluation overall, it is more likely for such a client to demand higher levels of measurement and evaluation, as well. However, many prior approaches to measurement and evaluation of public relations either did not include these measures at all or did not identify them as standalone levels. Thus, the proposed model of *Levels of Evaluation* that identifies a company's business results and performance beside its competitors as two important standalone levels of measurement and evaluation is better prepared to meet the needs of the public relations industry and its clients.

This can also, perhaps, suggest that as the overall importance of evaluation increases, in the future the importance of higher levels of evaluation will be increasing. However,

correlation does not necessarily mean causal relationship between the variables – so, additional research is required before this statement can be supported.

Table 3. The descriptive results for frequency of usage of different levels of evaluation in client work.

	Mean	Median	SD	Skewness	n	Agree (8-10)	Neutral (4-7)	Disagree (1-3)
<i>Output</i>	6.36	7	2.694	- .358	122	44%	38%	18%
<i>Outreach</i>	8.75	9.5	1.779	-1.871	122	85%	11%	5%
<i>Outcome</i>	6.52	7	2.549	-.540	122	38%	48%	15%
<i>Outgrowth</i>	6.33	6.5	2.701	-.363	122	39%	43%	18%
<i>Outperform</i>	6.54	7	2.728	-.573	122	45%	38%	17%

Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

The survey also asked the respondents about their actual usage of different levels of evaluation when reporting to their clients and about their preparedness to use different levels of evaluation. The results are presented in Table 3 and Table 4. Specifically, the respondents suggest that the most common method of evaluation they use in their work today is *outreach* – measuring media results (85% of respondents strongly agree). This focus on the media is not surprising due to the history of measurement and evaluation in public relations. Yet, it falls well short of best practices and standards advocated by AMEC, the Institute for Public Relations, and other professional and scholarly organizations. Yet, two levels used the least

are the *outgrowth* (business results), and *outcome* (effects of the target audience) – the levels that should be used the most according to the best practices.

Table 4. The descriptive results for preparedness to use different levels of evaluation among public relations agency’s employees.

	Mean	Median	SD	Skewness	n	Agree (8-10)	Neutral (4-7)	Disagree (1-3)
<i>Output</i>	9.17	10	1.430	- 2.188	122	89%	6%	5%
<i>Outreach</i>	8.93	10	1.498	-1.822	122	84%	12%	3%
<i>Outcome</i>	6.29	6	2.518	-.302	122	33%	48%	19%
<i>Outgrowth</i>	5.57	5.5	2.619	-.054	122	26%	48%	26%
<i>Outperform</i>	5.70	6	2.643	-.190	122	27%	47%	26%

Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

The results on the preparedness to use different levels of evaluation can perhaps explain this paradox as they suggest that many public relations professionals are not comfortable using higher levels of evaluations. Less than half of respondents strongly agree with the statements that they are prepared to use such levels of evaluations as *outgrowth*, business results (26%); *outperform*, performance vis-à-vis competitors (27%); and *outcome*, impact on the target audience (33%).

The study, once again, evaluated correlations between the overall importance of measurement and evaluation and the usage and preparedness to use different levels of evaluation. The results presented in Tables 5 and 6 showed that the higher the respondents rated the overall importance of measurement and evaluation, the higher they rated their preparedness to use each of the levels of evaluation: *output*, what the agency produced ($r = .330$; $p = .000$); *outreach*, the effects in the media/intermediary ($r = .432$; $p = .000$); *outcome*, the impact on the target audience ($r = .389$; $p = .000$); *outgrowth*, the business/organizational results for the client ($r = .294$; $p = .001$); and *outperform*, the client's performance versus competitors ($r = .210$; $p = .021$).

Similarly, the higher the respondents rated the overall importance of measurement and evaluation, the more frequently they actually used each of the levels of evaluation: *output*, what the agency produced ($r = .010$; $p > .05$); *outreach*, the effects in the media/intermediary ($r = .382$; $p = .000$); *outcome*, the impact on the target audience ($r = .220$; $p = .015$); *outgrowth*, the business/organizational results for the client ($r = .196$; $p = .031$); and *outperform*, the client's performance versus competitors ($r = .094$; $p > .05$). However, two of the results – *output* and *outgrowth* – did not produce statistically significant correlations.

Table 5. Correlation results between the overall importance of measurement and evaluation and actual usage of different levels of evaluation.

	r	p	n
<i>Output</i>	.010	> .05	121
<i>Outreach</i>	.382*	≤ .001	122
<i>Outcome</i>	.220*	≤ .05	122
<i>Outgrowth</i>	.196*	≤ .05	122
<i>Outperform</i>	.094	> .05	122

Table 6. Correlation results between the overall importance of measurement and evaluation and actual preparedness to use different levels of evaluation.

	r	p	n
<i>Output</i>	.330*	≤ .001	121
<i>Outreach</i>	.432*	≤ .001	122
<i>Outcome</i>	.389*	≤ .001	122
<i>Outgrowth</i>	.294*	≤ .001	122
<i>Outperform</i>	.210*	≤ .05	112

Conclusions and Limitations

Hon voiced a question that clients and executives ask of public relations professionals: “What have you done for me lately?” (1997, p. 1). She further explained that “the challenge for scholars and practitioners remains to more clearly articulate how effective public relations helps organizations fulfill their mission, whether that is making money, saving lives, or some other goal not showcased here” (Hon, 1997, p. 27). Today, this challenge remains unsolved. This study is a small step in proposing a specific approach to measuring and evaluating public relations.

The proposed model of *Levels of Evaluation*, however, can help public relations professionals answer the question of “What have you done for me lately?” First, it starts by clearly defining the overall strategic goal for public relations and, thus, creates a value proposition for the public relations agency’s client. Then, it shows how each action taken by a public relation professional at the *agency* level, translates into the media effects at the *intermediary* level, leading to changes in the target audience’s awareness, comprehension, attitude, or behavior on the *target audience* level. This influences the business results of the client’s company on the *organizational* level, which, in turn, creates changes in the client’s industry and competitive environment at the *industry* level.

This standardized approach to measurement and evaluation at the same time allows for variations in specific metrics used on every level as public relations strategic goals can vary greatly from specialization to specialization, from client to client, and from campaign to campaign. Indeed, it is possible to use *Levels of Evaluation* with media relations, social media campaigns, donor relations and fundraising, investor and analyst relations, and so on.

The exact metrics will have to change but they still can be organized in the same five categories. Future research is needed to empirically test this model in various contexts.

The initial validation of the model of *Levels of Evaluation* indicates its relevance to the public relations agency operations. Furthermore, it is possible to expect that there is gap between what clients demand of public relations practitioners and what these practitioners actually do in their day-to-day practice. Thus, future research should focus on descriptive studies to portray what, in fact, public relations practitioners do when they perform evaluation in agency and corporate settings.

Additionally, future research should include more respondents from various agencies because different agencies may perform and view measurement and evaluation processes differently. The model of *Levels of Evaluation* is applicable in an agency setting as well as in internal department setting. More research is needed, however, to test the model in the department setting. The same is true for various specializations of public relations. The model should be tested in various contexts to better evaluate its usefulness, including management, marketing, investor relations and nonprofit public relations.

Note: The author would like to thank Dr. David Rockland, Ketchum, for his comments on the earlier versions of this manuscript.

References

- AMEC U.S. & Agency Leaders Chapter (2010, October 7). *Barcelona declaration of measurement principles: Validated metrics; Social media measurement*. Retrieved from: <http://www.instituteforpr.org/wp-content/uploads/BarcelonaPrinciplesOct2010.pdf>
- AMEC U.S. & Agency Leaders Chapter (2011, June 7). *Valid metrics for PR Measurement: Putting the principles into action*. Retrieved from: <http://ameceuropeansummit.org/amecorgdocs/ValidMetricsFramework7June2011PrintVersion.pdf>
- AMEC U.S. & Agency Leaders Chapter (2012, November). *Measuring the true value of public relations: How an AMEC initiative changed the way PR measurement was seen*. Retrieved from: <http://amecorg.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Measuring-the-True-Value-of-Public-Relations-based-on-the-Barcelona-Principles-11-11-12.pdf>
- AMEC U.S. & Agency Leaders Chapter (2014, December). *How to use the AMEC valid metrics*. Retrieved from: <http://amecorg.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/How-to-use-the-AMEC-Valid-Metrics.-December-2013.pdf>
- Baskin, O., Aronoff, C., & Lattimore, D. (1997). *Public relations: The profession and the practice*. New York: Irwin/McGraw Hill.
- Broom, G.M., & Dozier, D.M. (1990). *Using research in public relations: Applications to program management*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Hon, L. C. (1997). What have you done for me lately? Exploring effectiveness in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9(1), 1-30.
- Hon, L. C. (1998). Demonstrating effectiveness in public relations: Goals, objectives and evaluation. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 10(2), 103-135.
- Kim, Y. (2001). Measuring the economic value of public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 13(1), 3-26.
- Likely, F., Rockland, D., & Weiner, M. (2006). *Perspectives on ROI of media relations publicity efforts*. Gainesville, FL: Institute for Public Relations. Retrieved from <http://www.instituteforpr.org/topics/mediarelations-publicity-efforts>.
- Lindenmann, W. K. (2003). *Guidelines for measuring the effectiveness of PR programs and activities*. Gainesville, FL: Institute for Public Relations.
- Manning, A., & Rockland, D. B. (2011). Understanding the Barcelona Principles. *Public Relations Strategist*, 17(1), 30-31.
- Michaelson, D., & Gilfeather, J. (2003, January). *What you need to know to measure investor relations*. Gainesville, FL: Institute for Public Relations.
- Michaelson, D., & Stacks, D. W. (2011). Standardization in public relations measurement and evaluation. *Public Relations Journal*, 5(2), 1-22.
- Rust, R.T., Lemon, K.N., & Zeithaml, V.A. (2004). Return on marketing: Using customer equity to focus marketing strategy. *Journal of Marketing*, 68(1), 109-127.
- Stewart, D.M. (2009). Marketing accountability: Linking marketing actions to financial results. *Journal of Business Research*, 62(6), 636-43.
- Watson, T. (2012). The evolution of public relations measurement and evaluation. *Public Relations Review*, 38(3), 390-398.

Watson, T. & Zerfass, A. (2011). Return on investment in public relations: A critique of concepts used by practitioners from communication and management science perspectives. *Prism*, 8(1), Retrieved from: http://www.prismjournal.org/fileadmin/8_1/Watson_Zerfass.pdf