

Healthcare Marketing

How to Measure the Value of a PR Program

Are you getting what you pay for with your marketing and PR program? Are the results worth the investment? More importantly, how can you measure the results of something like public relations, which by definition is designed to "influence" behavior?

Those are good questions. Today more than ever, they are questions that healthcare organizations are struggling to answer. Budgets are tight and demands are high. Most organizations do not have the resources or the staff to spend on any program that can't specifically quantify its value. To accomplish that task and gather information to refine or adjust strategies, businesses and nonprofits alike must have a system to objectively measure the results of a PR program.

Quantity versus quality

For years, most public relations campaigns were measured by the number of media "hits" or placements that they secured. The more placements the better. Some organizations even set goals of reaching X-number of consumers within a certain time frame. To provide further evidence regarding the value of placements, some PR professionals would provide a media equivalency rating that would estimate the value of the PR placement as compared to advertising. For example, if a full-page color ad in a trade magazine cost \$7,000, the theory was that a two-page story in that same publication could be worth two- to three-times that amount due to the implied editorial endorsement.

While this approach does give management a quantifiable number with which to judge a program, it is not truly an effective means for measuring PR effectiveness. Today, most in the PR profession recognize that there is simply no objective way to compare advertising and public relations. Some ads clearly have the ability to more directly influence behavior than an article that may only be skimmed. One must consider multiple factors and a blanket approach to comparing the two is far too subjective. Such a comparison ultimately will not provide an accurate and meaningful measurement.

The more important issue is that an approach that simply examines the number of placements is missing the true goal of an effective PR program. As the saying goes, it's quality over quantity. For example, it's important to note the type of media outlet at which a placement is achieved. While most healthcare CEOs would like to be featured on the front page of the Wall Street Journal, in some instances, a feature in a trade publication read specifically by the organization's target audience ultimately might prove more beneficial.

Conducting a PR outcome analysis

The Institute for Public Relations, Commission on PR Measurement and Evaluation has developed a list of guidelines and standards for measuring and evaluating PR. These guidelines can give a healthcare organization some of the tools necessary to

effectively mount a PR outcomes analysis. Here are some concrete steps that the Institute, as well as many PR professionals, recommend to better gauge the success or shortcomings of a PR program.

- **Define the program to be measured.** Organizations with a PR department or agency understandably want to examine the full scope of their efforts. However, it is important to look at individual programs or campaigns - these will be easier to measure and will provide a more accurate reflection of the success or problems with the program. For example, rather than look at a year-long multifaceted program, the analysis should measure the results of a specific fundraising campaign for a nonprofit hospital or the efforts to promote a new product for a company. The key is to clearly define what component of the PR program you want to measure.
- **Start with clear objectives.** To effectively measure the success of a campaign, you need to start with clear, measurable objectives. Without those objectives, there is no yardstick with which to measure the results of the program. Examples of objectives include "output" - which are tangible items created such as news releases, securing speaking engagements or placements in key publications. Objectives must also include "outcomes," which measure whether or not the target audience was reached, understood and retained the messages. Outcomes indicate the results of a program, such as an association that wanted to influence state legislators regarding pending legislation. If the result of the PR campaign produced a favorable result for the association, the campaign would have produced the desired outcome. Outcomes can also include objectives such as increasing brand name awareness, positioning the company as a "leader" in the industry, and even increasing sales (more on this later).
- **Ensure the PR goals support and reflect the overall business goals.** Objectives for a PR program can't be created in a vacuum. It's important that they evolve from the organization's business goals and that they reflect and support those goals. Therefore upper management needs to provide input into the early stages of the program development to ensure that it will further the business goals of a company
- **Clearly identify your target audience.** Who are the decision-makers for your product or service? What group of people will contribute to the success or failure of your endeavor? It is imperative that an organization clearly understands whom it is trying to reach and what PR vehicles will help it reach those people. For example, it has been shown that women make most healthcare decisions. Therefore a medical group wanting to build its patient base will want to use media outlets such as the lifestyle section of the local newspaper that will reach this audience.
- **Analyze what and where.** Media coverage will ultimately be a key indicator to measure whether or not objectives were met. But it's important to go beyond simply counting clips or providing an advertising equivalency. Here are some elements that can be used to better measure the value of media placements.
 - What was the nature of the content? Was the story positive? Was the organization prominently featured or was it mentioned?
 - Were key messages highlighted? If so, which ones were communicated?
 - Where did the story appear? Was it in a respected trade publication that directly reached a target audience? A general consumer publication?
- **Consider focus groups or other survey options.** For smaller campaigns, focus groups or surveys are often useful. A hospital or medical group could place survey cards in waiting rooms. Or they can use focus groups. Due to the

level of work necessary to implement a focus program, it's a good idea to combine a focus group that reviews PR with one that looks at an overall advertising or marketing campaign. Ask if the group recalls seeing stories in the local press. What do they remember? Did it influence them in any way?

- **Use tools provided by the media outlet.** Some magazines feature reader response cards that allow users to indicate if they read an article and if so, offer their opinions. Editors also receive letters from readers about articles. If your organization places a guest-authored article, ask to be notified about any positive or negative letters the publication may receive about the article. You can also track whether or not a news release was seen or article read by including a number to "call for more information." Make sure the individual manning the phone line keeps records of calls attributed to PR placements.
- **Leverage your PR program to enhance specific sales or growth objectives.** Not long ago, Oprah Winfrey mentioned her favorite brand of ice cream on her national TV show. Before long, the small company was flooded with orders. This kind of PR opportunity is the dream for many organizations. However, it doesn't often happen in real life. PR on its own typically can't sell a new healthcare product or increase the number of patients at a healthcare facility. It can support the overall marketing program and can be used as a tool to leverage marketing and sales efforts. In short, if an organization has an active sales team, a strong advertising program and a PR campaign, it is likely that each element contributes to the ultimate goal of improving sales, increasing membership or meeting some other organizational objective. To track exactly how PR contributes, when sales calls come in, it's important to ask, "how did you find out about us?" Or when the sales force meets with customers, they might ask, "have you seen our recent articles?"
- **Conduct a communications audit.** While it's important to measure individual PR campaigns, from time to time (perhaps every two to three years), it is useful for organizations to step back and conduct a comprehensive review of all their communications programs. This involves developing a survey tool and identifying the audience to contact. It may include current clients or patients, prospects, the general community, even reporters. Communications audits should examine what a target audience has learned about an organization; where they learned the information; general perception; likelihood of action, e.g., I am now more likely to buy your product or more likely to use your healthcare facility. This information should be carefully analyzed to determine the strengths and weaknesses of a program and to identify areas of improvement.
- **Understand what you are measuring.** An effective PR analysis or communications audit will examine a variety of factors that influence behavior and action. These include:
 1. Awareness and Comprehension Measurements - Did the target audience receive the information, pay attention and understand the message?
 2. Recall and Retention Measurements - This is a common advertising measurement that can also be used in PR. You want to make sure to find out if the target audience knows specifically where he saw a marketing piece. Can he name the media outlet? This is particularly important if the organization is also running an advertising campaign. You will want to ensure that you differentiate between the recall of an ad and a PR placement.

3. Attitude and Preference Measurements - This measures what people know and think and therefore how they are inclined to act.

4. Behavior Measurements - This is the ultimate test. Did the campaign increase fund raising? Did it help to pass (or stop) the legislation targeted? Did sales increase?

The best way to gather information on these key elements is through surveys, direct mail, or focus groups.

- **Be patient.** It's estimated that it takes at least three to six months to get a PR campaign under way. That means results won't happen overnight. Talk with the PR team to determine an appropriate length of time for the campaign - don't analyze the program until it is well under way.
- **Remember the primary purpose of PR - to inform and influence.** While that can be a difficult attribute to measure, it is possible. The development of measurable goals should be a key component of any new program and periodically some type of measurement should be conducted to ensure the program is on track. Don't expect more from PR than it was designed to deliver. Do expect your PR program to meet the goals and objectives outlined and agreed upon by all management and the PR and marketing team.

There are a number of ways to conduct a PR outcome analysis. There are companies that provide this service ranging from media analysis firms to specialty public relations firms. In-house PR or the agency of record can also conduct a program review. However the client will want to ensure that quantifiable data is provided and that goals and research methods are clearly set up before the evaluation.

The goal of a PR outcome analysis is to ensure that the program is producing the results the organization needs and that the organization is securing true value for its marketing dollar. If an analysis shows that a program hasn't met all objectives, that doesn't mean the program should be scrapped. It does mean that perhaps some elements of the program aren't working and that a new strategy needs to be developed. PR is a critical component of many effective marketing and communication programs today. It can help to inform, persuade and ultimately ensure an organization meets its overall business objectives. While it provides a vital tool for marketing and communications programs today, it must also be held accountable. Therefore the development of a PR Outcome Analysis should be just as important as the development of the overall PR campaign.

Scott Public Relations, in Woodland Hills, CA, specializes in healthcare, benefits, insurance and technology public relations. Visit us at our website www.scottpublicrelations.com. Reach us directly at **818-610-0270**.