cussion—it's quite another to show that perceptions and relationships have changed. For that you need to go back to traditional measurement methods. Online providers such as SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang, for example, have significantly reduced the cost of conducting survey research. The 1999 paper "Guidelines for Measuring Relationships in Public Relations," by Linda Childers Hon, Ph.D., and James E. Grunig, Ph.D., is an invaluable resource and contains a survey instrument for measuring relationships. (It's available for free at www.instituteforpr.org/research_single/guidelines_measuring_relationships.) With tools like these, it's a lot easier and cheaper to conduct this sort of research than it was a decade ago.

Measuring relationships is key these days because it gets to the heart of how powerful word of mouth is. How people feel about your organization and your brand determines what they say about you online. So, if you want to improve your reputation, you'll need to measure the degree to which people trust your brand and are satisfied with and committed to the relationship with it.

Yes, this may be the end of the world as we know it, but with the right research and data, not only can we survive it, but we can be part of a whole new, better world. •

'Audience-free' measurement: High-quality metrics

There's a good chance that the data you need already exists in your organization. You just need to find it

by Angela D. Sinickas, ABC

You know you should be measuring communication, but you have no budget, no time and no permission to pester your audience with questions. But instead of seeing these as barriers, consider them opportunities to find creative ways to gather data on effectiveness. Plenty of useful information has already been captured by your organization. It just needs to be collected and collated meaningfully by you. Other numbers can be gathered

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without surveys

through careful observation. All of these can provide free "snapshots" of your communications' effectiveness.

Creating potentially effective content

Balanced scorecards include two types of measures—lagging measures that show what happened in the past, such as surveys, and leading measures that can be tracked in real time to predict those lagging measures. Instead of measuring how well your messages got through to your audience, you might first identify whether you were even sending out the right messages and whether they had the potential of being understood—both of which are leading metrics.

Content analysis: Start by identifying the ideal content of your communications for a particular audience if they were perfectly aligned with your organization's needs, such as:

- Mission, vision, values.
- Organizational goals.
- Brand attributes.
- Appropriate balance of coverage among business units, locations, product lines, etc.

Then conduct a content analysis of publications, news pages on your web sites, or live or recorded presentations:

1. **Add up all the pages** in a publication, or the total word count in online publications or web sites, or total minutes of time in podcasts or webcasts.
2. **Measure the length** of each article, web page or podcast segment.
3. **Check which ideal content** is mentioned in each article or web page.
4. **Add up the length** of all articles on each topic and calculate the percentage of total content that represents.

While it may take some time to conduct an analysis of a year's worth of communication, doing this for new content takes hardly any time if you keep up with it weekly. It is also a great tool for planning future content if you find you're neglecting some key topics because other people keep hounding you to cover their information.

Readability: Before we ask our audiences if they understand the key concepts we're communicating, we should check whether our writing was even remotely understandable.

Microsoft Word can tell you how many years of formal schooling it would take to understand a piece of writing by analyzing the number of words per sentence and the number of words with three or more syllables. Just look under the "Tools" pull-down menu and run the "Spelling and Grammar" check. At the end of the process, you will see the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. (If the rating doesn't appear automatically, go under "Tools" and select "Options." Under the "Spelling and Grammar" tab, be sure that "Show readability statistics" is checked.) The right level for a particular audience varies depending on that audience's education level. Most consumer publications are written for readers with six to nine years of education. The right level could be different for different articles in the same publication. For example, for a hospital communicator, an article about a new clinical approach for nurses could be written at a much higher level than an article on the next page intended for all employees about an upcoming health fair.

Tracking message penetration

If you can't do a survey to track how many people have been exposed to your messages, use your own powers of observation to estimate penetration.

You've already been doing this if you monitor how many people are clicking on specific articles on your intranet or web site. But you can use similar techniques to observe non-electronic communication as well.

Before we ask our audiences if they understand the key concepts we're communicating, we should check whether our writing was even remotely understandable.

Talk to some of the people who made the behavior change to ask them how much impact your communication had on their actions.

If you want to know whether managers in your manufacturing facilities are posting key communications on common-area bulletin boards (as you've asked them to), go check the bulletin boards yourself. What's there? If you have more locations than you can visit yourself, prepare a checklist of what should be on the bulletin boards as of a certain date and fax or e-mail the list to a contact at each facility. Have your contact walk the building once a month to check off which items appear on each major bulletin board.

At a nationwide retail chain, communicators were sending out only about one-third as many copies of the employee publication as there were employees. The intent was to save money by having employees share copies. A quick call to HR reps at individual stores the day after an issue was placed in the break rooms revealed that none were left. This meant that unless employees were working on the day the issue arrived, they would never even know there was an employee publication. Readers didn't realize the copies were to be shared. They either took copies to read on their way home or tossed them when they were finished. In a company where part-time work schedules were the norm, the company was actually losing money because so many of its employees weren't receiving key information that would have helped them sell more effectively.

You can also use your own observation skills to fill out what you learn from web usage metrics. Instead of just counting the number of people who click on a link to listen in on a live webcast, walk the floors to see how many people are watching each link and whether they're fully engaged or working through the broadcast.

Tracking behaviors influenced by communication

Behavior change is the critical measure of effectiveness for communication. It's more important than increasing awareness or understanding, since those two outcomes are just precursors to audience behavior change.

Fortunately, other people in our organizations are already quantifying important audience behaviors. Marketing is capturing leads, sales and customer attrition. HR tracks retention, sick days, benefits enrollment decisions, and usage and abuse of benefits and perks. Operations tracks quality, safety, productivity and cycle time. Web usage statistics can measure many desirable online behaviors, such as the number of people completing forms online instead of walking into our customer service offices or the HR department. All we need to do is:

1. **Find and befriend** the people who keep track of key behaviors so they share them with us.
2. **Compare the behaviors** immediately before and after communications.
3. **Identify the behaviors** at different locations or among various audience subgroups where you conduct a pilot test. Then compare the difference in behaviors with the control groups where you didn't communicate the key topics influencing the desired behavior change.
4. **If you have a little more time,** you can talk to some of the people who made the behavior change to ask them how much impact your communication had on their actions. This step helps cement the cause-and-effect relationship between your communication and their behavior change.

Wendy Kouba, the former vice president of global communications at Ethicon, a unit of Johnson & Johnson, notes that "Ethicon used this approach to see how sales of a women's health care product increased far more in markets where a celebrity endorsed our product and appeared at key marketing events." Reader's Digest uses a similar approach to track increases in book orders through Amazon.com in markets where the publisher's featured authors appear on local-market talk shows, according to Susan Fraysse Russ, director of public affairs.

You may also find you have a treasure trove of "accidental pilots" to mine for data—the situations where your campaigns weren't used as intended among all your stakeholder segments. Just average the resulting positive behavior changes in the locations where your communications were used as intended, and then compare that against the average behavior change in the locations that didn't use the communication as intended. The U.S. Internal Revenue Service used this approach to demonstrate that a change in the way technical information was provided to call center representatives could increase the accuracy of the information provided to taxpayers (as measured regularly by their own quality department) by 62 percent. However, the increase was only 10 to 42 percent in locations where managers didn't use the full set of new tools with at least half the audience.

Calculating ROI

Once you have statistics on the behavior change you influenced, determining the return on investment (ROI) is simple because each behavior has a financial value: It either increases the money coming into your organization or decreases costs on the expense side.

To calculate the ROI:

1. **Multiply** the financial impact of one person's behavior change (for example, the profit from the sale of one additional book, or the number of minutes of an employee's time saved times the average pay per minute) times the number of people whose behavior changed.
2. **Take credit** for a percentage of that financial impact based on the difference in outcome between pilot and control groups.
3. **Subtract** the cost of your communications.
4. **Divide** the result by the cost of your communications to end up with a percentage return on investment.

A communicator at home-security company Westec Security Systems changed safety communications in half of her company's branches, which led to a reduced rate of accidents in the pilot locations but no change in control locations, delivering an ROI of more than 1,000 percent.

Mining existing surveys

If you don't have enough information to calculate ROI, you can still build a case for the impact of communication on business. An easy way to do this is to look at results about communication in previous surveys and compare communication inputs against desirable business outcomes.

For example, when we presented demographic breakouts by store regions for a retail organization, the client noticed that the region that was best informed about company topics was also the most financially successful—by far. The two least profitable regions were at the very bottom on the same chart. Coincidence? The company's management didn't think so.

Sinickas' snapshot metrics

- **Alignment with goals:** Content analysis of what you're sending
- **Understandability:** Flesch-Kincaid Grade-Level test through Microsoft Word
- **Distribution:** Walk-around observation to assess penetration of channels or messages
- **Impact:** Track behavior changes using before/after measures, pilot/control groups or web usage software
- **ROI:** Apply financial value to behavior changes
- **Efficiency:** Track staff time and budget against ideal targets

If you have a good in-house statistics resource, you could even ask them to run a factor analysis on existing data to find the levels of correlation between various communication inputs and desirable business outcomes.

Measuring your department's efficiency

You can also identify the ideal amount of time your staff should be spending on various communication aspects, and then have them track their time against those ideals. For example, depending on your goals, staff could track time spent:

- On repetitive tasks that could be made more efficient.
- Working on various key company initiatives versus low-value projects demanded by insistent managers.
- Being strategic versus tactical (broken out by job level for different staff members).
- At the corporate level, supporting various business units versus the value they add to the organization.
- At the business-unit level, supporting corporate requests versus requests from business-unit management.

You can also track similar metrics for budget dollars spent, or track whether it is more efficient to use in-house staff for some functions or outsourced freelance help.

So, really, who needs an audience to conduct research? Surveys can clearly provide valuable baselines and progress reports, but it's far better to capture at least observable measures of communication's impact than to just sit back and wait until you have a budget, the time and management's permission to talk to your stakeholders. •

about the author

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