By **Angela Sinickas**

Measure your ROI—fast!

How to find out everything you need to know—just as fast as you need to know it

When most communicators think of measurement, they picture a survey. No question that surveys are great, but in this frenetic, needed-it-last-week business environment, no one has time to develop and launch a traditional survey, let alone wait for the results to roll in.

What's the alternative? Learn how to take a series of "snapshot" measurements that need little time to conduct, but still provide meaningful, useful metrics to quantify the effectiveness of your work.

Did anyone get or use the information we sent?

Typically, survey questions can identify which audience segments have been exposed to different communication vehicles. Instead of a survey, just call random audience members a few days after they should have received a particular message.

If you call one location and at least four out of five people have seen it, move on to the next location. If you find that many people don't know what you're talking about, it's time to track the distribution chain for that location to see where the blockages are.

Then, there's simple observation. If you want to know if managers in your manufacturing facility are posting key e-mails on bulletin boards, as you've asked them to do, 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 and fax or e-mail the list to a contact at each site. Have your contact walk the building once a month to check off which items appear on each bulletin board.

Did anyone understand the communication?

Before we ask our audiences if they understand the key concepts we're communicating, we should first find out if our writing was 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. The grade level of this article so far is 10.6, which means that a second-year high school student could understand it.

If the rating doesn't appear automatically, go back under "Tools" and select "Options." Under the "Spelling and Grammar" tab, be sure that the last item has a check-mark next to "Show readability statistics."

Are our communications aligned with organizational goals?

Start by identifying the ideal content of your communications. Assume 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 an analysis of the actual content of your key publications and news pages on your Web sites:

1. Add up all the pages in a publication or the total word count in online publications or Web sites.
2. Measure the length of each article or Web page.
3. Checkmark 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 a content analysis on a year's worth of communication, doing this weekly for new content takes hardly any time. This also is 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 instead. There are even online tools that help automate content analysis.

Did the communication change behavior?

Behavior change is the critical measure of effectiveness for our communications. It's more important than increasing awareness or understanding since those two outcomes are implicit if the audience's behavior changed after being exposed to our communications.

Fortunately, other people in our organizations already are 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 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 our communications or
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 impacting 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.

Did we create a return on investment?

Once you have statistics on the behavior change you influenced, calculating 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 times the number of people whose behavior changed.
2. Take credit for a percentage of that financial impact based either on the difference in outcome between pilot/control groups, or the percentage credit your audience attributes to your communication in influencing their change.
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

Is the communication function operating efficiently?

Identify the ideal proportion of time your communication staff should be spending on various aspects of communication. Then have them track their time against those ideals.

For example, depending on your goals, staff could track time spent:

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

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

Don't give up on focus groups and surveys

Focus groups and surveys can also be used for speed-of-business research if we structure them differently.

As you plan a campaign or develop your timeline for a new communication, just before you go into production, build in a day to pre-test the materials with several dozen people you invite to your conference room for breakfast, lunch or afternoon snacks. Have them read your materials and give you feedback on content and format changes that will make the communication more understandable and more likely to result in the changes you want to see.

Online surveys written by you for your own Web or intranet site or inexpensive external survey software like SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang can provide fast numbers if you ask only a few questions. For example, ask a question on your home page about a topic you plan to communicate soon. Then repeat the question after your campaign starts to check for improvements. Just realize you'll hear only from the people in your audience who regularly use electronic channels.

Get creative!

As you've seen, measurement doesn't have to be unwieldy or time-consuming. You can measure many aspects of communication efficiency and effectiveness without even going to your employees (what I like to call "audience-free research"). And there are ways to make spot focus groups and "pulse" surveys work for you, as long as you build them into your schedule during the planning process.

Feel free to become as creative in developing measurement metrics as you are in creating your communication campaigns and channels. Think in terms of instant snapshots rather than long-term trends, and you'll be on the right track.

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