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Measurement at the Speed of Business

Who has time to do communication audits anymore? Only the lucky few. The author shows ways to find out everything you need to know, just as fast as you need to know it.

By Angela D. Sinickas, ABC

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.

So what's the alternative? Take a series of "snapshot" measurements that need little time to conduct, yet can still provide meaningful, useful metrics that quantify the effectiveness of our work.

Sinickas Snapshot Metrics

- **Distribution**: random phone calls or walk-around observation
- **Understandability**: Flesch-Kincaid grade level test through Microsoft Word
- **Alignment**: content analysis
- **Impact**: track behavior changes using before/after measures or pilot/control groups or Web usage software
- **ROI**: apply financial value to behavior changes
- **Efficiency**: track staff time and budget against ideal targets

Did anyone get or use the information we sent them?

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 onto wall-hanging 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 site. Have your contact walk the building once a month to check off which items appear on each major bulletin board.

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Here are two examples of how this technique has worked:

- 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 people share copies. A quick call to HR reps at random stores the day after an issue was placed in the break rooms revealed that none was 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 their employees weren't receiving key information that would have helped them sell more effectively.

- At another company during a major re-engineering, the communicators had prepared a quick-answer guide designed as a tabbed, multi-page, table-top tent card. Employees were asked to keep them on their desks so when customers, vendors and others had questions on how the re-engineering would affect them, employees could easily refer to the piece and find the answer quickly. To see if the communication was useful to employees, we simply walked around the cubicles and calculated the percentage of desks where the pieces were visible.

Did anyone understand the communication?

Before we ask our audiences if they understand the key concepts we're communicating, we should first check if 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. The grade level of this article so far is 10.6, which means that a second-year high school student in the US 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." Just a word of caution: the software has a glitch that prevents it from showing any grade level over 12.0. If your target level is 12.0, keep rewriting your copy until it calculates an 11.9, or you might actually be writing at a much higher level.

Are our communications aligned with organizational goals?

Start by identifying the ideal content of your communications 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 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.

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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 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 instead. There are even online tools that help automate content analysis.

Did the communication change anyone's 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 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 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.

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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 various key 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 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.

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're planning a campaign or developing your timeline for a new communication, build in one day just before you go into production to pretest 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.

A major Minnesota manufacturing company did this with a planned e-mail announcement about a pension plan change. The 17 text changes made based on the comments, and approved by an attorney waiting on tap for the purpose, reduced the expected calls to HR from the typical several hundreds to less than five. Plus, many people saved productive time by not participating in a videoconference that wasn't going to provide any additional information, just the same information in a different way for those who preferred hearing the information to reading it. However, the original e-mail had said "more information" would be available at the videoconference.

Online surveys, either through your own Web/intranet site or using inexpensive external software like SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang, can provide very fast numbers if you ask only a few questions. For example, ask a knowledge question on your home page about a topic you plan to communicate very soon. Then repeat the same knowledge question after your campaign is underway to check for improvements. Just realize that you're hearing 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 refer to as "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.

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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.

Figure 1: Sample Sinickas Snapshot Scorecard

Metric	Target	Actual Q1
Distribution	0 of 7 locations with significant blocks to publication access	3 of 7 have blockages
Understandability	Employee newsletter at or below grade 9	Grade 8.2
	Manager e-mails and meeting-in-a-box materials at grade 11 or below	Grade 10.5
Content alignment	66% of content connected to goals	72%
	50% of content connected to brand attributes	24%
Impact on behavior	Increase number of employees using long-distance access codes from 12% to 50%	82% of employees now using access codes
ROI	At least 100% ROI for long-distance access code campaign vs. cost of having a communicator on staff full-time to identify opportunity and change employees' behavior	179% return on long-distance access code campaign ($20,000 monthly savings, minus monthly communicator's salary of $7166, divided by $7166)
Efficiency	Percentage time being strategic/tactical: • 90/10 for VP • 75/25 for managers • 25/75 for specialists • 2/98 for admins • 5/95 for free-lance help	Percentage time being strategic/tactical: • 76/24for VP • 62/18 for managers • 4/96 for specialists • 0/100 for admins • 23/77 for free-lance help

Angela Sinickas, ABC, is president of Sinickas Communications, Inc., an international communication consultancy specializing in helping corporations achieve business results through focused diagnostics and practical solutions. You can visit **CommToolbox.com** to see automated planning, measurement, and benchmarking tools she has developed based on her manual, *How to Measure Your Communication Programs*.

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