

Use leading measures to identify what future communication may be needed to reach goals

## STAY ON TRACK WITH LEADING MEASURES

Surveys provide a useful snapshot of how employees think or behave at a certain moment in time. But what measures can be used to get a glimpse of how they're likely to behave in future? In the absence of a crystal ball, Angela Sinickas suggests getting to grips with leading predictive measures, to find out what future communication may be needed.

I first learned about the distinction between "leading" and "lagging" metrics in a book by Paul Niven about balanced scorecards. He points out that most of the traditional financial measures are "lagging" in that they tell you where you've been, and often at too late a time to avoid ending up with disappointing results.

He recommends that companies also identify the right "leading" measures that could have a cause-and-effect relationship with the lagging measures. Leading measures can provide an early-warning system that gives us time to make changes to better ensure the types of positive lagging results we want to see.

### Implications for communicators

This has significant implications for communicators as well. Many of our own performance metrics are often based on surveys that tell us where our audience's perceptions about communication were at the time of the survey. And since surveys take a lot of money, time and approvals, we often track these metrics on an annual or, at best, quarterly basis. Putting in place the right leading measures on a more frequent basis can help ensure we're on the right track in between quarterly survey results.



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### Examples of lagging measures

Lagging measures in our field could be survey results that show the percentage of our audience who:

- Say they are well informed about a topic.
- Answer a multiple-choice knowledge question correctly.
- Agree that your organization's or your product's reputation is better than that of your competitors.

In addition, you can measure actual business outcomes that are the goal of communication campaigns you're managing on issues such as:

- Quality, productivity, safety and retention (on the employee side).
- Revenue, number of products sold per customer and market penetration (on the external side).

### Leading measures for knowledge

In order to have higher numbers of our audience understand key concepts, they must actually be exposed to those concepts and must receive the information in a way that is understandable to them.

Fortunately, there are a number of things we can quantify about the way information is presented to our audiences without doing a survey, just by counting various aspects of the objective reality of the communication environment. Here are some examples.

#### Content analysis

One potential predictor of knowledge about a topic is to make sure we're sending out enough volume of content about that subject. To measure this, start by identifying the ideal content of your communications for them to result in the desired lagging outcome measures you're targeting. These categories of content would depend on whether your audience is internal

or external, but could include:

- Mission, vision, values.
- Organizational goals like safety, quality, productivity and sales of various products or services.
- Brand attributes.
- Appropriate balance of coverage among business units or locations.

Then conduct a content analysis of your key publications, collateral, ads, news clips, direct mail packages and websites:

1. Add up all the pages in printed materials or the total word count in online publications or websites.
2. Measure the length of each article, web page or other element of the campaign.
3. Checkmark which ideal content is mentioned in each article, web page, etc.
4. Add up the length of all articles or elements on each topic and calculate the percentage of total content this represents during the measured time period.

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 to do.

#### Reading grade level

Even if we have a great deal of content on a topic, ultimate knowledge levels on the subject might not increase if the writing of the content is well above the reading capability of our target audience.

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’ll see the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. The grade level of this article so far is 10.7, 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 tick-mark next to “Show readability statistics.” Just a word of caution: versions of the software earlier than Word 2003 have 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.

#### *Access/exposure to information*

Even if we’ve sent out enough content on a topic and it’s easily understandable, knowledge levels won’t improve if the information isn’t received by our target audience. That’s why it’s useful to also track exposure to various communications. Here are ideas on leading measures to track exposure without resorting to a survey:

- Track click-throughs for information available online.
- Track the number of downloads of webcasts or podcasts, or the number of people printing key documents from your website.
- Count the number of people attending meetings, conferences, sponsored events or trade show exhibits where your key messages will be broadcast.
- Count the percentage of bulletin boards that have specific types of information posted on them; for example, if you’ve asked managers to post printed copies of key e-mails on notice boards for manufacturing employees.

#### **Leading measures for attitudes**

We can often predict a trend in improving attitudes about our

company or its products by measuring the number of people taking certain actions that are consistent with the desirable attitudes. For example:

- To predict if employees are feeling more engaged at their jobs, track the usage of sick days or the number of employees referring their friends for jobs at the company.
- To predict if customers are becoming more satisfied with your company or more loyal to your products, track the number of complaints being received.

#### **Leading measures for behaviors**

While we wait for our audiences to take the final behaviors we’re hoping for, we can track preliminary behaviors that can be predictive. For example:

- To predict ultimate levels of sales of a product being promoted, track the number of phone calls, visits to specific web pages or requests for free samples that you receive immediately after each communication that leads them there, such as a new ad campaign or major news coverage. If your marketing department knows what percentage of leads typically turn into sales, these early behaviors can be a good predictor of the impact your communications will have on the ultimate level of sales (a lagging measure). This is especially important if your product is very expensive and has a long sales process.
- To predict ultimate levels of employee behaviors, you could count the number of people attending safety meetings to predict decreases in accidents, or track the number of suggestions for cost savings sent in to your

suggestion system, to predict ultimate cost reductions resulting from your communication campaign.

#### **Identifying true predictors**

All the ideas for leading measures mentioned so far are only potential leading measures. We can’t be sure what the real causes of our desired results might be until we track our leading and lagging measures against each other for a while.

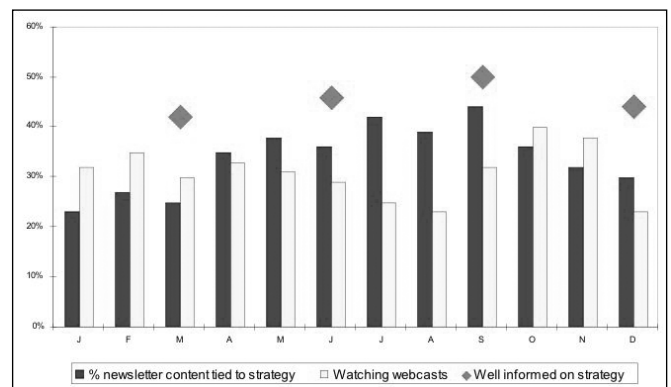
For instance, in Figure One (below), we’re tracking a lagging measure (knowledge level about strategy) against two potential leading measures (exposure to webcasts that refer to strategy, and the volume of content on strategy in the company newsletter).

Looking at the trends of each of the leading measures, it appears that newsletter content seems to track better with the ups and downs of knowledge than exposure to the webcasts.

Once you identify what your own predictive leading measures are, you’ll know exactly what types of communication input are most likely to result in the outcomes you’re driving toward.

Keeping track of those leading measures can then be done on a frequent basis to ensure you’re heading in the right direction and on track to reach the ultimate goals you’ll be rewarded for at the end of the year. scm

**Figure Three: Comparing monthly leading measures with quarterly lagging measures to find trends**



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