

How Well Are Your Communications Working?

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Many efforts to measure communication question how well messages have been understood and how effective different communication channels are. What we as communicators often forget to ask are the questions that help us connect our communications with the effect they have on behavior—in other words, the effect they have on improvements in the bottom line. Successful measurement will help you provide quantifiable proof of the impact of your communications, which can:

- Lend credibility to your work.
- Help you obtain more personnel and financial resources by speaking the “numbers language” of other members of management.
- Allow your own performance to be measured on something more concrete than, say, the quality of your writing style.

Read on for an example of how one communicator used measurement to her benefit, and find out low-cost ways to learn more.

Case study: Using research to connect communication to a company sales goal

A division of the former Pharmacia Corporation had identified five goals. One was to increase sales of their highest profit-margin product, a goal that they exceeded. They did this without increasing the advertising or PR for this product, or by changing the sales incentive plan. The main method used was increased internal communication, especially with sales employees. So Wendy Kouba, then vice president of employee communication, hired me to survey employees to show a correlation between employee communication and achieving the company's goal.

Her survey included three levels of questions:

1. How well-informed employees *felt* about the goal (attitude)
2. Employees' ability to identify which main elements of the goal listed on the survey was incorrect (knowledge)
3. How much impact employees thought communication had on achieving the goal (outcome)

The results were compelling:

- 55 percent said they felt well informed or very well informed about the sales goal. (Only 37 percent felt informed about the year's other four goals.)
- 62 percent answered the knowledge question about the goal correctly. (Only 29–46 percent answered knowledge questions about the other four goals correctly.)
- 54 percent said communication was either the main reason or one of three reasons the goal was achieved.

The numbers were even stronger among sales employees who were the primary target of the communication:

- 78 percent said communication was a primary reason the goal was achieved.

Kouba was able to use the survey numbers to calculate a return on investment of 279 percent, based on the entire cost of the communication function that year and the research conducted.

This communication campaign received an IABC Gold Quill Award of Excellence, and the communication function's budget was tripled the following year.

How to learn about measurement

Here are some ideas for learning more about research and measurement—for free!

- Volunteer to help an IABC chapter or a nonprofit community group conduct a survey.
- Agree to take every telemarketer's survey. Fill out evaluation forms at hotels and restaurants. Take notes on how you react to the questions or the response scales to help you when forming your own questions.
- Study newspapers and magazines for creative ways to present quantitative data. One of the best is *USA Today*. Also notice when a bar chart or other illustration of data doesn't make sense. Determine what is missing that would make the information clearer: A better headline? A label for each axis? A legend? A different scale?
- If your organization hires a consultant to conduct research, offer to be their liaison. Ask them to define the terminology they use. Volunteer to be a note-taker in any focus groups they conduct and observe the techniques of different facilitators and how they handle various situations. Then ask the consultants about how and why they do their research the way they do, and what other options they considered but didn't use—and why.
- Examine survey and focus group reports conducted over the years for your department or other departments. Study what they have in common, what's good and what is confusing. Take several survey questions and study them chronologically from the survey instrument to the raw data report to the interpretive report. Pay attention to which numbers were used and which were not. Notice how those results were put into context with other numbers in the report, especially in comparison with a normative database or against past years' results.

To learn even more, check out free articles and abstracts offered online by the following professional journals.

Publications About Communication Research	Where to find it
<i>Journal of Public Relations Research</i>	erlbaum.com
<i>Journal of Applied Communication Research</i>	tandfco.co.uk
<i>The Measurement Standard</i> (published by KD Paine and Partners)	measuresofsuccess.com
<i>Web Journal of Mass Communication Research</i> (most relevant for those working with the media or advertising)	scripps.ohiou.edu/wjmcr/

Other web sites focused on communication research include:

Website	What to look for
casro.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Code of standards and ethics for survey research • Q&A on "Surveys and You"
communicationresearch.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The "Research Methodologies" section, but be warned that this is not for beginners!
instituteforPR.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dictionary of research terminology (PDF file) • The "Research" tab has reprints of many articles on research, including a bibliography of key research papers
surveysystem.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey size calculator, along with explanations of related terms like confidence interval and level, significance, etc. • Discussion of survey design issues and how to do correlations

For case studies from IABC's Gold Quill Awards program, including information on measurement tactics, look to the "Case in Point" column in each issue of *Communication World* magazine (also available at iabc.com/cw). Complete Gold Quill work plans are also published each year in the *Best Practices in Communication Planning and Implementation* collection, available for purchase online at iabc.com/publications; or check your school library.

Sidebar: IABC and a number of communication firms offer conferences, manuals, articles and book chapters on communication measurement: iabc.com, euprera.org, globalpr.org, instituteforpr.com, measuresofsuccess.com, melcrum.com, ragan.com and sinicom.com.