

# But I hate numbers!

You may already be measuring your communication without realizing it says Angela Sinickas

It's ironic. Many of us have chosen communication as our life's work because we don't like numbers and math. But now, our bosses seem to expect us to quantify the value of what we're doing for our organizations. Put numbers on persuasive prose? On creative layouts? On killer Web sites?

Furthermore, even if it's possible, many of us aren't convinced that measurement offers us much value.

Yet numbers form the language that management understands best. We need to learn enough of their vocabulary to make sure they continue to provide us with the resources we need to do our jobs.

## Why bother measuring?

Most of the decisions we make are based on years of experience, which we have every right to take pride in. Certainly, most of the decisions we make are right. Yet, when we're wrong, we can be spectacularly wrong. Management hates an unpleasant surprise, especially when it affects them or their bottom lines.

## Common wisdom is commonly wrong

Here's an example of how our experience, unsupported by original research, can lead us astray. There is a strong trend to develop first-line supervisors as the primary conduits of company information. Common wisdom states that employees prefer to get information face-to-face from their supervisors. Right?

Wrong! That idea is based on some badly-designed studies that have been very well publicized. In fact, employees' current and preferred information sources vary significantly on different company-related subjects. And, for any single subject, they vary by company, by demographic subgroup within a company and in the same company over time.

The only way you can know the exact subjects your employees want

to hear from your supervisors is through research. Research will also tell you which subjects your employees want to hear about from higher levels of management, through print and through electronic channels. This information can help you send the right messages to your audiences through the most efficient mix of channels for the greatest effectiveness.

## Knowing the general can obscure the specific

Thinking we don't need to do research because we already "know" our audiences may also lead us down a false trail. While we may be in frequent contact with our audiences, we generally hear the most from the same people. They may not accurately reflect the views of other audience members who may be farther away from our offices, more shy or more satisfied with no reason to contact us. In addition, things we know about our audience in general may prevent us from anticipating their reactions to something specific we are about to communicate.

For example, I worked at a privately held company where we were going to conduct financial education to prepare employees to do their part in improving the company's profitability from 6% to 12% over a two-year period. From past focus groups, we knew that employees wanted management to raise pay levels, improve benefits, replace old equipment and expand building space. We feared that employees would rebel against the profitability initiative until these other issues were addressed first. We began planning the education meetings to hit these issues head-on before we could hope for employee support for improving profitability.

Fortunately, we conducted some measurement before the employee meetings. During the usual course of a week's travel and phone calls around the company, the internal communication manager asked

about 100 employees at random two questions:

- "What percentage of profit do you think the company is making?" – a knowledge question.
- "What percentage of profit do you think the company should be making?" – an attitude question.

The most common answer to both questions was 15%, even higher than our own target. This completely changed our approach.

After comparing our (lower) profit line with those of our competitors, employees immediately wanted to know what the company intended to do – and what they could do to improve profitability. Without the research, we would have exposed our senior managers to highly negative employee reactions.

## Don't be afraid of measurement

You may already be measuring when you monitor the topics that are coming up on a company electronic chat room or checking with people in different parts of the company to see if they received a recent mailing.

The only difference between what you may already be doing and more formal measurement is being more scientific about whom you ask questions of and keeping track of the responses more accurately. You'll learn a lot that will give you an even sounder basis for making future decisions based on your personal experiences. Just think of it as two-way communication with your audience instead of measurement. You may enjoy the process a lot more!

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Angela Sinickas answers more measurement FAQs on [www.melcrum.com](http://www.melcrum.com)

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