How well do your communications really work? Here's how to find out

If communicators wanted to work with numbers, we would have become accountants. However, to succeed in today's business climate, we word people need to become more comfortable in a numbers world. Often that means we need to measure the results of our efforts in ways that mean something to our management.

This insert has been designed to get you started gradually in conducting measurements of your own. It includes:

- An overview of different types of measurements
- Ten measurement techniques you can do as soon as you put down this newsletter
- Two case studies of how companies have created comprehensive measurement systems
- Tips for overcoming the most common barriers for why we don't measure our communications

Which Measurement Approaches Will Work for You?

Different types of measurement approaches work best in different situations.

	Bench-marking	Objective Analysis	Interviews & Focus Groups	Surveys
Find innovative potential solutions	✓		✓	
Identify audience needs			✓	✓
Assess adequacy of current media		✓	✓	✓
Assess communication output's support of company goals		✓	✓	✓
Measure improvement over time or across business units		✓		✓

Benchmarking usually means looking outside your own company to see what other organizations are doing in communication. It's great for generating new ideas that might work in your organization, but it's really not a good measurement of your own effectiveness.

Objective analysis. Interviews, focus groups and surveys are "audience invasive." You need permission from management to do them, and they cost you significant money and time. It makes sense to first conduct an objective assessment of what you're sending out — and make sure it's right — before you take the time and money to measure what your audience finally gets out of your communication. A number of objective measures are described in the sidebar "Ten Ways…"

Interviews and focus groups. Focus groups typically involve eight to 12 people of similar status in a facilitated group discussion for 1-1/2 to 2 hours. Higher-level executives tend to be more candid in individual interviews than in focus groups. Interviews and focus groups provide "soft," qualitative information that points you in the right direction when you need to know if something will work with most people, not whether 75% or 79% don't understand it.

Surveys. A survey is very useful when you do need to find out exactly how many people feel a certain way, and you want to track changes over time or compare subgroups against each other.

Overcoming the Barriers to Measurement

Why don't more of us measure our communications? Communicators all over the world share many of the same excuses. Do any of these fit your situation? If so, here's what others have done to overcome these obstacles.

I Don't Have Time

We've all been here, but not having time to measure is a bit of a "Catch-22." Effective measurement takes time upfront, but saves much more time in the long run by making communication more effective and reducing rework.

Cheryl Peterson at State Farm Insurance started out by doing a content analysis of the corporate publication, *ALFI*. She discovered which important company goals needed greater coverage than they had been receiving. She also realized that it would be valuable to keep tracking content over time in a less mechanical, time-intensive way. She worked with colleagues in-house to set up a data base program that tracked content against key company goals. Once this was set up, other colleagues suggested tracking additional aspects of each article:

- The writer's name (so they can track productivity and make new assignments more equitably)
- Whether and when a follow-up article should be written
- Key sources for the article (to save start-up time when doing another article on a similar topic)

- Extent to which articles and photos reflect State Farm's diverse associate demographics

While the set-up of the data base program took a few hours, now an administrative assistant takes very little time — and no extra budget — to enter the stories after each issue of *ALFI*. Having this data base automated also saves them hours of time each month that they used to spend tracking down old articles for managers who ask for background on various topics. Cheryl, who works at corporate, has also made this data base program available to regional communicators for their publications. **(Cheryl Peterson, State Farm Insurance)**

I Have NOOOOOO Budget!

You can conduct many of the objective measurements described in the [see sidebar on Ten Ways] at little or no cost. You can also talk with your own employees without spending a dime to research a subject you're about to communicate with them.

Westec Security took a completely different tack on communicating their financial objectives to employees after upfront informal measurement clarified what employees thought about the subject. The one-person communication department talked to about 100 employees (during site visits for other purposes, so this did not require her to go out of her way). She asked two simple questions:
1. What do you think our company's profit percentage is?
2. What do you think it should be?

Westec had anticipated taking a defensive approach to communicating higher profit goals for that year, thinking employees would say the extra profit should instead go to increased pay and benefits. But the research indicated that employees thought the company was currently earning profits far higher than the new goal, AND employees thought the higher amount was appropriate! This changed the entire communication strategy. Management's message was, "Here's what you said our profit should be. We agree. Let's work together to get us there." The new message worked perfectly in employee meetings, avoiding having to redo the entire approach after the first meeting, which would have shown the defensive approach was inappropriate. **(Kris Mills, Westec Security)**

Why Bother? I Have Better Things to Do

Since companies tend to cut programs that can't prove their value, communications that don't show measurable results tend to be trimmed or eliminated.

One Southern California healthcare company conducted executive interviews, employee focus groups, and media and content analyses about six months before a layoff was announced. Their findings and the resulting plans they had put in place saved the communicators from any headcount reductions. In fact, the company increased its communication staff — a wise decision by management, since employees need more information, not less, during times of change.

Does this work all the time? Certainly, not. The communications department managed to make it through that round of layoffs by demonstrating their value. The next round a few years later required across-the-board cuts, no questions asked. However, the communications department is still in existence. Without demonstrating its value, it may have been cut all together.

In another situation, Pacific Telesis purposely conducted a survey just before they were acquired by another company. They knew the acquirer did very little employee communication, while they themselves did a lot. The numbers on the survey were very strong, showing small information gaps on key business subjects, a good match-up between employees' current and preferred sources of information on different subjects, higher results at divisions with embedded communicators — all to no avail. The new parent company eliminated nearly all the communication channels, laid off 90% of the communication staff and outsourced most of what was left. On the bright side, the favorable results from the survey did help many of the communicators find new jobs because they had measurable successes listed on their resumes.

Communication Is too Soft to Tie to the Bottom Line!

Contrary to popular belief, communication can be tied to the bottom line. First you need to find a subject to communicate that has a bottom-line impact where communication can make a difference. For example, you could work with your company's loss prevention manager to design a communication campaign to reduce various types of accidents. Second, roll out the communications to a few representative sample locations *but do nothing else differently at any locations*. Any improvements in safety at the pilot locations can then be clearly connected to the communication campaign.

Or, if you are planning a communication to potential customers, try two different approaches with sample groups to see which approach creates more sales leads or revenue. Put the more successful one into production with your entire customer population.

My Management Doesn't Care What Employees Think

In the past, much research measured audience members' satisfaction with communications. Most managers don't care if employees are satisfied; they want employees to be productive.

The trend afoot today is to tie communications to changes in employee behavior that support reaching the company goals. National Semiconductor does this by asking action-oriented questions, like: "Have you changed the way you work in the past six months because you understand the company strategy better?"

I Don't Have Approval to Measure

This is a tricky one. When I was at the Chicago Tribune, I just went ahead and conducted informal research about communication during a major re-engineering process — without permission. One senior manager who heard about it sternly reminded me that it was not appropriate for me to gather employee opinions without prior approval. However, when the lecture was over, the manager leaned over and quietly said, "So...what did you find out?" The results were so surprising and had such significant business implications that I was asked to join the task force planning the entire re-engineering.

Will such a bold move be successful for you? You'll have to decide for yourself.

National Semiconductor Develops an Effectiveness Index Used Globally

National Semiconductor once created a unique way to quantify communications performance consistently around the world. The communicators distilled their performance criteria down to six measures of successful communications that were been synthesized into a single index score:

1. Employee knowledge of business goals
2. The extent to which employees understand the company strategy and believe it is executable
3. The extent to which employees understand how their local division goals fit with the overall company goals
4. The number of employees who have changed their behavior as a result of effective communication on the company's goals
5. The extent to which employees are receiving information about the company's goals and objectives from their preferred sources
6. The extent to which employee communication channels cover content related to eight key business initiatives

National Semiconductor tracked their performance on these measures using a one-page survey administered quarterly to a statistically significant sample of their worldwide employee population. (They also conducted a quarterly content analysis to measure criterion #6 above.)

Each of the six measures was converted to a score of 1 to 10 based on their performance. The six scores were totaled for an overall quarterly rating that could be compared by location and over time. The company tracked communication effectiveness using a modified version of a spreadsheet program developed by Lockheed-Martin to measure quality in various engineering functions.

To ensure the measures would be used by communicators and valued by operational management, Christine Allen and Lori Fraser conducted training with global communicators, pretested the tools and gathered other input with teammates worldwide.

AlliedSignal Communicators Save $200,000 and Improve Communication Effectiveness

Using measurement to retool their communications program, AlliedSignal Aerospace increased the effectiveness of their communication programs, while reducing their costs by more than half from! That's definitely bottom-line impact.

With a combination of built-in measurement systems, monthly, quarterly and semi-annual surveys, as well as ad hoc spot checks to evaluate performance, Don Wilt at AlliedSignal measured their communication on these criteria:

- Credibility
- Delivery and timing
- Systems reliability
- Attention and interest
- Relevance
- Comprehension
- Feedback
- Employee activity
- Attitudes
- Behaviors

So what kinds of metrics allow them to get at their criteria?

The company looks at:

- # of employee exposures
- The amount of a publication read by employees
- Employee interest in content of communication
- Employee ratings of credibility and value (both to the employee and the customer)
- Employee satisfaction with communication
- Management responsiveness to upward communication
- Ability of communication to influence behavior
- Effectiveness against goals
- Message penetration
- Frequency and timeliness of communication
- Clarity of information
- Logistics (efficiency of production and delivery)

What Did AlliedSignal Do with the Performance Measures?

Re-shaping communication content in significantly boosted reader interest and belief in information, while reducing costs by more than $200,000.

AlliedSignal also used the results to set targets for communication goals. For example, local managers had frequency targets for two-way communication activity. There were also targets for feedback response time on upwards communication programs. Of course, the company set targets for the amount of coverage allocated to company goals in media.

AlliedSignal correlated multiple measures. An employee satisfaction survey showed a growing correlation between two-way supervisor meetings and employee satisfaction.

There have also been times when they were able to detect and correct a decline in satisfaction. One year, measures revealed that company leaders were less satisfied with briefing packages they received on important company news than they had been the year before. Changes to the materials improved ratings in the following year to higher than pre-decline levels.

10 Measurements You Can Do Right Now — with Little Time or Budget

1. **Readability.** Use your word processing software to calculate the grade level of your writing to demonstrate that the communications you produce are geared to the reading level of your target audience. (For example, in Microsoft Word, this test is part of the Spelling and Grammar function under the Tools menu.)

2. **Distribution.** For a document being distributed through e-mail, send it "receipt requested." Then track which individuals opened the e-mail on which dates. For print, video or face-to face communications, pick up the phone and call people at the bottom of the organization chart in each of your organization's locations to ask them when they received a particular communication that should have reached them about a week earlier. (You will probably be unpleasantly surprised and need to take some corrective actions.)

3. **Intended audience penetration.** Create a matrix listing each element in your communication program down the left side and each audience subgroup across the top. Then put an X in each "cell" where a particular medium is intended to reach that subgroup. You may find that very few communications are sent to the majority of your employees, yet executives may have a misguided perception that everything they see or hear is also being seen and heard by the entire company.

4. **Media mix.** Using the same left-hand side of the matrix above, set up the columns with headings in three categories: type of medium (face-to-face, AV, electronic, print), direction of medium (top-down, upward, horizontal) and speed or frequency of medium. Place Xs in the columns that best describe the characteristics of each medium. The overall mix of your program should show balance within each category of criteria. If it doesn't, use this matrix to plan how you can add new media to your mix or change an existing medium to incorporate new characteristics.

5. **Content analysis.** Create a matrix that lists down the left-hand side the key content areas your communications should be addressing to support company objectives. Across the top, list various communication media in your program. For a medium that has several editions each year, create a separate matrix using a column for each issue of the medium over the course of a year. Using either a check mark or measuring actual column inches, indicate to what extent each medium has covered each content area.

6. **E-mail survey.** If you have a few questions you want answered about the effectiveness of a specific communication, put together a short, multiple-choice survey on a platform like SurveyMonkey and distribute it to your online audience through e-mail.

7. **News release effectiveness.** For each release you issue, create a matrix with the key message points you want the media to pick up listed in the left column. List your target news outlets in the columns across the top. In the cells where the rows and columns meet, write in a "0" if the outlet did not pick up a particular key message, a "+1" if they picked it up correctly and a "-1" if they mentioned the message but got it wrong. Then add up the *columns* to see how well each news outlet is picking up your messages; follow up with those that have low scores. Add up the *rows* to see if some messages are consistently being skipped or garbled by many news outlets, which would indicate those sections need rewriting.

8. **Cost per audience member**. Add up the total budget for your communication program. Divide it by the number of audience members your communications reach. Track over time or against other companies' costs.

9. **Productivity**. Add up the total volume of communication you have produced in the last year in some standard fashion, such as the number of 8½" x 11" page equivalents of copy you have written, or total word count for electronic communications, divided by the number of staff members creating the communication.

10. **Linking communication and profitability.** Take a new look at an existing employee survey report. Rank order different divisions, offices, plants, branches, etc. from those with the highest scores on communication effectiveness to the lowest. Ask your Finance Department to provide a similar list from most profitable to least profitable locations. See if there is a correlation.

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