

The following article appeared in
Journal of Employee Communication Management,
September/October 2002
Ragan Communications, Chicago

Tracking the Evolution of our Work by the Revolution in Communication Measurement

The dark days of haphazard readership surveys and job-justifying communication audits have given way to an era characterized by more intelligent, specific, strategic communication measurement efforts. Are you keeping up with the times?

By Angela D. Sinickas, ABC

When I first began working in corporate communication in 1974, the only common measurements used for employee communication were readership surveys and a few lonely questions about communication on employee attitude surveys. The common wisdom was that communication was so intangible that it couldn't be measured.

In 1980, I was faced with a newly appointed company president at the Chicago Tribune who wanted to measure everything, including employee communication, so I had to scramble to find ways to adapt market research techniques and newspaper measurements I had learned about in journalism school at the University of Illinois. That research project got me promoted from the editor of the employee magazine to be the manager of a brand-new department of four. It also netted me a pair of IABC Gold Quill awards and launched me on the road to making measurement a major part of my professional life ever since. Since that time, I've been evangelizing other communicators on the impact measurement could have on their careers as well.

But when I started making presentations about employee communication research at professional meetings in 1981, very few communicators were interested in measurement. It wasn't until the early 1990s, when Ragan Communications published the first edition of a manual I wrote on measurement, that a significant number of communicators began recognizing the value of conducting their own research.

By this time, many executives were demanding that all their staff departments prove their worth. This need was felt most acutely by communicators who had been laid off in organizations that had been "McKinsey"ed. That august consulting firm consistently recommended disbanding employee communication departments as unnecessary

overhead. Internal communicators began seeing measurement as a lifeline that might help them build a business case for their very existence.

By the late 1990s, IQPC sponsored the first multi-day conference devoted to how companies were measuring their employee communication success, and they had an impressive panel of top-notch speakers and scores of highly motivated attendees. Now several of these seminars are conducted each year by a number of conference sponsors. And in the last two years, similar workshops on communication measurement are pulling in full houses in locations as far apart as Barcelona and Kuala Lumpur.

We've become more sophisticated about what we measure

One of the biggest shifts over the last few decades is that we've moved from measuring how happy employees are with what we do, to quantifying the impact our communication outcomes are having on our companies' financial success.

Figure I shows the shift in two aspects of what we measure about communication, both our criteria for success and what level of impact the communication may have.

- The table cells with a white background generally show the types of measurement that were conducted at larger organizations up through most of the 1970s.
- The cells with a gray background show newer measures that were integrated into many measurement programs in the 1980s and early 1990s.
- The cells reversed out of a black background show the types of measures that are just now being incorporated into the research programs of leading organizations.

The spans of dates are a bit fluid, since some early adopters were ahead of the curve while other organizations still conduct no measurements.

Figure I: The Evolution of Communication Measurement

Legend:	1970s and before	1980s to mid-1990s	Mid-1990s to 2000s
----------------	------------------	--------------------	--------------------

CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS	LEVEL OF IMPACT COMMUNICATION MAY HAVE			
	Communication activities themselves (channels and messages)	Changes in audience perception (knowledge and attitudes)	Changes in audience behavior	Impact on organizational goals
Employee Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readership survey questions on content, format and frequency of channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I understand the organization's goals" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I receive enough information to do my job well" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I understand how I can contribute to reaching the organization's goals"
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to channels • Benchmark staffing and budgets for various channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match between current and preferred channels by subject 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare cost of channels against their impact on behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost savings from reduced communication budget
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall value of each channel • Reading grade level of messages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match between levels of interest and information by subject 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived impact of a channel on behavior • Perceived impact of a message on behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "% impact communication had on reaching a goal"
Outcome of Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alignment of content with organizational goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starch Test of message recall • Knowledge test 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actual behavior changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ROI calculations (return on investment)

Criteria for success

Satisfaction. In the old days, we focused mostly on how satisfied employees were with our communications. Did they like the content and format of our publication? Were staff meetings conducted frequently enough? Companies that conducted attitude surveys also

asked satisfaction questions on how communication was influencing understanding of company goals. Some typical questions included: How satisfied are you with the amount of information you receive? Do you receive enough information to do your job well? How well do you understand how your job contributes to reaching the company goals?

Efficiency. If management asked for more measurement in those early days, they typically wanted to know how efficient we were. Was the expensive publication actually reaching all employees? Did we spend more or less than other companies? Sometimes communicators even tried to show they contributed to the bottom line by being more efficient in the money they spent, such as when they replaced outside designers and typesetters with in-house desktop publishing.

Effectiveness. In the 1980s, we started to measure how valuable our channels were in comparison to each other. Some communicators also started using a tool available in Microsoft Word to calculate the reading grade level of our writing to make sure it would effectively match the reading capacity of our workforce.

Outcomes. In the late 1980s, we also started trying to connect our communications with our organizations' outcomes. Our first steps in that direction were to show through content analysis that we were reflecting the key messages of the company in the communications we distributed to employees.

Level of impact of our work

The second major shift in what we measure is that we used to focus mainly on our output, the communication messages and channels we used. We have steadily progressed to measuring the impact they have in increasingly financially oriented ways.

Activities. Most of the measurement questions asked in the section above focused on our communication activities: what we said and the methods we used to say it.

Changes in employee perceptions. By the 1980s, we started to measure the impact of our work on our audiences' heads and hearts: whether we were affecting what employees know about the company and how they feel about it. A series of surveys sponsored by IABC and conducted by Towers Perrin had started measuring how effectively we were closing the gap between how interested employees were in specific subjects and how well informed they felt about them. And a number of organizations started measuring actual knowledge about company goals before and after they communicated them, often turning the knowledge test into a contest or game with prizes for those who got the answers right.

The IABC-Towers Perrin surveys also began asking employees about their current and preferred information sources, although these questions were not asked by topic, just "overall," with the predictable finding that employees said they got most of their information from other employees and preferred their supervisors. By the 1990s, we had refined these questions to be able to compare the gaps between employees' current and

preferred sources by subject, which showed quite different patterns of preferred sources depending on the topic.

Changes in employee behaviors. When change management came roaring onto the corporate culture scene in the early 1990s, communicators were challenged to connect change communication with their companies' desired changes in employee behaviors. This couldn't be done by measuring just our activities or our impact on changing knowledge and attitudes. We needed to go one step further to connect our communication with the new or improved ways employees were doing their jobs. About this time, Brad Whitworth at Hewlett-Packard validated earlier findings at GE that face-to-face communication between supervisors and employees affected employees' actions in terms of higher productivity and increased commitment to stay with the company.

In this current era, we're seeing communicators conducting pilot programs to show that behaviors changed in locations or units where they conducted special communication programs, but not in others. They have started putting questions on surveys that ask employees to what extent the communications are affecting employee behaviors; for example, does the employee publication help employees talk more knowledgeably with customers and does the intranet help them be more productive?

Impact on organizational goals. In just the last few years, a growing number of communicators have embraced the most important measure: how to calculate a financial return on our investment (ROI) in communication. Trying to calculate an ROI on an entire program, however, is next to useless. Even if you could come up with a value, it would be based on too many assumptions and be susceptible to too many criticisms from a CFO.

What successful communicators are doing is taking specific message campaigns, or specific elements of a communication channel, and connecting them to quantifiable behavior changes, multiplied by the financial value of that change. Then all they need to do is divide by the cost of the communication and they have calculated an ROI. Calculating just a few of these for parts of the work we do is often enough to show that the few easily measurable impacts we have had are more than enough to pay for our entire program.

We've also embraced new ways to measure

There have been major changes in how we measure. In the past, most employee research was conducted in the form of focus groups or a paper survey.

Surveys are now regularly conducted online with those employees who have easy access to computers. Electronic voting technology is used in employee meetings to do pre- and post-meeting research. Focus groups are sometimes conducted "virtually" on electronic chat rooms or by videoconference. We measure not just usage of our Web sites, but also their usability.

Plus, we don't just measure after fact. We're building research into the planning process, with the result that the research often changes our plans and makes our communication more successful the first time around. We're finding a little extra research time upfront avoids the need for extra time and money to fight fires after flawed campaigns.

Where are we heading?

Greater frequency. Research is now conducted more frequently. While a major survey might still be conducted once every year or two, certain key questions are repeated monthly or even weekly with random samples of employees to track changes before and after specific communication interventions. Single questions may be asked online or by phone to get an instant reading on a specific communication challenge.

Focus on action. We're asking fewer questions that don't help us make decisions about what to do to fix problems. We're focusing response scales on how often specific aspects of communication are working well, rather than on how satisfied employees are with them.

Specificity. In the past, a survey might ask to what extent communication works well between departments. However, if a company obtained negative results (which most do), there was no indication of which pairs of departments had the worst communication barriers. Today, we conduct surveys that can pinpoint which departmental match-ups have the biggest problems so we know where to go to intervene. We identify the best, and most efficient, combination of channels to use on each important topic. We discover the exact topics employees want to learn about from their supervisors versus those they prefer to learn about on the intranet or from a publication. We can identify exactly where staff meetings are not being conducted.

All these changes in what we're measuring and how we're doing it are helping us gain fluency in a language communicators didn't speak in 1974: business. And speaking that language is what is turning our communication departments from high-overhead cost centers to profit-generating dynamos.

© 2002 Angela D. Sinickas, All rights reserved

Angela Sinickas, ABC, is CEO of Sinickas Communications, Inc., an international communication consultancy specializing in helping corporations achieve business results through targeted diagnostics and practical solutions. You can visit her website, www.sinicom.com, to see over 150 articles and dozens of FAQs on measurement.