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How to Measure the Impact of Speeches

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I once judged the speech category of a communication competition where the speechwriter's one-line description of measurable results was: "My client sent me a dozen roses."

At least she counted the flowers.

Most of the measures I see of speeches or the meetings in which they are presented focus on audience satisfaction with various elements of the event: the length of the speech, the presenter's delivery, the amount of Q&A, the temperature of the room. While it's nice to have a happy audience, I'd rather know if the speech made an impact on them.

I recommend focusing on three key outcomes that most speeches should be trying to achieve. Find out to what extent the speech:

- Increases the level of **knowledge** on the speech's topic. This can be measured by how many people believe they understand a topic (on a scale of 1 to 5) or by how many answer a true/false or multiple-choice question correctly.
- Creates more favorable **attitudes** about the presenter, his/her organization or its products or services. Attitude questions typically take the form of statements with which respondents can agree or disagree on a five-point scale.
- Changes the audience's decisions or **behaviors** affecting the organization. Capturing behavior change will allow you to calculate an ROI for the speech because most behaviors have a financial value, either in increasing revenues or reducing costs.

To capture these impacts, it usually helps to conduct some measures before the speech to identify your baseline, and then afterward to identify progress against the baseline. Here are several ideas for how to set up your speech metrics.

1. **Show of hands:** Build into the beginning of the speech several points at which the presenter asks for a show of hands on knowledge, attitudes and current behaviors related to the speech topic. Then repeat those questions at the end to see improvement. To make this more scientific for large audiences, arrange for several photographs to be taken from different angles behind the audience, without flash, to be able to more accurately count the hands. A variation of this would be to use the show of hands at the beginning, and then to repeat the questions in a written evaluation form completed after the speech. The ideal way to capture these would be to have hand-held, electronic voting technology available in the room so people can just press the buttons for their responses and even see the bar charts of results while they are in the room.
2. **Piggyback survey:** If your organization already does formal surveys of your audience on their attitudes or purchasing behaviors (employee engagement or customer satisfaction, for example), see if you can add a few questions to the end of the survey to identify if potential customers were exposed to your executives'

speeches at conferences/trade shows or if employees participated in a Town Hall meeting. Then use this question as a demographic filter for all the other questions, to see if those who were exposed to the speeches answer some of the other survey questions more positively. For instance, are employees more likely to be engaged or committed to the company if they've been exposed to Town Halls? Are potential customers who have heard executives' speeches more likely to see your company as innovative or trustworthy, or more likely to choose your firm instead of your competitors' companies?

3. **Customized survey:** You could develop a very short telephone survey that probes knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to the speech and administer it first to a random sample of your target audience. This provides your baseline. Then you can repeat the survey using a sample of the people who attended the speech to see if those who were there are better informed, feel more positively about your organization and are more likely to buy your products.

The only difficulty with the first and third suggested measures is that you do need to plan ahead and do the initial measurement before the speech!

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