

To standardize, or not to standardize?

Is standardizing the way we measure IC's efforts really the best approach for all organizations? Principles, rather than prescribed techniques, may be preferable.

In the last few years, I've seen a push to standardize communication measurement. Several global communication associations developed the Barcelona Declaration of Measurement Principles two years ago, the US Institute for Public Relations (IPR) drafted standards for media measurement in June 2012, and the UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) is meeting in October to develop a standard set of principles for measuring internal communication. Many of the guidelines/principles developed have a lot in common; for example:

- Communication projects should start with measurable objectives.
- Research should be conducted before developing new communication.
- Measurement should focus on outcomes, not only on our activities.

Standardize, but don't invent, terminology

One of the difficulties with standardized approaches is terminology. For example, the IPR has defined three levels of communication to be measured: outputs, outtakes and outcomes. "Outputs" and "outcomes" are words that already mean the same thing to most people, but the newly minted "outtakes" is confusing on two levels. First, it already has a standard definition that has nothing to do with communication effectiveness: footage from TV and movies of mistakes that are funny but not used in the final project. Using this term with executives to mean something else would surely be confusing. Secondly, even the communicators who coined this trilogy of terms – in trying to explain the differences through the use of case studies – assign the same metrics to different categories (outtake or outcome?) in the different cases – even within the same white

paper. I prefer to use just the two categories of our activities *versus* the outcomes they lead to in our audiences. That's clear to anyone and relies on definitions everyone already understands.

On the plus side, the IPR is proposing standardizing definitions of terms that are already in common use, such as the media measurement concept of "impressions." While I agree that words like this should have standard meanings from company to company, I have a problem when groups invent new terminology they want us all to adopt.

While there may be value in having all PR agencies measure audience impressions the same way, I'm not sure I see a need for every communicator to measure an outcome, like understanding, in exactly the same way. Different communicators use different scales to measure aspects of communication success. I don't think any one approach is inherently better than any other. The key is for a single organization to measure understanding of all its own subjects using the same scale so they can compare all the subjects against each other, and how they change over time. Different approaches may make more sense for different types of organizations, cultures, etc.

Conform to existing business standards

Similarly, I've seen some Comms consultants call for a new, standardized approach to measuring communication's ROI. I don't see a need for that either. There's already a single formula for calculating ROI in business: Divide the cost of X into the net gain achieved by X. (Net gain is the total gain minus the cost.) Developing a different formula for communication's ROI could devalue

it in management's eyes – such as when social media gurus talk about return on engagement or return on conversation, without ever calculating a financial value. We need to use the same formula already accepted by business, not a new one invented for, and imposed on, communicators.

The variable for ROI calculations is in how much credit Communication can take for a gain that may have been achieved through the efforts of several organizational units. Here, again, we can follow techniques for isolating credit already in use by other business units (e.g., pilot studies, correlating timing of activity inputs with spikes in outcome improvements, survey questions, etc.). But we need the flexibility to use whichever technique makes the most sense in the situation, not some new, single way standardized for Communication.

Principles, yes; prescribed techniques, no

So my overall conclusion is that there is value in agreeing on measurement principles, but not on a single standardized list of "best" techniques to follow. The right approach depends so much on what's being measured and the environment in which it's being measured. For example, for a client that measures its overall success using the Balanced Scorecard, I developed a Communication Department Balanced Scorecard. And for a company in the investment industry that uses indexes to measure financial performance, we created a Communication Index. I think it's far better to match your communication measures to the way other business measures are being tracked in your own organization, than to match your measures to those of communicators in other organizations.



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