

Making a Different Kind of ‘Impression’

By Vicky Hastings

If I could do only one thing before I die, it would be to end the practice of counting clips and using advertising equivalency to measure public relations effectiveness. I’m a big fan of tracking metrics against objectives but, unfortunately, it’s all too frequent that the wrong items are counted to justify communications ROI.

There’s nothing wrong with tallying media coverage. It’s putting a value on quantity over quality. But the quantity of media stories is only meaningful if the editorial coverage is in the right media outlet and conveys the right message.

The archaic methodology called “advertising equivalency” is based on counting the number of column inches generated in print editorial coverage (or length of broadcast stories) and estimating what it would cost to purchase the same space for advertising. Because advertising and editorial have very different impacts on readers, those impacts cannot be compared by virtue of the space they occupy. It would be similar to determining the quality of a shoe by looking at its size. What’s more, advertising equivalency is based on standard rates, not those actually paid by advertisers, most of whom negotiate rates based on volume. This makes advertising equivalency estimates so broad as to be virtually meaningless.

There is a better way. Here’s how we evaluate the effectiveness of our communications programs at Maxwell PR.

To be as objective as possible, we never calculate “impressions,” i.e. when a publication’s circulation is multiplied by the stated pass-along rate – or just an arbitrary number such as three, as we’ve seen companies do. Instead, we opt to use actual (and some would say more conservative), circulation figures. But readership or circulation figures only get you so far, since not everyone who has the opportunity to read, listen to or watch the story actually does so.

In some of our work, we’ve begun a much more sophisticated program based on the experts at [KDPaine & Partners](#). It begins by identifying the business and marketing objectives we’re trying to achieve, and then mapping the public relations results to those goals by measuring a combination of the following:

1. **Outputs:** What’s being done to communicate effectively to specific audiences
2. **Outtakes:** How we’re increasing awareness and/or changing attitudes
3. **Outcomes:** What specific actions or behaviors we’re prompting, such as people participating in an online poll, downloading information from a Web site, taking a survey, adding photos or ratings, attending specific events, redeeming coupons, registering for a newsletter, referring a friend or purchasing a product

If you’re looking to truly understand the value of your public relations program, we suggest considering Maxwell’s Top Ten Measurement Questions to frame your discussion:

1. Are the right journalists agreeing to engage with you and hear your story?
2. How credible do they find your key points?
3. Do consumers, see, view or hear the message and believe the message?
4. What do you want your key publics to do and how likely is your media coverage to drive the desired behavior?

5. How do you rate your long-term relationships with your target audiences?
6. What “share of voice” or “share of coverage” do you have relative to your competitors?
7. What behavior can you track in terms of registration, survey participation, downloads, videos watched, sampling and more?
8. What kind of consumer feedback are you receiving?
9. How do you rate the engagement level of your consumers with your product or brand?
What are you seeing in terms of consumers forwarding and sharing your content?
10. How many advocates or ambassadors are willing to speak out on behalf of your organization?

With the advent of social media, the opportunity for you to communicate directly with your target consumers – and they with you – is greater than ever before. So don't use Old World techniques to measure today's communication programs. Start tracking outputs, outtakes and outcomes, and keep asking those insightful questions.

