PUBLIC RELATIONS EVALUATION – SURVEY OF AUSTRALIAN PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract
The first major survey of Australian public relations (PR) practitioners’ evaluation practices and attitudes since 1993 shows a picture of a media relations-centric approach. Watson and Simmons’ online survey was undertaken in November-December 2003, mainly among members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), which is the peak national professional body. They used a questionnaire based on surveys undertaken with similar cohorts in the UK during the 1990s.

The data suggest some increase in research and evaluation activity has occurred, but the focus remains on outputs, not outcomes, of communication. Media coverage monitoring and media content analysis dominate research methods used to plan, monitor and evaluate PR communication. 89% of practitioners reported often or always measuring the volume of communication, just 32% often or always measure resulting changes in behaviour.

The data show that UK and Australia attitudes are broadly similar, although local attitudes suggest that cost is much less of a barrier to evaluation than a lack of time and knowledge. Analysis of attitudes and 74 responses to an open-ended question suggest that lack of research skill confidence, longing to show bottom-line results, and frustration at decision-makers’ misunderstanding of PR, make evaluation a cause of anguish for many practitioners.

Stream: Organisational and Management Communication

Introduction
This paper describes the research and evaluation practices of a sample of mostly mid to higher level Australian public relations practitioners. It reports the techniques used, practitioner attitudes to research and evaluation, and the types of measurement. It focuses on evaluation research, and examines the findings in the context of previous studies in Australia and overseas.

Evaluation is ‘essential’
Demonstrating the ‘value’ of, or return on investment in, public relations, has become essential public relations practice.
‘Today’s practitioner is in a business that demands more. Modern public relations research strives to deliver evidence that the bottom line has been enhanced by the practitioner’s activities’ (Stacks, 2002, p.3).

Since the 1980s industry leaders and academics have advanced the need for more accountability in public relations communication, and evaluation has had a regular place in industry journals, conferences and professional and academic training programs. Media monitoring services and do-it-yourself software support have become widely available, and measurement is entrenched as an essential part of the industry’s best practice models. Macnamara refers to a ‘philosophical consensus’ on its importance, but says application of evaluation has been low in public relations (Macnamara, 2002). In the US, Judd found that 67% of practitioners had used formal or informal research in the previous 12 month period, and concluded there was a strong positive relationship between perceived importance and use of research (1990). Most studies, however, have found practitioners believe it’s important and accepted, but don’t necessarily do it (IPRA 1994; Walker, 1997; Watson 1996).

Two 1993 surveys in Australia found a substantial gulf between attitudes and practices among practitioners. Consistent with public relations best practice credo, there was 90% agreement or strong agreement that research is widely accepted ‘... as a necessary and integral part of the planning, program development and evaluation process’ (Walker, 1997). Only 55% reported very frequently or occasionally ‘measuring or evaluating the outcomes, impact or effectiveness of PR programs or activities’. An international study found that 90% of Australian public relations practitioners believed evaluation was necessary, but just 14% ‘frequently undertook research aimed at evaluating’. Australia’s figure was slightly lower than the USA, South Africa and the average for the whole sample (IPRA, 1994).

A recent past president of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) said there ‘... is little evidence that the use of research has increased significantly in public relations since 1994, and some surveys suggest that even if more research is being used, there is still a long way to go’ (Macnamara, 2002). In 2003, more than 50% of an Australian sample reported that effectiveness was measured either on an ad hoc basis or not at all (Mercer, 2003).

**From tactical to strategic**

The public relations profession aspires to shift from a technical (writing, events and information dissemination) to a strategic (managerial decision-making) role in organisations. Practitioners are well known to express frustration at the sidelining of public relations in many organisations, and management failure to adequately recognise the value of communication. Macnamara highlights two failings that help explain public relations lacking credibility in the eyes of management. First is the failure of public relations to evaluate and report the outcomes or effects of communication. A second, related, reason is failure to use the language of accountability preferred by organisations (MBO, TQM, QA, Benchmarking etc) (Macnamara, 1999). These factors are major obstacles to the inclusion of public relations in strategic decision making. More than 60% of a sample of UK practitioners said that evaluation increases respect from clients and employers (Watson 1996, unpublished). Another study of UK marketing directors found that only 28% were satisfied with their public relations evaluation, compared with 67% for advertising...
and 68% for sales promotion (Test Research, in Macnamara 2002, p.103). Managerial status will require research and evaluation that gives firm evidence of contribution to the organisation (Macnamara 1999).

A survey of senior Australian managers suggests public relations’ transition to managerial status is far from complete. Managers were found to have very low expectations of public relations’ role in strategic planning, and rely on public relations officers for information dissemination rather than advice (Steiner and Black, 2000).

**Market pressures to evaluate**

Without evidence of the effects of public relations communication, the decision to invest is based on belief. Decision-makers generally prefer measures and precedent to guesswork and assurance. Thus investment in public relations communication is threatened by decision-maker perceptions of lack of accountability.

According to Fairchild, in the UK the need to strengthen PR’s research and evaluation practices has become even more urgent in recent years. Recessory pressures on organisation budgets are causing cutbacks to public relations in the UK, ‘… indicating yet again that PR is regarded as an optional and dispensable service’ (2002, p.306). He also discusses a trend leading to increased competition for public relations core business. The convergence of management consulting, legal and accountancy services is resulting in the encroachment of multi disciplinary consultancies on fields such as issues and risk management, communication and reputation. Fairchild notes that without the esteem of management, public relations is likely to take a publicity rather than strategic role as organisations respond to the increasing (regulatory and non-regulatory) demands to report non-financial performance (2002).

Other pressures upon practitioners, which have not been reported academically, include the introduction of payment-by-results (PBR) contracts and the use of purchasing professionals in the negotiation of consultancy arrangements. PBR, which is widely used in advertising, demands evidence of the achievement of mutually-agreed objectives or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). These objectives or KPIs are measured by some form of evaluation methodology in order to decide whether the supplier of PR services (in-house and consultancy) can be paid the full contract amount or penalised for missing the targets. It is a similar position where purchasing professionals are involved in negotiating the performance elements of a contract or a campaign. This practice has become widespread in consumer and technology public relations in the UK and North America and is being introduced into the governmental sector in many countries. In the UK, for example, there has been a strong effort by bodies representing purchasers of services and the suppliers to develop a common industry-wide approach which includes evaluation methodologies. Like it or not, PR practitioners are having to face up to the use of evaluation.

With these changes in international practices, it was timely that a benchmark study was undertaken of public relations evaluation in Australia so that this sector can determine where it stands and plan educational and resource changes that will keep it competitive in the corporate and marketing communications marketplace.
Method
Finding a representative sample of the public relations industry is a challenge when
the majority of Australian practitioners remain unaffiliated to professional industry
bodies and there is no central registry or even standardised nomenclature for
practitioners. Major studies of evaluation practices and attitudes have used
professional bodies to reach a sample of practitioners (Dozier, 1984; 1985; 1988, used
the PRSA and IABC; while Watson 1992 and 1996 approached IPR members in the
UK), and used targeted samples of practitioners in prominent organisations
(Lindenmann 1990 and Walker 1997 used a cross section of organisations and
sectors). Other studies have sought insight by reviewing entries for industry awards
(Blissland 1990; Walker 1994; Gregory 2001).

This online survey targeted members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia
(PRIA), the Local Government Public Relations Association (LGPRA), and visitors to
the PRIA website. The survey instrument was Watson’s 1996 Nationwide Survey of
Public Relations Practitioners, modified for use in Australia in 2003.

Survey instrument
In 1992 and 1996 Watson surveyed PR practitioners in the UK about their attitudes to
evaluation (Watson, 1996). He posted a questionnaire to a random sample of 1000
members of the Institute of Public Relations. The instrument used here was based on
Watson’s questionnaire and adapted for online use with a sample of Australian PR
practitioners in 2003. This enabled comparison on some questions with Watson’s
findings, the introduction of questions relating to current issues, and piloting of a
survey instrument that could be readily used to benchmark the practices of different
sections of the public relations industry in different countries across time.

Changes to Watson’s (1996) survey were made after discussions with Australian
communication practitioners during 2003. A pilot study was also conducted.

The main changes to the instrument included:
• reduction in the number and detail of questions about media analysis techniques
  and companies
• addition of questions referring to WWW based research techniques
• addition of a respondent variable based on the size of the budgets they work with
• addition of questions that differentiated use of output and outcome evaluation
• addition of questions that differentiated the levels of media analysis undertaken,
  based on the levels proposed by the UK PRE-Fix task force (2002)
• clear separation of research used to plan, monitor and evaluate PR communication
• addition of questions exploring perceptions of the measurability of PR
  communication.

The survey reported here was divided into four main sections. The first section used
five questions to profile the respondents’ work and workplace, including employment
sector (government, non-government, commercial, consultancy), communication
focus (internal, external or mixed), average size of communication campaign budget,
size of organisation (employee number), and seniority (director, manager, executive,
assistant) in the organisation.
The second section of 54 questions asked about research practices at the planning, monitoring and evaluation stages of communication, PR communication measures used by their organisation, and questions about research budget and trends. The third section asked 21 questions about respondent views towards research and evaluation. The fourth section profiled the respondents according to professional affiliations, age, gender, income, education and postcode.

Most of the 75 items concerning respondents’ practices and views on research and evaluation used a 5-point Likert style scale. Analysis of the data used frequency and mean, and cross tabulation calculations to compare sub-sample responses.

An online study
The study was supported by the National Directorate of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA). The peak Australian PR industry body, it provided convenient access to a large sample of the Australian public relations practitioner target group. The PRIA agreed to email all members with a hotlink to the survey, and to host a hotlink to the survey on the PRIA homepage (<www.pria.com.au>).

The survey was conducted online for several reasons. Email is the principal means of member communication for the PRIA, and the public relations industry is generally very computer literate. The budget for the project was small (less than $3000), and the minimal distribution and follow-up costs, and automatic collation provide several cost advantages relative to mail and phone surveys. Once the survey and data collation and analysis processes are in place, the survey can be repeated easily for different industry samples around the world. These advantages were balanced against the perceived advantages phone and online surveys would deliver in response rates.

Distribution of survey
The email with the hotlink to the questionnaire was sent to approximately 2800 PRIA member email addresses in the two weeks between 17 November and 1 December 2003. All but one office sent the email as requested, with that office electing to include the hotlink in its online newsletter.

The survey was conducted anonymously. Participation by individuals was not tracked. They were asked for their postcode but not for their name or organisation. A follow-up email was sent to all members between seven and 10 days after the first email.

The survey was also emailed to approximately 100 members of the Local Government Public Relations Association of Australia (LGPRRA) on December 3.

The survey website was constructed and hosted by the Western Research Institute, a commercial research agency at Charles Sturt University’s Bathurst campus. The only access to the survey site was through the PRIA site, the email hotlink, or by using the exact url address. Net surfers could not happen upon the site.

Sample
The 216 responses reported here were received up to 17 December 2003. 168 of the completed responses were PRIA members. Sixteen were members of the LGPRRA. The other 32 are believed to have come through the PRIA homepage.
Most respondents were at the higher end of public relations decision-making. 77% reported they were at manager or senior manager/director level. Most (91%) had tertiary qualifications (72% had tertiary qualifications in public relations or a communication-related field). This is consistent with the large percentage of members of the PRIA (76%) included in the sample. Level of respondent membership was not recorded, but standard PRIA membership requires ‘… 5 + years full time PR/communication experience and approved tertiary degree in public relations /communication’ (www.pria.com.au, accessed December, 2003).

They were generally in mid career (62% aged 25-44) and most (55%) were in the $50,000-$99,999 salary range. Only 3% earned less than $35,000 annually, 25% earned more than $100,000.

Table 1: Sample by sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. Which term best describes your workplace?</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultancy</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government or government agency</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non government and non profit</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 216

Table 1 shows the five categories (including ‘other’) that were used to describe the respondents’ type of workplace. Consultants (43%) were the largest group represented, followed by government or government agency (33%), commercial (12%) and non-government and non-profit (9%). Walker’s targeted postal survey reported on a sample with a higher proportion of government (36%) and corporate (27%), and fewer consultants (10%)(1997). Watson’s survey of the IPR included more consultants (54%) (1996, unpublished).

Respondents ranked themselves in terms of ‘PR management responsibility’ (using a descending scale with four possible response options; Senior Manager/Director (45%); Manager (32%); Executive (14%); Assistant(9%).

Another recent online study of Australian communication professionals reported a similar sample with more younger practitioners, fewer tertiary qualifications and slightly lower salary levels (Mercer, 2003).

Findings

Methods used at different stages of PR communication
Media coverage monitoring and media content analysis dominate the research habits of PR practitioners. Table 2 shows the combined totals for ‘often’ and ‘always’. More than four out of five practitioners said they often or always use media coverage monitoring (clippings/tapes etc) to plan (82%), monitor (88%) and evaluate (87%) PR
communication. Media coverage monitoring appears to have increased since 1993. Walker asked about frequency of use for planning and evaluation, and about more research methods, but her data are still interesting to compare. She found that 81% of practitioners used publicity tracking or media monitoring frequently or occasionally to support PR planning or evaluation (1997, p106).

Table 2. Research methods often or always used to plan, monitor and evaluate

| Q. How often does your organisation use these methods to help (plan/monitor/evaluate) PR communication? (Response options – Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always) N = 216 | Frequency of use % Often or Always |
|---|---|---|
| | Plan | Monitor | Evaluate |
| Library searches | 17 | NA | NA |
| WWW information searches | 73 | 38 | 29 |
| Focus groups | 16 | 10 | 13 |
| Phone surveys | 10 | 8 | 10 |
| Mail surveys | 9 | 8 | 10 |
| Online surveys | 12 | 12 | 11 |
| Questions in omnibus surveys | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Media coverage monitoring (clippings, tapes etc) | 82 | 88 | 87 |
| Media content analysis | 64 | 69 | 74 |
| Readability tests | 16 | NA | NA |

Media content analysis was the second most frequently used method overall. 64% said they often or always use media content analysis to plan, 69% to monitor, and 74% to evaluate.

The World Wide Web is entrenched as an aid to PR communication planning. Most practitioners (73%) said they often or always use WWW information searches to plan PR communication, but less to monitor (38%) and evaluate (29%). Only one respondent said WWW information searches were never used to plan communication.

Practitioners are using social science research techniques much less frequently than media centred techniques. Phone and online are the most frequently used survey methods at each of the three stages. Totals for phone, mail, and online surveys range between 8% (mail - monitor) and 12% (online plan and monitor). These figures appear surprisingly low when considered against US PR research academic Don Stack’s claim that the survey or poll is probably the ‘… most commonly used research methodology in public relations today …’ (2002, p174), and Walker’s 1993 results. Walker found that 68% of Australian practitioners frequently or occasionally used ‘… surveys by telephone or mail with simple cross tabbing of findings’ (1997, p.105).

Table 3 shows the totals for ‘Sometimes’ and ‘Often’ and ‘Always’ responses to the questions about social science techniques. The increases in the scores indicate that between 20% and 30% of respondents ‘sometimes’ use the social science methods listed. ‘Sometimes’ could be added amongst Walker’s ‘occasionally’.
combine telephone and mail methods, and ‘planning and evaluation’ purposes (1997, p105). The results for 2003 presented here separate both the research methods and purposes. When the results are presented this way they show that each survey method is used ‘sometimes, often or always’ by between 30 and 40 percent of Australian practitioners for each of the planning, monitoring and evaluation stages. They also show that these research methods are most frequently used for planning, less for evaluation, and less still for monitoring. This is consistent with previous Australian findings that research is used more for planning communication than evaluation (Walker, 1997).

Table 3. Social science methods used to plan, monitor and evaluate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. How often does your organisation use these methods to plan/monitor/evaluate PR communication? (Response options – Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always)</th>
<th>Frequency of use %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone surveys</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail surveys</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online surveys</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phone surveys and focus groups are the most used of the social science methods in planning, perhaps suggesting a logical preference for interactive methods that allow reflexivity and exploration in the development of communication.

**Levels of measurement – outcomes and outputs**

Practitioners were given a list of different measures of PR communication and media and asked how often their organisation measured them. The responses have been ranked in order of frequency and labelled as either an outcome or output measure in Table 4.

The results show that practitioners are mostly using evaluation to measure communication outputs. The top five measures are all output measures, and five of the lowest six measures are outcomes. This is consistent with the domination of media focused methods reported in the previous section. Media coverage monitoring and media content analysis, the most frequently used research methods, measure the quality or amount of communication sent (outputs). The less used social science methods are more amenable to measuring the effects of communication on PR outcomes - behaviours, attitudes and knowledge.

The leading measures in the respondents’ organisations are volume of PR communication (89% often or always), followed by favourability or unfavourability of media coverage (86%) and inclusion of the organisation’s key messages in the media coverage (79%). Watson’s 1996 UK survey didn’t differentiate outcomes and outputs, but asked how evaluation data was used. He found that that it was used for combinations of output, outcome and monitoring purposes. The main reasons given were: 30% to measure media coverage (output); 26% to generate reports to clients and
employers (output and outcome); 24% to review effectiveness of campaign (outcome); 17% to track issues and attitudes of journalists (monitor); 14% judge favourability of media coverage and other attitudes; 13% to judge the effectiveness of the consultancy by the client (outcome, output, monitor) (Watson, 1996).

The most frequently reported outcome measure was business indicators (sales, turnover, costs) (44% often or always). 43% reported often or always measuring changes in attitude or perception. This was followed by target audience response to media coverage (41%), changes in target group knowledge resulting from PR communication (33%) and changes in behaviour resulting from PR communication (32%).

The often-debated output measure Advertising $ Value Equivalent (AVE) of media coverage was the least used measure (26% often or always). It also had the largest never or rarely score (50%).

The data clearly show that output measures are more frequently used than outcomes. Closer analysis reveals that 59% of practitioners often or always use one of business indicators, perception, or behaviour change to measure PR communication. Just 12% reported never or rarely measuring business indicators or perception or behaviour.

### Table 4: Frequency of measures of PR communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. How often does your organisation measure the following?</th>
<th>Frequency of measure %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Response options – Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always) N = 216</td>
<td>(Ranked according to Always or Often % column)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outcome or Output</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume of PR communication</td>
<td>Output</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favourability or unfavourability of media coverage</td>
<td>Output</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of the organisation’s key messages in the media coverage</td>
<td>Output</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of audience exposed to the media coverage</td>
<td>Output</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of listeners or readers reached by PR communication</td>
<td>Output</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business indicators</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(sales, turnover, costs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in attitude or perception resulting from PR communication</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target audience response to the media coverage</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in target group knowledge resulting from PR communication</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in behaviour resulting from PR communication</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising value of media coverage</td>
<td>Output</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Business indicators or perception change or behaviour change resulting from PR communication**

**Cumulative use of at least one outcome measure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>59</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitudes and comments</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate their agreement or disagreement (on a five point scale) with statements about research and evaluation and then gave respondents the opportunity to answer an open-ended question: ‘Finally ... is there anything you would like to add about PR evaluation and research?’ 74 took the opportunity. Their comments largely mirrored issues in the surveys, but with a surprisingly strong emphasis on issues such as the need for standardised systems or metrics (not the same concepts), and the use of AVEs as measurement tools. There was also a range of comments that illustrated the barriers to evaluation that had been identified in the UK by Watson (1992 and 1996) and in Germany by Baerns (1993) as well as by other researchers. Typically these were lack of budget and time, knowledge, staff resources (typically, too busy “doing” to spare time for evaluation), and just plain “too hard”. Some respondents indicated that the economic tightness after 2000 and the “post-techwreck” cutbacks in ITC marketing and communications budgets had hit even rudimentary evaluation or had forced the cost of it back on consultancies. It is interesting to compare the comments with the data on a range of the relevant statements.
Table 5: Barriers to evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Score (1-5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Budget is difficult to obtain for PR evaluation</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners … lack training (or knowledge of) evaluation techniques</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners often forego evaluation because of lack of time</td>
<td>3.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR evaluation is too costly</td>
<td>2.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, there was a lack of confidence amongst practitioners that was not demonstrated in the quantitative data. This is illustrated by an inability to make the case for research and evaluation budgets and positions many practitioners under Dozier’s “technician” descriptor, rather than managers. By their own expressions, many practitioners do not have the full respect of clients or employers and see themselves at the bottom of the communication process or at a severe disadvantage compared with advertising and other marketing communications practitioners.

Barriers

Yes, I think PR evaluation is an extremely vital tool in educating yourself and others about the great value in PR. I think currently there is very little PR research/evaluation undertaken due to limited budgets, time and lack of know-how.

My organisation is a very small business that would benefit from PR evaluation and research, however, very limited time and resources makes it almost impossible.

We don’t have a sufficient budget for events, media training, and other core PR activities let alone a budget to evaluate the success of them. Time is critical. Money is critical. These two factors prevent any sort of meaningful evaluation at my place of work.

In my particular case formal PR evaluation is difficult to implement due to a lack of understanding on the part of the clients, time on the part of the practitioner and budget for outsourcing. As a result a type of informal evaluation is generally used that tries to measure outcomes (communication activities and informal survey regarding effect) against objectives stated in the PA plan for each activity. What would be useful is to have tools that are designed for solo, in-house practitioners who have limited resources and time.

In the last 2 years there has been a big rationalisation of business costs, including PR & ad budgets. This is been due to the global down turn. As a result clients are demanding more from their PR budgets. They expect PR practitioners to evaluate but are not prepared to spend money on it. As a result consultancies have to find cheap ways to show results.

Budget availability is not the problem; it is simply lack of time and staffing resources.
Advertising Value Equivalents / Clip counting

In the quantitative data, the statement “Advertising Value Equivalent is not a valid method of PR effectiveness” scored 3.91/5, indicating broad agreement by the sample. Yet, the comments of respondents indicate that AVEs are alive and well, as are clip counts. This indicates that, despite practitioner doubts on these methods, clients and employers are insisting on financial equivalent measurement of PR communications and eschewing measurements based on strategic objectives. This may also point to a general perception among purchasers of PR communication (both in-house and consultancy) that PR is a message delivery tool and not a method of strategic communication. This further supports perceptions outlined above on a lack of practitioner confidence and their positioning as technicians.

I find that people who don’t know a lot about PR tend to look at the advertising value equivalent and number of clips/stories only - I don’t believe this is a very good way of evaluating success. However I also appreciate that it is difficult to come up with a better way of measuring your success - people understand tangible numbers

A trend I am seeing more and more of is using only the evaluation method of a clip count. Most or all of my clients want to see a large number of clips at the end of each month and don’t really care about other value-adds such as speaking and networking opportunities and stakeholder communications. PR seems to be moving into just a media relations sphere. As most clients are an arm of an international company, I think they feel pressure from head offices to compete with other regions. Clip count is usually the only evaluation used to measure every office in every country.

Evaluation effectiveness more often than not comes down to what the client wants. I was recently in the US for a PR conference and heard the PR manager for one of the largest tech firms in the world get up and say he doesn’t “give a rats” about quality of message or share of voice. He measures one thing only - number of clips. And it doesn't matter where they have come from. Having a discussion about key message pull-through or quality of audience would have been a waste of time. PR tends to suffer from a lack of understanding from client side as much as anything. Advertising seems to be more simple to understand for many.

Single or standard system

The statement that “PR would be more credible if there was one agreed measurement technique” scored 3.51 out of 5. This result shows a reasonable but not strong level of agreement with this proposition. The comments by practitioners also show strong interest in either a standard evaluation method or tool, preferably software based, or a set of standard metrics. Analysis of these comments and those regarding AVEs indicates that practitioners want to match the response-driven data used by marketing communications techniques such as response advertising, direct marketing and sales promotion which appear to compete more successfully for budgets than PR does in many business situations. An observation to make is that, as Watson found in the UK (Watson 1992; 1996), practitioners appear unwilling to research the evaluation issue
which has been written about extensively in trade media and basic PR texts as well as supported by training bodies such as PRIA and commercial organisations.

As practitioners we need more standardised tools.

I think the establishment of a standard evaluation method for PR would be of immense benefit both to the practitioner, the client and more importantly the PR industry as a whole, which suffers due to under-developed and unclear practices. The sheer broad nature of PR work alone, stresses the importance in developing universal tools for all.

A standardised approach to evaluation would assist the industry in being more widely recognised as a value component of any marketing campaign.

Accepted industry metrics would be a good start with a joint focus on quantitative and qualitative measurement.

Evaluation is absolutely essential for our credibility - one system that is reasonable in cost is the key.

Engaging with management
This final group of comments link to some points raised earlier in regard to Barriers and AVEs/Clip Counting. There was an almost despairing desire amongst some respondents for the creation of metrics or methods of reporting on PR communications in “business-speak”. Some saw AVEs as dubious but acceptable because financial and marketing managers could understand the financial equivalency that was expressed. The quantitative data shows the importance of clients and employers in progressing the use of evaluation.

Table 6: Evaluation drivers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Score (1-5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation is essential for credibility with clients and employers</td>
<td>4.17 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The client’s or employer’s request determines whether PR communication gets evaluated</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is pressure from clients/employers to more clearly demonstrate results of PR communication</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This was the second-strongest response in a set of 21 statements

The challenge for practitioners is whether to stand strongly by existing social science and market research-based methodologies or to invent new methods or adapt existing presentation of data using business-speak in order to gain client/employer acceptance of research and evaluation. The lack of practitioner confidence and knowledge of research methodology is again evidenced by both the qualitative comments and the data. It is a worrying trend for Australian public relations practice which should have expressed a fully-professional image by 2004.
The first comment in this section does offer some guidance with the suggestion that evaluation models have continuous improvement built into them. A review of existing structures such as Cutlip, Center and Broom’s PII, Watson’s Continuing, Watson & Noble’s Unified and Macnamara’s Macro models would see that all have some form of iteration that informs future campaigns or supports modification of existing ones. The information on evaluation models may need to be made more widely than academic discussion and higher education.

*Need to embrace the management concepts of 'continuous improvement' and continuous feedback into evaluation models.*

*As an industry, we need to find a way to transfer our qualitative results into quantitative data. Business leaders understand numbers and money – let’s talk their language.*

**Discussion**

This report provides an initial snapshot of research and evaluation practices in Australian public relations. Further work will be undertaken on the data, but there are some benchmarks emerging for all sectors. The survey found a well-educated, higher management group of practitioners for whom the media is the prime focus of strategies and tactics and, therefore, the principal area of research and evaluation. The finding that 59% are ‘often’ or ‘always’ using at least one outcome measure of PR communication suggests a strong increase since Walker recorded that 14% were ‘very frequently measuring or evaluating outcomes, impact of effectiveness of PR programs or activities’ a decade ago (Walker 1997, p.102).

However, it is output measurements that dominate evaluation practice with 89% measuring ‘volume of PR communication’ and ‘86% measuring favourability or unfavourability of media coverage’. Indeed, five output measurements top the table of measures of PR communication before the first outcome measurement appears (business indicators at 44%). These are the characteristics of a PR sector in a marketing communications / one-way Information model rather than a professional group that is primarily concerned with strategic communications, which many aspire to. This is also reinforced by data that shows between 82% and 88% undertake media coverage monitoring when planning, monitoring or evaluating, but between 8% and 16% use focus groups, phone surveys or mail surveys.

Analysis of the qualitative discussion shows that Australian practitioners are less confident than the main data would indicate. Like practitioners around the world, they face common barriers but appear to be more influenced by client attitudes and knowledge limitations than comparable cohorts, especially in the UK (cf. Watson, 1996 and PRE-fix, 2002). There is a role for the PRIA to consider in taking leadership of the debate on research and evaluation methods and promotion of best practice. This has happened in the USA via the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Institute for Public Relations Research & Evaluation (IPRRE) and in the UK where the Institute of Public Relations has, with the Public Relations Consultants Association, developed and promoted three editions of the PR Evaluation Toolkit, as well as the PRE-fix website. PRIA’s resources are limited but there is strong demand for its leadership on this issue. This will be explored in future reports.
Overall, there appears to be a trend to wider use of evaluation techniques amongst Australian PR practitioners, but it is firmly focused on output measurement rather than outcomes.
References


PRE-Fix Task Force June 2002. Understanding the current use and requirements of Media Evaluation within the UK PR industry and proposed action. www.PRE-Fix.org.uk


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