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PR NEWS

PR Measurement Now Moving At A Not-So-Glacial Pace

In the last year or so the struggle over measurement has moved from understanding output (your media hits) to capitalizing on the outcomes (how they connect to the company's overall business goals).

Not exactly like the switch from analog to digital, but in the annals of PR measurement, it's a start.

"We're in that grey space between equating (media hits) to how they impact sales and customers," says Matt Gonring, VP of Global Marketing and Communications for Milwaukee-based Rockwell Corp., which supplies plant floor automation and equipment. "Who cares about the quality of the publication if it's not aligning with the business strategy and you can't draw a line between [the clip] and better business? That's the only way you're going to get sustainable investment in this area."

While a growing number of CEOs are buying into the idea of measurement, they still need a lot of convincing, which presents both a challenge and an opportunity for senior PR pros. Part of the problem is that we still for the most part live in a universe of business silos and PR measurement works most effectively when it's integrated with the rest of the company's marketing disciplines, say observers.

Barring a breakdown of silos (don't hold your breath) it's still crucial for PR execs to be able to demonstrate the benefits of measurement. "We have to press for it," Gonring says. "The option is to be asked by your CEO whether you have considered a benchmark, say no--and have the program be put at risk, or say yes--and you will be challenged on the validity of the plan--but you will also be in a better position for budget retention."

With CEOs more amenable to measurement, the onus now is on PR execs not to have their measurement plans turn into Rube Goldberg-like contraptions. "Companies and clients want something simple," says Ed Moed, a co-founder of mid-size PR agency Peppercom (New York), which in July launched its own proprietary measurement tool, called Business Outcomes. "You should be able to go to the CEO with a couple of pages showing the key ingredients of how measurement helped to get the message out. It doesn't have to have 100 different graphs." He adds: "Every client has a different idea of what measurement should be, but you need to be able to show the good, bad and ugly of the outcomes and then tailor your plan accordingly."

Others say equating PR measurement to Ad Equivalency Value (AVE) is a non-starter. "It's not going to give you the intelligence and the ability to move forward," says Pauline Draper, senior VP of MB Precise, (Chicago) one of the main measurement vendors and a subsidiary of Millward Brown, one of the Top 10 global research firms. For PR pros grappling with outcomes, Draper recommends a pilot [measurement] program that considers "the amount of coverage you're getting, the industry you're in, your competitors and market dynamics."

Albert Barr, founder of Washington, D.C.-based CARMA, one of the very first companies to provide PR measurement, cautions that as measurement develops PR execs not get too bogged down in (the holy) ROI. "ROI is one of the most overused terms in the business," he says. "If you believe there's a relationship between PR and sales, ROI is the exposure that drives the relationship and the quality of that exposure."

Rick Rudman, president-CEO of Lanham Md.-based Vocus, which also offers measurement services, adds that the overriding issue is for PR pros to find answers in the press coverage their companies garner. "It's still in the zygote stage," he says, referring to more sophisticated measurement techniques. "It's too expensive and there's too much focus on analyzing the news coverage [and not understanding what it means]. There's still a long way to go."

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