CHAPTER 8

How PR professionals can move from data to insights

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Data and insights are an increasingly important aspect of public relations and communications. While there seems to be more and more data available, gaining value and strategic insight from it remains a key challenge for many organisations. This chapter is designed to provide communication professionals with practical steps to help with the move from data to insights.

1. Not everything that can be counted counts

The availability of so much data means that communication professionals often use analytics that are easy to gather rather than the most appropriate and targeted measures. This has been particularly prevalent due to the volume of data from owned media assets and the ease of access to cost-effective social media analytics. It is important to distinguish between analytics and insight here. The two terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the industry, but they serve very different purposes. In fact, the use of analytics can often be a barrier in the move from data to insights if the data is not linked to SMART objectives and does not help to prove business value and improve performance.

Quality should be the ultimate goal when starting any measurement and evaluation program. Starting out can be daunting and confusing. However, if you focus on quality rather than quantity, your projects will be far more manageable and rewarding. This applies to the types of data you include as well as the PR activities you set out to measure and evaluate. It is far more important (and useful) to use clean, timely and relevant data, link your activity to organisational goals and measure end-to-end rather than to superficially assess a wide range of PR activities. Obviously, the most important part of an "end-to-end" approach is to measure the outcomes of PR activity rather than just outputs (ie. the results that really count to your organisation). A commitment to quality is equally important to effective measurement programs. Challenging the status quo and the data already in use within an organisation can often lead to better evaluation and more insightful and useful reports. Having the courage to question the way things have always been done can help to break away from counting and move towards more thoughtful and useful reporting.

| Protect and drive budget reallocation decisions | Speak your language and resonate with all stakeholders | Sharpen your focus on key messages and content strategy | Demonstrate what's working and evaluate what isn't | Use findings to inform strategy and future planning |

2. Silo busting unlocks potential

Firstly, it is important to make sure you are using the data and tools that already exist within your organisation. The data you need to measure effectively and gain strategic insight will not always be gathered and held by the PR function. An integrated approach to insights and research makes sound business sense because it avoids duplication of supplier contracts, makes the most of the synergies between different business units and it also provides all teams with access to far richer datasets.

Breaking down long-established silos and forging new ways of working together can be a very challenging task, especially if your organisation does not have culture of knowledge sharing or collaboration. However, PR professionals are in one of the best positions to manage this process and bring all the key stakeholders together.

The most obvious area where silo busting can unlock insights is with social media data. Quite often, social media is "owned" by a business function and this means social media data isn't widely analysed to benefit other business units. Public relations teams are frequently tasked with managing reputational risks on social media channels while marketing teams manage and promote the brand. An integrated approach to social data gathering and measurement brings cost savings as well as a strong base to glean business insights.

"If every American business would investigate and act on the data it has right now, using only common-sense planning and the techniques covered in a college Statistics 101 class, our economy would boom" (Meta S. Brown, (2016) 4 Reasons Why You Don't Need A Big Data Strategy, Forbes, 30 August 2016)

3. Use action and budget-reallocation as your ultimate tests

One of the easiest and most definitive ways to assess how well your organisation is using data and insights is to ask some very simple questions:

1. Has our measurement program provided concrete ways we can reallocate our budget?
2. Have our insights been actionable?
3. Have our insights been presented in a way that provides clarity and the confidence to make decisions and implement change?
4. Have our measurement and evaluation protected our budget?
5. How much engagement do we receive from our clients (external and internal)?

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If you can't answer these questions positively, it is worth reassessing the way you are using data with the view to measure what matters. Organisations are using data and insights to successfully change the way they do business. Whether it be moving spend from paid to owned or changing the way they recruit and resource their teams, the golden rule of any measurement is that it should provide you with the confidence to reallocate your budget and make smarter decisions that lead to smarter actions.

There may be a perception that measurement and research is out of reach for many due to time and or cost constraints, but measurement can and should save you money and increase the effectiveness of your communications. A good example of this type of measurement can be seen in the work completed for the White Ribbon campaign in New Zealand. Their use of different data sets and actionable insights helped them win a gold AMEC Award for the best measurement in the not-for-profit sector. The case study is available on the AMEC website.

Khali's Top 3 Measurement Tips

1. Make the most of the free resources available from PR organisations and industry associations.

2. Look at measurement and data holistically in your organisation.

3. Challenge the status quo and always focus on quality.

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