While the most straightforward measure for proving public relations success is often “meet or beat measurable objectives,” setting quantifiable objectives is one of PR’s most vexing challenges. As you move towards 2013 planning, research can help you determine what you can do to uncover efficiencies, determine optimal budget and structure your plans for success. It all begins with knowing what you want to accomplish. Learn proven techniques for setting objectives for success, as well as how to start fresh by assessing which priorities drive the PR value. Enhance your ability to improve PR performance, and expand client buy-in and alignment for PR by linking objectives and results with the overall goals of the business.
For your PR efforts to realize their full potential, you need to start with a clean slate: no preset objectives, preconceived strategies, or predetermined outcomes. This clean-slate atmosphere provides a fresh start for reexamining the priorities of the organization, how they affect public relations, and what public relations can do to advance these priorities. It begins with a dispassionate look at past performance, conventional wisdom, and what has come before, from either within the organization or among its competitors: everything is up for grabs. It is a landscape ripe for new thinking in support of breakthrough opportunities and explosive growth.

Clean-slate public relations is a layering process that begins and ends with research: the progression begins with the research upon which objectives will be set and by which strategy can be developed. It continues with the creative interpretation of the initial research for the purposes of creating and delivering key messages to target audiences in a compelling and credible fashion. The sequence moves forward through program execution in a way that advanced research has pretested for success, and concludes with the research-based evaluation by which the PR program is assessed in terms of the extent to which it met or exceeded the original research-based objectives. But rather than working in a linear fashion, the process is cyclical, with each succeeding program being a bit more refined, more efficient, and more effective.

While each component of this scientific approach is integral to the development, execution, and evaluation of successful public relations programs, it can be argued that the initial stage of objectives-setting research is the most important and certainly the most frequently overlooked: it is at once the foundation for the entire PR program and the skeleton around which strategy, execution, and evaluation are formed.

Why Setting Objectives for Public Relations Is Essential
Despite the truism that you need to know your destination in order to tell whether you’ve arrived, the vast majority of public relations programs do not begin with a clear and measurable objective. As a result, when it comes time to measure performance against objectives, few PR programs can prove the extent to which—or even if—they succeeded.

There are five simple reasons for setting clear and concise objectives in public relations:

- **Objectives create a structure for prioritizing action:** Once your aim is clear, so too becomes the sequence of actions required to achieve it.
- **Objectives reduce the potential for disputes before, during, and after the program:** Once everyone has agreed on the objective and the strategy by which you intend to meet or surpass the objective, the risk of disagreement is greatly minimized as everyone works with a single sense of understanding and purpose.
- **Objectives increase efficiency by concentrating resources where they will make a difference, thereby reducing waste and inefficiency:** A clear sense of purpose distills program tactics and focuses assets where they have the greatest impact.
- **Objectives help to form successful programs by focusing attention and action on those criteria by which the program will later be evaluated:** Good and proper objectives provide a clear line of sight. When they share an advanced understanding of the criteria for success, teams naturally work toward those areas that will yield the desired outcome.
- **Objectives set the stage for evaluation by allowing PR investment decision makers to determine if the PR program met or exceeded its original objectives:** Objectives work best when they are understood and acknowledged by those who are underwriting the investment. Once you set specific objectives and gain agreement in advance, there can be no doubt as to whether the program met or fell short of the desired outcome at the time of its conclusion (we’ve met some cowardly types who view this type of vagueness as a plus…they’re planning for failure before they get started).
However compelling the reasons for setting clear, measurable objectives are, it is done too infrequently. The award programs sponsored by professional PR associations and trade publications reveal that a haphazard approach to setting objectives is widespread in the world of PR. Each year, professional communicators from corporations, nonprofits, PR agencies, and governments are invited to submit “best-in-class” PR programs for consideration to win the profession’s most esteemed awards. The awards are considered an important distinction of accomplishment: agencies, for example, widely promote themselves as award winners and showcase their trophies, taking out full-page trade advertising to trumpet their superiority. Reputations are born of the recognition that comes from winning the blue ribbon. Some large agencies consider awards programs to be so important that they maintain special staffs to oversee the submission process and manage the quality and pre-eminence of their award entries.

In each of these awards programs, the rules for entry explicitly dictate that the program submitted for consideration include a specific, measurable objective based on some form of primary or secondary research. And yet, many judges report that in categories ranging from Special Events to Corporate Communication to Brand Publicity, roughly one out of five entries submitted gets eliminated outright because it contains no underlying research at all, and another 50 percent receive substandard marks for stating objectives that would be considered inadequate or incomplete. Given the enormous effort and resources that go into preparing the submissions and the doors to opportunity that open for award-winning programs, it is remarkable that so many entries are dismissed from consideration as a result of skipping or shortchanging this essential first step.

At PRIME Research, we now believe that most entrants who omit proper objectives do so not because of oversight but because they are either unable or unwilling to set specific, measurable objectives in the first place. And if so many of the self-proclaimed best programs aren’t based on proper objectives, what can be said of the thousands of other PR plans that don’t see the light of day or are never submitted for competition and peer review? It seems incredible that companies and brands will invest millions of dollars in PR without a definable understanding of what they’re striving to achieve and what will define measurable success. And even if they choose to invest in vague objectives once, why do they continue to make the same risky investment over and over again?

The problem with most stated objectives is that they are so vague they undermine the five reasons listed at the beginning of this paper. “Deliver media awareness,” they say. . . . Or “create significant buzz.” Is “generating buzz” rigorous enough to prioritize action? Is there enough of a clear consensus on the definition of buzz to avoid dispute? Does buzz provide enough structure to act as the foundation for proper PR strategy development and evaluation? At dozens of speeches and conferences around the country, I offer audiences one dollar in exchange for a clear, consensus-formed definition of buzz. And that offer is topped by a ten-dollar prize if they can tell me how to measure its results in such a way as to know if “buzz significance” has been achieved. I first made this offer several years ago, and I’ve yet to pay out a cent. To be fair, the Buzz Marketing Association now has a serious effort under way—but despite their best efforts, the “generate buzz” objective is vague and overused; not the specific, meaningful, and measurable objective that those who invest in PR should insist upon.

That many PR departments and agencies make do without clear and measurable objectives could be the result of a variety of reasons, including lack of budget, lack of understanding as to how objectives are set or why they are important, preference for the creative rather than the quantitative, or apprehension about initiating a score-card process. Whatever the truth may be—and I’m sure that there are many more reasons than these—when it comes to setting objectives by which performance can be precisely evaluated and perpetually refined, many PR people simply choose not to do it.

The Difficulty of Speaking “PR”
One of the challenges facing the public relations profession is the need for a common lexicon like those used in the medical, legal, and accounting professions. Not that dictionaries for public relations don’t exist, they do. (In fact, Don Stacks of the University of Miami has

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brought together an extraordinarily thorough compendium that is available through the Institute for Public Relations.) The trouble is the gap between having a dictionary and having a living, common language: the definitions exist, but few abide by them.

One area that may be inhibiting the wider acceptance of serious objectives-setting efforts is the common confusion surrounding the definitions of and the differences between the words goals and objectives, which are often (and erroneously, in my opinion) used interchangeably. For the purposes of this discussion, it’s useful to draw some boundaries.

Goals
Goals are relatively vague, reflecting aspirations rather than a chosen destination they often appear in the form of organizational vision and mission statements. Unfortunately, although vision and mission statements are important for focusing resources and for ensuring that the PR program’s efforts blend with those of the larger organization, they are often indeterminate and difficult to measure. The nature of mission statements thus makes it difficult or even impossible to determine whether or not you’ve achieved success. For example, goals like “being the best” or “achieving leadership” are unhelpful when it comes time to evaluate PR on either a campaign or program basis.

Objectives
By contrast, objectives are measurable and unambiguous so that you—and everyone else—can see when you’ve met or exceeded them. Business objectives tend to relate to specific standards of business performance and they can be translated quite directly to public relations objectives. PR objectives can and should be specified in terms of audience (who is the best target?), time frame (when should the program begin and end?), and outcomes, which may be further reflected in terms that are behavioral (did they do what we wanted them to do?), attitudinal (do they feel about us what we wanted them to feel?), and informational (do they know about us what we want them to know?). These elements are used to ensure that objectives are specific and success can be quantified when the campaign ends. Research-based objectives are set and evaluated by using the tools discussed in Chapter Three. In so doing, one must ensure that objectives are meaningful, reasonable, and measurable... the keys to demonstrating a clear ROI and reducing the risk that your claim to success might be challenged once the program is completed.

Moving from Goals to Objectives
Business goals—even vague, aspirational goals—can be transformed into specific objectives. Take, for example, the following positioning statement from Patagonia, the socially and environmentally conscious (not to mention “successful, category-defining”) clothing manufacturer and retailer:

Committed to Uncommon Culture: We prefer the human scale to the corporate, vagabonding to tourism, the quirky and lively to the toned-down and flattened-out. We used to call our own world of alpinists and surfers a dirt bag culture: of temp jobs and long summers; of foraged meals and tribal travel that followed the seasons, from summer climbs in Yosemite to Baja’s winter surf breaks to spring kayaking. And if many of us now work more than we climb, and care more for our families than for bumming about, we still sound our appeal to the dirt bag within, the need for the wild dirt bag spirit to survive in our e’d-out culture.

I buy Patagonia products and I understand and like what they stand for (could I have a dirt bag within me?), but I’d find the company’s mission statement difficult to translate directly into something specific and measurable even if the words speak directly to customers and employees. But just as any good business goal should do, Patagonia’s provides strong guidance for communicators because it can be translated into tightly defined public relations objectives. For example, it offers strong, communicable themes and visual cues, clear ideals that translate to market segments, and obvious prompts for special events and spokespeople. Thus the aspirations represented by Patagonia’s mission statement can be converted into clear and measurable objectives such as “increase awareness of Patagonia as the home of ‘dirt bag culture’ by 10 percent among ‘latent dirt bags’ by the end of the year.” Presumably, the promotion of “dirt bag culture” translates to sales growth and profitability, if not for the sake of the business then for the sake of the many philanthropic activities that Patagonia supports through its business activities.
Using Research to Set Objectives
Let us begin the discussion of objectives by looking at how research instruments can be applied in the creation of scientific, meaningful objectives. The purpose of using research and analysis at the beginning of a program is to assess the current public relations environment, to identify opportunities, and to set objectives in light of the environment you find and the opportunities you seek. Your initial research should be based on preliminary program hypotheses whose proof should provide you with the means to answer these key questions: What is the current environment? What place do we hold within the current environment? Why is this so? Is it likely to continue? What do we need to know now so that we can improve our position? After the data are compiled, they should be analyzed, interpreted, and shared so that the results can be applied for greater understanding of what's come before and toward improved planning going forward. The metrics associated with the current environment—the quantity and quality of marketing and public relations outputs as well as existing levels of awareness, attitudes, and behavior—are the metrics by which you will set your objectives at the beginning of the programming process, measure program progress during the program, and assess performance at the conclusion.

Using research as part of the objectives-setting process also allows you to pretest some early notions and validate others before allocating resources. What is more, research and analysis reduce the risk of failure since you have a chance to learn from the general and competitive landscape before you begin: you can adapt to and adopt from the best and the worst of what you learn to ensure that your program accomplishes what it is designed to accomplish and avoids the pitfalls of those failed PR programs that came before you.

Using Attitudinal Research to Set Objectives
To set objectives that are meaningful, measurable, and reasonable, surveys are valuable because they reflect the levels of awareness, attitudes, understanding, preference, and behavior that your public relations program seeks to raise. A variety of qualitative and quantitative research tools are useful in setting objectives, including focus groups, consumer surveys, journalist surveys, and executive audits.

Focus Groups: Focus groups can help shape quantitative research during the objectives-setting phase. The focus group provides access to the opinions and attitudes of a small group through the give-and-take of an in-depth moderated discussion. Focus groups help you establish “color” and “language” in a relatively short time, thereby providing useful guidelines when creating the quantitative research described next. While the focus group process precedes the objective-setting process, the results directly feed into how you word your objectives as stated in the ensuing consumer survey.

Consumer Surveys: Understanding how to affect your target audience positively is the key to successful public relations. Typically, a survey is conducted at the earliest planning stages of “clean slate” PR program development for the purpose of setting objectives. Your survey ought to explore different areas, through the use of what is known as a “battery of questions.” To ensure that you learn what is needed through your survey, include the following batteries:

- **Aided and Unaided Awareness:** Unaided awareness is a measure of recognition without any prompting from the survey (when you think of a cookie, what kind of cookie comes to mind?); aided awareness is a measure of recognition with the help of survey prompts (Have you ever heard of a Fig Newton?). The formation and continuance of company and brand awareness is one of the most elementary (and most important) objectives of public relations. Hence, one should gauge levels of awareness in advance of the PR program so that awareness levels after the program can be compared to that baseline. Public relations is arguably more powerful in building awareness than any other form of marketing communication, and so “building awareness” is commonly found among public relations objectives. A PR campaign can be considered a success when increased awareness is accomplished within a predetermined time frame and budget. In the cases of both aided and unaided awareness, preexisting levels must be determined so that specific, reasonable, and meaningful
PRIME RESEARCH

awareness targets can be set for assessing your success.

These measures are common whenever “pre- and post- communication” awareness research is undertaken: they provide guidance when tracking changes in awareness and the extent to which they may be attributed to the PR campaign. For example, if you can show that brand awareness is higher among those who are aware of the campaign than among those not aware of the campaign, then it can be reasoned that the PR campaign is contributing to brand awareness. Conversely, if brand awareness is rising while awareness of the PR campaign is declining or is nonexistent, then you could surmise that the public relations initiative is probably not the cause.

- **Respondent profile:** As part of every questionnaire, ask questions regarding the respondent’s personal attributes such as gender, age, geographic location, and income. Some of this information may be requested right at the beginning of the interview process to determine if the respondent is indeed relevant: if, for example, the survey is part of a PR program intent on selling men’s shaving cream, the responses of women and men with full beards may muddle assessment of the objectives of your program. Better to clarify that you’re speaking with a man and then ask a quick question such as “do you shave your beard at least three times each week?” And if the answer is “no,” say “thanks,” disengage, and reach out to the next potential respondent. If your respondents do fit your target criteria, then you’ll know that responses will be helpful in setting objectives and strategy. Usually, a more in-depth battery of questions at the end of the survey supports more detailed “respondent profiling.” These factors are extremely valuable when setting target audience objectives and for comparing results after the program. Success will be based on the degree to which the target audience response moves in a favorable direction.

- **Media Consumption Habits:** When gathering information through your survey, it is important to confirm your respondents’ media preferences. Ask which media they read, watch, and listen to, and also get an idea of their level of involvement. (Do you watch this show from beginning to end or do you flip channels? Do you read every issue of this newspaper? How often do you visit this site? How long do you wait to read the magazine after receiving it?) Involvement is an important and underutilized criterion for media selection: I religiously read the New York Times but I don’t have time to read it front-to-back; I also read my hometown weekly paper and I take in every page . . . sometimes I read it twice during the same week. Finally, it is recommended that you ask where the respondent goes to find new information: the print or on-line version, the ads, the tear-out inserts, or the editorial content. The answers to these questions will help set the stage for media objectives and for evaluating media results during the post program evaluation phase. Depending on whether you have access to various demographics databases available today, you may find that these media questions aren’t a good use of the limited amount of time you’ll have with the respondent. But if you have this information from one source or another, when it comes time to evaluate your results, you can show the extent to which you hit the media with the highest penetration among the target demographic.

- **The Journalist Audit:** As described in Chapter Three, the Journalist Audit is a way to better understand the needs and preferences of key journalists, and then, once identified, to meet or exceed their expectations. Your survey research will help you create a target media list. Typically, each of your target media will have a journalist assigned to cover your subject area; even small local newspapers and TV news programs have dedicated journalists to cover business, lifestyles, and the arts, and may also have journalists assigned to cover technology, health, and home.

It is important to identify target journalists during this initial research-based objectives phase. If they are worth targeting, their reporting tendencies will be worth tracking in the news content analysis described in the next section.

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We’ve seen cases where journalists are predisposed to a particular brand within a category even when all things appear equal. Once you’ve evaluated the reporting of particular journalists, it is important to compare their coverage of your organization against that of your competitors. If a journalist is running your competitor’s news—and it’s comparable, you’ve got a problem that needs fixing. If, on the other hand, the journalist runs neither your material nor your competitor’s, it may be something else entirely, such as an improperly targeted journalist.

If the media analysis doesn’t reveal any meaningful patterns, consider speaking with the journalist, either during your annual survey or directly if time doesn’t permit the luxury of an annual schedule. Sometimes, the media analysis reveals only the symptoms and the journalists provide the cure. More often than not, it is a matter of something simple and fixable: the journalist prefers e-mail when you’ve been leaving voice mail, or the journalist prefers a local angle that may have to be customized in the future.

**Executive Audit:** The Executive Audit is of critical importance during the objectives-setting phase since it is imperative that the people who will be either funding or evaluating your program sign off in advance on your objectives. After all, they will later be the ones who determine the extent to which you have met or exceeded your objectives. Their response to questions about business goals and objectives as well as their ideas on how PR can help achieve the organization’s overall goals and objectives will be critical in shaping your PR program. You may well find that some executives believe that the objective of the PR program is to generate a high volume of news coverage while others believe the objective should be keeping the company out of the news. These conflicts need to be resolved before objectives can be set.

**Using News Content Analysis to Set Objectives**

News content analysis is a powerful tool for setting specific and measurable public relations objectives. The content analysis process helps you identify current levels of media exposure as well as uncover key opportunities. At the objectives-setting stage, these are the key determinants for a successful “pre-program” news content analysis:

- Target media frequency
- Key message delivery and quality
- Target audience demographics
- News coverage trends by reporter
- Spokespeople and third-party citations
- Tactics tracking
- Impact Score and Net Effect

**Target Media Frequency:** During this planning and objectives-setting stage, surveys supplemented by the Media Demographic Audit will have identified the audiences you seek as well as the media they favor. Once your target media are identified, a content analysis of news coverage will reveal how often your topic has been covered—as it relates to your company and brand, but also in terms of your competitors. In the case of newspapers, for example, you can track the frequency of coverage by newspaper and by market so that target volume of coverage can be set: “Improve the incidence of positive coverage in the New York market by 20 percent during the next six months” is an example. Typically, target media volume objectives are best set based on your own past performance, your key competitors’ performance, and that of “the best in class.” The objective is based on measurably improving the frequency with which target media cover your company or brand compared to reporting in the past and reporting of your competitors and peers.

**Key Message Delivery and Quality:** In the objectives-setting stage, it is important to assess the many possibilities to determine which messages will be your priority. The content analysis of messages will identify the extent to which various messages are performing in the current and recent media landscape. If one of the messages you are considering for your campaign is already owned by a competitor, you may seek to identify an equally credible and important message that you can own outright. If you find that one theme is being applied negatively to your organization, a priority may be to fix it.
In some cases, company and brand news will also contain or be surrounded by related issues and unintended news coverage that will need to be factored into your objectives. For example, a public relations program promoting a new, cleaner gasoline may have to contend with issues-driven rather than brand-driven news about the high price of fuel or global warming. It is important to uncover these issues and to have contingency plans to deal with them.

Once levels of news coverage are determined, objectives can be set in terms of a specific percentage gain or beating the competition by a specific differential.

**Target Audience Demographics:** Another meaningful objective is to reach a greater share of the target audience than your competitors. By conducting a Media Demographic Audit, you will have a way to assess target audience penetration by conducting a content analysis of those media that matter. If the results indicate it would be useful to do so, you can focus your resources on achieving supremacy on just these media, letting your competitors waste their resources on less targeted media outlets.

**News Coverage Trends by Reporters:** Once the target media are identified, you can track reporter by-lines to focus your resources on the journalists that matter. The content analysis can help you identify which reporters already favor your organization or brand as well as those you may target for improvement. If certain journalists seem to prefer your competitors, determine if your story is as credible and as compelling and reach out to these journalists. The purpose is to improve relationships rather than to black-ball your critics, plus the ability to earn a place as a journalist’s preferred source of information can be a great asset, one which can be definitively measured through content analysis.

**Spokespeople and Third-Party Citations:** The content analysis can be set up in such a way as to identify the experts journalists cite when writing about your organization and your category. You may also find that these experts favor your company—or your competitors. Once you know who is being cited, you can include these opinion leaders in your objectives, either to refine relations with those opinion leaders who already favor you or to improve relations with those who favor your competitors.

You should also track who at your organization and among your competitors, peers, and opposition are cited as spokespeople. Accessible and responsive spokespeople are a great asset for improving the frequency and quality of news coverage about your organization. Use content analysis at this pre-programming stage to identify who your competitors use as spokespeople and how they perform. There is no better way to engage your organization’s own executives to than to compare their coverage to what your competitors are generating: executives are typically a competitive group and the more engaged they are, the better your performance will be as your spokespeople help you meet or beat your objectives.

**Tactics Tracking:** Content analysis can identify the tactics of your competitors—both successful and unsuccessful—so that you can create uniquely successful events, sponsorships, and campaigns of your own. Your competitors’ least successful tactics probably never see the light of day, but you may find criticism or negative reviews if you look for them. At least you’ll be able to avoid the most obvious fiascos while learning about the most successful alternatives. Once you’ve identified the best and the worst, set measurable objectives based on what you learn and in such a way as to distinguish your campaign from the rest.

**Impact Score and Net Effect:** The Impact Score and Net Effect process are distilled measures of public relations quality in the media. Analyzing news coverage at this more granular level gives you more specific objectives to set and more ways to achieve success. Look for ways to generate more visuals than your competitors or more exclusive stories and you will see your Impact Score improve. Enlist executives in your organization to be more open and accessible to the media and you’ll see the quantity and quality of your media programs improve.

**Rules for Setting Good Objectives**
Remember our definition of an objective: an objective specifies an audience (who is the best target?), a time...
frame (when should the program begin and end), and one or more outcomes, which are behavioral (did they do what we wanted them to do?), attitudinal (do they feel about us what we wanted them to feel?), or informational (do they know about us what we want them to know?). Good objectives aren’t hard to set.

Lay the Groundwork
Begin by specifying your desired PR outputs, PR outcomes, and business results—the building blocks for PR success. Let’s define each component and then discuss how they can be applied individually and collectively for the purpose of setting objectives:

- **Outputs:** The definition of output is not consistent across the PR field. Some define outputs as press releases, special events, collateral materials, and Web sites. Others say these are not outputs but activities; real outputs are found in the media coverage generated as a result of these activities. At PRIME, we use this second definition. Output objectives look like this:
  
  “Increase competitive share of positive news coverage by 20 percent by June.”

  “Improve our ranking in the ‘PRIME Research Top Companies Benchmarking Study Index’ by five places in the annual review.”

  “Generate a minimum of 1,000 page visits a month to our Web site’s journalist newsroom.”

- **Outcomes:** Outcomes are recognized widely in the form of awareness, understanding, attitudes, preference and behavior. Outcomes are achieved as a result of outputs and, simply put, have an effect on the minds of the target audience. Outcome objectives look like this:

  “Boost brand awareness in our top ten markets by 15 points in six months.”

  “Increase the perception of our brand as ‘the high-quality brand’ by 15 percent in the second fiscal quarter versus the first fiscal quarter.”

- **Business results:** Business results are commonly recognized as effects that make a direct contribution toward the organization’s goals and objectives. They relate to what happens as a result of outputs and outcomes. Business results–based objectives look like this:

  “Use PR to add 1 percent to overall unit sales in the first six months of 2012.”

  “Lower PR costs by 15 percent by August.”

  “[Now that we’re in for a potential crisis], use PR to stabilize stock price by working with financial analysts and tracking their comments during the initial phases.”

Each example of an output, outcome, or business result is specific and measurable. The degree to which PR activities lead to outputs that lead to outcomes that lead in turn to business results depends on how well you have researched the cause-and-effect relationships among them. Only internal dialogue among business and PR decision makers will confirm if these steps are meaningful in the context of the organization’s overall goals and objectives. This is the conversation that should take place once your preplanning surveys and content analysis are done.

Define Useful Objectives
Be sure that your objectives are a guide to action rather than a chronicle of activity: “Send out press releases,” “book TV interviews,” or “host opinion leaders at a special event” are activities that might help one meet an objective, but they aren’t objectives, per se. Activities should be tracked in their own right as measures of productivity. But demonstrating that you have sent out 20 percent more press releases than last year offers not a clue about whether these releases met their objectives. A special event, in isolation, doesn’t mean anything unless it satisfies specific criteria. And the TV interview is meaningless if the program is not seen by the people you’re targeting or if the interview doesn’t allow the interviewee to deliver the key messages of the
campaign. So, while these examples qualify as a tactics to-do list, simply having done something shouldn’t qualify as having met an objective. In and of themselves, such actions aren’t satisfying any of the organization’s business goals or objectives.

Remember, objectives emphasize ends rather than means: If any of your objectives begin with words like distribute or create, then you don’t have an objective, you have part of a tactical plan. Good objectives identify outputs, outcomes, and business results rather than tasks, strategies, or deliverables. The latter may be important in helping to achieve the desired results, but they are simply the means by which the end is achieved.

Instead, think of what outcome a particular strategy or supporting tactic is designed to stimulate. Suppose Cameron Cookie Company seeks to increase sales and market share of its Beasty Graham brand by five percent in the third fiscal quarter. Sending out press releases might or might not foster objectives like “Generate stories using our three key messages (Beasty Grahams—taste great; we use only the best natural ingredients; Cameron’s Beasty Graham-brand cookies are essential to a healthy diet) in key media.” If the releases are properly targeted, Cameron Beasty Graham stories will appear in media with the highest penetration among health-conscious mothers in markets where Cameron-brand Beasty Grahams are sold, thus satisfying a PR objective such as “Increase news coverage by 80 percent within our top ten markets.” And the press releases can be timed for late August and early September so as to be the healthy snack mothers prefer when they pack school lunches for their kids and/or to satisfy a PR objective such as “raise awareness by five percent among parents with kids in elementary school during the back-to-school period.”

The sequence suggested is one of audience identification, media targeting, message development, and campaign timing: when properly conceived and productively executed, the PR campaign for Cameron-brand cookies may result in a spike in sales within the markets where stories appear, thus satisfying Cameron’s business objective for increased sales and market share during the third fiscal quarter.

In the case of “sponsoring a special event for opinion leaders,” the event might advance an objective such as “Raise awareness by 10 percent within three months among local elected officials and clergy of our company’s business objective to be the community’s best corporate citizen through our commitment to local philanthropy.” The action suggested in this example is one of audience and influencer identification. And if these PR objectives are met, then the overall objectives of the organization are more likely to be successful.

Set a Specific Time Frame
Sometimes, within certain projects, time frames are predefined. The Summer Salad Dressings Season Kick-off, for example, is obviously seasonal in nature. Most PR programs at the corporate and brand levels are ongoing, and use seasonal campaigns as the means to an end. Solid objectives will include a schedule on which general objectives will be met, and the timetable for PR objectives should coincide with the overall business goals of the organization. A toy company that generates 70 percent of its annual sales during the Christmas shopping season, for example, has to plan around that time of year.

The PR schedule should be tied to the organization’s general business calendar, with milestones such as traditional sales seasons and fiscal quarters. PR timetables are also tied to professional calendars like the annual meeting or the Acapulco marketing planning retreat in September. Interim targets may be driven by new product introductions and may be scheduled in concert with others involved with managing the organization’s brand marketing mix. Such internal events may be the monthly CEO roundtable, when heads of each of the organization’s units deliver short-term results to senior management. To be able to report results at proper intervals, one must have objectives that clearly translate to these time frames. Be sure to speak with others in the organization to ensure that PR’s objectives support theirs, and vice versa. As in the case of every objective, it is important to get agreement from those who fund PR programs so that they see the calendar you’ve identified as meaningful, sufficiently measurable, and reasonable.

Differentiate long-term objectives from short-term objectives. While it is important for business and
PR departments alike to have objectives, some objectives are difficult to achieve wholesale and can only be accomplished in an incremental fashion. A small start-up that has a long-term goal of capturing at least half of its target market will usually set incremental objectives, such as increasing market share every year for the next five years. Similarly, long-term PR objectives need to be translated into shorter-term objectives, usually on an annual basis.

Construct your objectives with respect to and in recognition of what PR can and cannot accomplish reasonably, whether in the near term or the long term. Public relations can be a powerful agent but it can’t accomplish the impossible. Setting objectives that are unreasonable is a waste of time and resources for everyone and, worse, may prevent more appropriate alternative endeavors from taking hold. One way to determine what is reasonable is to benchmark against competitors and your own past performance. During your clean-slate PR start-up this may be difficult, but it can be done. Once benchmark performance levels have been established, PR objectives should become more and more reasonable—and more accurate—over time.

Identify Specific Media
For the most part, PR audience identification is a highly subjective exercise rather than the scientific process that it is—and should be—in other areas of marketing communication. Audience targeting is inherent in direct marketing, which is predicated on its ability to deliver pinpoint communication to the proper recipient, and it is also a primary consideration in advertising. However, audience identification has not traditionally been central to public relations objectives, even though targeting is just as fundamental to successful PR as it is to other forms of successful marketing. This may be explained by the different natures of paid versus nonpaid communication: the risk with non-targeted paid advertising is that millions of dollars are on the line; in the case of PR, which can distribute press releases through inexpensive commercial newswires, the risk for broad and vague target media objectives is considerably less. However, it should be said that an unfocused outlay of human, financial, and creative resources will certainly undermine the likelihood of PR success, just as it would in any other endeavor.

Proper audience and media identification for the purposes of setting objectives also takes into account the size of the audience. The audience size doesn’t in itself determine the importance of the program. An extreme example would be a PR plan designed to help sell hydroelectric turbines, where the PR department might have ten trade media targets and might hope to sell a dozen turbines each year. Within this context, it would be unreasonable to construct media relations objectives around generating hundreds of positive turbine-focused trade media stories a month; fifty stories a year might be a stretch in such a narrowly focused industry as hydroelectric power generation. And since the buying decision is so involved, it would be an even bigger stretch to attempt making the link between media-relations driven PR and sales. However, a public relations plan designed to sell bottled water may have an audience of many millions with media targets among hundreds (even thousands) of consumer media. In a mature competitive market like bottled water, a campaign promoting a new brand might have to generate thousands of high-quality stories in targeted media to have an impact on consumers and to make a meaningful contribution to the brand’s sales objective. The fifty-story-a-year goal of the turbine manufacturer would not make a dent on mass-market awareness for advancing the sales of bottled water.

Define Your Audience Relationship
You need to know what your relationship is with the audience and how you want that relationship to change. Do you want your PR campaign to build loyalty among existing customers or steal customers from your competitors? For example, cola drinkers in Memphis are extraordinarily loyal to Coca-Cola. A new soft drink targeting Memphis would have its work cut out if the new brand was not sufficiently and compellingly distinctive from the overwhelming market leader. A battle for Memphis market share might require more funding or more time than would be needed in a target market that reveals no such loyalty. It is also worth exploring what sort of relationship the company or brand wants to have with its target audience. Is the objective defined by sales or legislative support? Preprogramming research should be used to uncover the existing relationship with the company and its competitors. Many smart PR planners borrow from market research conducted by other units
within the company to uncover these relationships, but it can be an expensive proposition.

Less expensive than custom market research are demographics databases like the Media Audit, which aren’t regularly applied to public relations objectives, strategy development, or evaluation. Databases with which we’re familiar offer hundreds of criteria by which audience relationships can be determined. It may be easy, for example, to identify Memphis as a “cola market,” but you need to know whether Memphis cola drinkers are your customers, prospective customers, or a competitor’s loyalists.

Ensuring Top Management Buy-In to PR Objectives
Following the rules outlined thus far will ensure that your objectives are measurable and meaningful, but it won’t guarantee that they will ensure top management support or align with the organization’s marketing goals (although it ought to be very close unless other areas of the business aren’t as thorough as you’ve been). Savvy PR professionals make sure that their PR objectives further larger organizational goals and objectives and take other positive steps to secure top management backing.

Tie Your Objectives to the Organization’s Goals and Objectives
Beyond assessing your customers’ preferences (I’ll tell you now: they all want three scoops of ice cream for a nickel), it is essential to know the mission of your organization before defining your own objectives, and similarly, the organization’s goals and objectives should be reflected in good PR objectives. Because public relations objectives must be aligned with the organization’s goals and objectives, it is critically important that the PR planner understand fully the organization’s priorities in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, also known by the acronym SWOT analysis. PR’s SWOT analysis of the organization should extend well beyond the traditional PR purview to include factors such as financial performance, corporate and brand reputation, vision and leadership, workplace environment, and corporate citizenship.

A publicly held consumer-products company, for example, would probably have goals in multiple areas.

No doubt it has sales, revenue, and profit targets. But it might also be eager to attract and keep its most talented employees, to boost its reputation on Wall Street as a worthwhile investment, and to keep competitors on the defensive. Business goals such as these can be readily translated into business objectives (increase sales volume by 20 percent; attract at least two of the Medill School’s top marketing graduates; raise the stock price to $35 per share and keep it there through the rest of the year; gain market share against the competition, and so on).

Business objectives such as these can also be translated into measurable PR objectives. For example, each of these themes is directed to a particular audience, whether it is the consumer marketplace, employees and prospective employees, or Wall Street analysts, investors and financial reporters. What is more, each of these audiences can be the focus of communication outreach seeking to stimulate a point of view that the company and its audiences alike would consider to be mutually favorable.

The process by which one sets PR objectives that tie in with the organization’s overall business goals begins with knowing and understanding them before setting PR objectives. Before confirming the perceptions and preferences of your executives via the first Executive Audit, you can find this information on the organization’s Web site, in its annual report, its employee newsletter, and the like. Using what was defined earlier as “secondary research,” you could begin simply by identifying and listing your organization’s goals and objectives, and then accompanying each of the overall goals and objectives with a corollary PR objective.

Once the business’s goals and objectives are viewed as the environment that helps to shape PR objectives, the next step is to gain an understanding of how other communications disciplines within the organization are interpreting business objectives toward their own advertising, promotions, or other marketing and communication objectives. Reach out to leaders in these areas to learn more about how they interpret the way the organization’s business goals apply to their own endeavors.
Make Sure You Have Buy-In from Senior Management

The Executive Audit, a qualitative research instrument by which perceptions, attitudes, and preferences toward PR can be uncovered. The Executive Audit, which ensures confidentiality to the participants and thereby, a high degree of candor, helps PR people understand how the PR function is viewed within the organization, but it also helps to set objectives in the ways we have described. A structured approach based on the Executive Audit assures that you find out everything you need to know. Show key executives all three sets of goals and objectives: business goals, business objectives, and the corresponding PR objectives, and then discuss them, refine them, and get agreement. Confirm your understanding of the business goals and objectives of the organization as well as of the target audiences, the time frame, and the actions and activities, long-term objectives, and subordinate short-term objectives . . . in other words, double-check on each of the objectives discussed in this paper.

But before cutting your PR objectives in stone, it is important to confirm one additional level of understanding, and that is how executives currently view the PR operation and how they will evaluate your success. The Executive Audit is structured to deliver on three dimensions: what is important for PR to deliver, the extent to which the PR department delivers on these standards now, and finally, the extent to which the PR department delivers compared to competitors. The answers to these questions will round out the objective-setting process, and they will guide PR planning so that the results address the measures agreed to at this preliminary stage.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, some PR people prefer to handicap their company’s or their client’s PR program rather than taking the risk of putting hard, measurable objectives in place so that they can be scientifically evaluated later. They’d rather have their managers or their clients not know for sure if the program succeeded or failed than risk jeopardizing their standing. I would argue that one’s refusal to set specific goals are a form of malpractice, especially when you consider the affordable new tools at ones disposal, newfound recognition and the still huge upside for PR and the increasing scope of activities for which PR people are now held responsible. But then again, responsibility is also borne by those who fund PR programs. Until those executives who invest in PR programs demand solid, specific, measurable objectives, change is unlikely to come. And as long as so many practitioners within the public relations profession avoid the establishment of serious, scientific objectives, they will continue to find themselves searching for their seat at the decision-making table in a state of limbo marked by uncertainty and anxiety.

If you are investing in public relations, you have a right to ask some hard questions. What is more, you have the right to expect a detailed explanation of how the answers to each question were determined.

Questions Every PR Investment Decision Maker Should Ask

• Are our PR objectives related to our business goals and objectives? How was this determined?
• Have we set our objectives using a clean-slate approach? How?
• Are our objectives meaningful, reasonable, and measurable? How so?
• Have we segmented long-term and short-term objectives? How so?
• Do our objectives specify outputs, outcomes, and business results?
• Have we identified the optimal audience?
• Has everyone with a stake in the game signed off on the objectives?
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