Examining the PR Measurement Challenge

By Rebekah Iliff, Chief Strategy Officer, AirPR

Albert Einstein once said, "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them."

Imagine trying to invent a light bulb with a match.

Or cure malaria with a rampant mosquito.

The "problem" with PR has always been, and will always be, understanding how on earth the investments made in it map to quantifiable business outcomes; and ultimately, how PR efforts affect the customer, who in turn are the ones supporting the business.

In other words: Measurement.

Today, companies are largely data-driven, and this requires us to look at solving the PR measurement problem in a different way than we did five or ten years ago. If we attempt to measure PR at the level where it was created, in the messaging and communication tactics themselves, we will fail miserably

because we are missing a huge piece of the pie.

We cannot measure PR success by headline impressions, or story placements, or (God forbid) advertising value equivalencies. These outcomes do not get us any closer to solving the real problem, which is answering the question of "how does this translate to business value, and what is the customer getting out it?" Instead, this current way of thinking pulls us back to the source of the PR activity itself, which isn't a metric. It's an output from a specified task.

PR Measurement Inquiry

In order to understand the "what shall we measure?" behind PR measurement, we must first begin by asking the most accurate questions which will get us closer to solving the problem.

The question isn't:

What publication will give me the most headline impressions?

Rather, it is:

What publication has the highest probability of reaching my target audience and getting them to take some sort of action?

Or:

What publication will tell my story in a compelling way so that customers understand my value proposition?

Once the appropriate questions have been posed, PR measurement outcomes should be quantified using metrics like:

#1 – Do customers understand what value we offer through the stories we are telling? >>*Are they sharing stories, engaging with content, or commenting on the posts?*

#2 – Are customers (or potential customers) taking actions that signal they are interested in purchasing our product or service? >> *Are they visiting our website, downloading*

materials, signing up for demos, or making an actual purchase?

#3 — Are people talking about us positively? If not, what are they saying? >> *What is the tone of the reactions to our stories and how do we collect important feedback?*

#4 — How do we compare to innovators or incumbents in our space? >> *What is our share of voice and power of voice and are we even on the competitive playing field?*

Ultimately, PR is about listening carefully and telling stories in order to reach a particular audience or customer segment. Gone are the days when it was enough to wave around a story in the New York Times and say: "Look, we did it! Our job is done here."

Instead, we are now armed with data that can get us closer to solving the problem of "how PR translates to value for the business."

PR Measurement Technology

PR measurement technology solutions (of which there are many) are merely a conduit to solving the problem. You need them in order to automate activities that pull you (the PR professional) away from critical thinking, relationship building, storytelling, and strategic planning. But you also need to ensure that these technologies ask the correct questions to begin with in order to solve *your* problem.

If you have massive amounts of data but no real way to apply it, you are basically swimming up shit creek without a paddle.

How do you ensure your PR measurement technology is going to empower you, rather than just create more work for you or arm you with big numbers and fancy pictures?

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Am I getting access to information that I can't find otherwise?
2. Is this information allowing me to understand the impact of my PR efforts in a clear and concise manner?
3. Does this technology provide me with insights that can help me make better decisions about future PR efforts?
4. Do I feel empowered by this technology or am I confused and frustrated?

As we stand squarely at the center of an industry that is being driven — for better or worse — by new technological advancements, we are required to challenge the status quo, learn new modes and methods for our profession, and ultimately change "business as usual."

In other words we cannot solve the PR measurement problem at the same level where it was created: With PR. We must apply other areas of expertise (data science, analytics, etc.) in order to reach a solution.

About the Author: Rebekah Iliff is the Chief Strategy Officer for AirPR, a technology platform to increase PR performance. She is currently a columnist for Mashable, Inc., and Entrepreneur, and her contributing writing can be seen in everything from Forbes to the Huffington Post. Additionally, Rebekah frequently moderates and participates on panels focused on the future of PR and big data. In 2014, Rebekah was named by Dell as a "Dell Influencer" and has been asked to sit on industry panels and think tanks dedicated to innovation, technology trends, PRTech, and social good. In 2015, Onalytica, the leading influencer relationship management software company, cited her as one of the Top 100

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