



## Evidence Based Research

In this fifth and final article about The Future of Strategic Communication, we're wading hip-deep into the topic of evidence-based research that supports the role of communication as a key business driver. The burning question is: Are we proving it to the satisfaction of business leaders?

Research and measurement is not new to the communication profession. How we determine our impact on business results has been studied, researched and debated for decades. One among several notable academic experts in the field, Professor Tom Watson of Bournemouth University in the United Kingdom published [The Evolution of Public Relations Measurement and Evaluation](#) in 2012, tracking the efforts of the profession to quantify results back to the 1920s.

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In 2011, another leading authority, Jim Macnamara PhD, FPRIA, FAMI, CPM, FAMEC published a white paper written on [PR Metrics: How to Measure Public Relations and Corporate Communication](#). He said "Research before a communication campaign or activity to inform planning is termed formative research, while research to measure effectiveness is termed evaluative research. Evaluative research was originally thought to be conducted after a communication campaign or activity. However, Best Practice [sic] thinking . . . indicates that measurement and evaluation should begin early and occur throughout communication projects and programs as a continuous process. Undertaken this way, formative and evaluative research inter-relate and merge."

It wasn't until the 1970s when demonstrating the value of our work became a significant topic of discussion. Since then there's been no shortage of academic white papers written about research and measurement, and they're filled with the detailed work of academics that's typically hard to follow. Within the content of this article, we hope to make sense of what all this means to communication professionals.

In 1992, after seven years of research, [James Grunig](#) and the IABC Research Foundation published Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management. James Grunig is a noted public relations theorist with over 20 years of experience in the field. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1968 and is Professor Emeritus for the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland.

His 600-page book presented insights on how communication makes an organisation more effective, and sought to answer another critical question: What is that contribution worth, economically? Grunig was not able to definitively answer that question; a challenge we continue to face today.

However, he did offer some critical observations about the structure and depth of communication research. The "Excellence Study" defined five levels of analysis:

- > Products, channels and messages
- > Programs and campaigns
- > Function
- > Organization
- > Societal

As a profession, we are in pretty good shape overall on the first two counts. Communication professionals know how to measure Grunig's first two levels of research: products, channels and messages, and programs and campaigns. These levels of analysis are based on our ability to determine communication outputs and outcomes.

## Communication Outputs and Outcomes

It's common practice to measure the value of communication in outputs (volume-based) and outcomes (impact on awareness, understanding, opinion and shifts in audience behaviour). The former is a leading indicator generally measuring volume and not influence on business results. Examples include the number of people attending an event, number of hits on a website and the volume of media coverage. While these numbers are indicators, they are not in and of themselves results.

Outcomes are lagging indicators measuring whether the audience received, understood

and retained the message, and whether communication has influenced changes in knowledge, attitude and behaviour. Delivering outcomes is a little tricky because you must first have all your ducks in a row. Research as an input to strategic planning is the basis for establishing meaningful, measurable objectives, and deliberately measuring against them. In other words, benchmarks. Examples of outcome-based results include increased awareness and understanding and demonstrated shifts in attitudes and behaviour that are aligned with the the business need.

Some lagging indicators, particularly those tracked against marketing communication campaigns that demonstrate increases in sales and new and repeat customers can be quantified to the bottom line. Others that measure increased awareness and understanding require a leap of faith as they cannot be measured in dollars and cents, only increased brand and reputation awareness.

Evaluation of the functional, organisation and societal impact of strategic communication have not fared so well, and herein lies the next challenge for our profession.

Grunig (2008) defined this as "the public relations department's participation in the strategic management of the organization, measurement of relationships and the intangible assets, and perhaps tangible assets, created by those relationships that the organization has with its publics and stakeholders and the measurement of social responsibility that organizations have to the welfare of society." Quite a mouthful, but what does it mean in practical terms?

## Evidence-based research at the function level

At the function level it means a holistic approach to strategic communication management aligned with business needs, taking into account audience analysis, researching, planning and implementing strategy in partnership with stakeholders. It includes several communication programs targeted at different audiences, and positions communication as a core activity and a strategic driver of business results. Grunig says, "The overall function might not be effective unless it is integrated into the overall management processes of an organization and has chosen appropriate publics and objectives for individual programs."

The criteria laid out by the "Excellence Study" is based on a number of key elements of knowledge and professionalism within the communication department and the support of senior management.

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### Functional elements:

- > Empowerment through participation in strategic management
- > Access to key decision-makers
- > Strategic planning and evaluation of communication programs
- > Communication as a management function not a technical support, on par with other management functions such as marketing, human resources and finance
- > Integration of all communication programs
- > Practicing two-way communication to build relations between the organisation and its audiences

This level of research requires an audit of the communication function to compare its structure and processes with those of similar departments in other organisations or research based on theoretical principles. Is the communication function organised in a way that offers maximum benefit to the organisation and society?

When the communication function is at the heart of the organisation it becomes part of the so-called "dominant coalition" or part of the decision-making executive group. When communication is part of this group its work is measured against the ability to contribute to business outcomes.

### Evidence-based research at the organisational level

The organisational level focuses on the contribution that communication makes to the overall effectiveness of the organisation. It's grounded in relationship building, integrating "the organisation's goals and behaviours with the expectations and needs of its strategic publics." (Grunig)

At this level, communication builds long-term

relationships with the organisation's audiences. Research evaluates and monitors the quality of these relationships. In simple terms it means managing communication to build relationships using research to identify critical audiences that can help the organisation succeed. This type of research is ongoing, part of the way that communication department operates on a regular basis. [Read more about Grunig's analysis of organisational level research.](#)

### Evidence-based research at the societal level

This level of research is complex and multi-layered. It focuses on identifying the cumulative effect of communication at the program, functional and organisation levels against the long-term impact of good relationships.

Research at the societal level refers to evaluations of the contribution that organisations make to the overall well-being of society. It's no secret that organisations have an impact beyond their own mandate and business priorities. They serve customers, stakeholders and other businesses, and reach into the overall well-being of society as a whole.

Picture a pebble thrown into a still pond of water that causes a ripple effect. See the concentric circles causing waves. Now think of that pebble as a business decision, and each ripple as a stakeholder group or audience. At the outer ring of the circle is society. There is a communication implication for every business decision because large or small, it affects an audience group.

In addition to evaluating the quality of relationships against societal needs, this level of research evaluates the ethics and social responsibility practices of the organisation, creating a role for communication professionals to serve as ethics advisors to management.

Grunig's research underscores two key questions:

1. "To what extent has the public relations (communication) staff helped management address the consequences the organization has had on publics and addressed the needs of publics?"
2. To what extent has the public relations (communication) staff carried out its moral obligation to communicate with and disclose the organization's behavior to publics

when it has consequences on them or the public expects consequences from the organisation?"

[Get the full discussion.](#)

Best practice strategic communication management incorporates all five levels of research as part of the intrinsic nature of the work that communication professionals do. Far beyond tactical delivery, the strategic underpinnings of our work are essential to the success of organisations and of society as a whole.

Given this significant responsibility, we leave you with one question: Are you ready to take on the challenge of integrating these five levels of research into your practices, proving that communication is a critical business driver?



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