How did the campaign go? Strange though it may seem, this is a question you have to think about during the initial planning stage of your campaign. Crossing your fingers, taking a deep breath and hoping for the best are not acceptable.

The very process of thinking about how you are going to evaluate and measure the proposed outcomes has the salutary effect of scrutinising the plan’s strategy and tactics with your eyes wide open.

Implementing a campaign is not an exact science; it is not possible, given the numerous factors that could affect the outcomes, to state precisely how successful or otherwise it will be. As a PR practitioner, you understand this. Unfortunately there may be others in your organisation who do not, especially those involved in handling finance and administration.

So how do you cope with this? The best way is to incorporate some measurement systems into your plan against which you can evaluate the outcomes.
1 Evaluation measures

Result (or out-take) objectives

Research and surveys

As part of your plan, there is a strong argument for carrying out a survey or audit of the target audience to gather their opinions, awareness and acceptance of a campaign’s key messages before the campaign is launched. Your plan can then include a proposal to conduct a similar survey after certain milestones in a campaign have been reached to evaluate how successful or otherwise it has been in effecting a change in the target audience. Sometimes this is done with focus groups; alternatively it may involve a wider group of staff, key influencers, services users, clients, investors or customers.

While there may be a case for sending out questionnaires to certain target audiences, you must take account of whether enough people will respond to make the findings truly representative of the audience. Relying on – and perhaps giving too much weight to – reactions expressed via electronic means is also not advisable. There is a place for encouraging reactions through websites, blogs and other online and social media, but they have a tendency to attract more critics than supporters. A more personal approach, either face to face or via the telephone, is likely to result in a more realistic representation of their views.

Output objectives

Media analysis

Not long ago, media analysis was assumed to mean collating cuttings and mentions in the media. But the process has become increasingly sophisticated in recent years, perhaps as a reaction to tougher demands on the public relations profession to prove the effectiveness of its work. There is even a specific organisation, the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication – [www.amecorg.com](http://www.amecorg.com) – which provides specialist help. The aim is to evaluate both the quantity and quality of the media coverage – print, broadcast and online.

Remember that the evaluation must match your overall objectives, messages, target audiences, target media, and so on. The key factors to consider in your plan include:

- Which media covered the issue?
- What was its audience in terms of size and demographics?
- Which of your target audiences did it reach?
- Which of your key messages did it communicate?
- Which of your objectives did it contribute to?
- How positive was it?
- How accurate was it?
- How negative was it?
- How inaccurate was it?
• What was the reaction to it?
• Where did it appear or was it repeated in other (especially online) media or other forums?
• Was the coverage picked up and reacted to by other media?

If the budget allows, your plan should recommend the use of a specialist media evaluation company to carry out this work, as it will be seen as objective.

Outcome objectives

Measuring campaign outcomes

You may be able to measure and evaluate the success during and after your campaign by looking at the following:
• sales figures
• changes in behaviour
• voting patterns and numbers
• website hits
• enquiries.

However, it is difficult to isolate the impact of a PR campaign from other factors that may influence these measures, for example, advertising or other promotional activities not associated with the campaign.

Direct client and customer reaction

Apart from conducting surveys before and after a campaign, part of your evaluation is likely to focus on the reactions of specific audiences during the course of the campaign. Tracking website hits is an obvious one to include. This is particularly relevant when you have set up a new website, perhaps linked to your main one, to promote the campaign. Hopefully it will be interactive and encourage comments. Again, be aware that such sites have an unsettling tendency to attract more negative than positive feedback.

Similarly, your organisation may have other systems to encourage communications from specific audiences, such as hotlines, call centres, online customer and service user ‘How did you find it?’ forms.

2 The importance of ongoing evaluation

Resource management

Ongoing evaluation is an important part of your campaign as it will help you to review activities and therefore keep the campaign on time and on budget. It should also give you fair warning of any issues or changes so you can adapt your plans accordingly.
Adding value

PR versus advertising

The person in charge of the finances of an organisation is likely to resent money spent on anything other than what they see as the essential focus of your organisation, i.e. the product or service, the staff, shareholders and the investors. They are very likely to be lobbied by those who advocate that all or most of this budget should be spent on advertising and those who argue for it to be devoted to your public relations campaign.

As a PR professional you need to be prepared to argue for your campaign plan. You will have to admit that unlike in an advert you cannot guarantee that all the words written in your PR materials will be reproduced, or reproduced accurately, in media. However ongoing evaluation should provide you with information to support how your PR campaign is adding value and contributing to organisational goals. Hold your nerve! How often have you read an advert and thought ‘Wonderful! I'm totally persuaded!’ and how often have you seen a mention of an organisation, person, service or product in editorial coverage and thought ‘That’s interesting!’? Sir Martin Sorrell, chief executive of the WPP Group, said: ‘All research I've seen says that editorial publicity is better than paid-for publicity’.

Measuring value

Ongoing evaluation should provide opportunities to show how the PR campaign adds value to at least one of the measures listed in the Outcome objectives section on page 3. Being able to show where value has been added may also allow you to show how the campaign contributes to wider organisational goals and objectives.

Return on investment

PR campaigns for commercial organisations should generate a good return on investment (ROI). This means that for every £1 spent on the campaign, more than £1 will have been generated for the organisation in revenue. Ongoing evaluation of how an organisation’s finances are affected by the PR campaign will allow ROI to be calculated.

Activity

Look through a national newspaper and spot:

- how many adverts impressed you enough to consider buying or looking into the products/services further
- how many mentions of products/services in media coverage had a similar effect.
Portfolio activity

Following on from the previous Portfolio activities in Topic Guide 6.1, page 18, and Topic Guide 6.2, page 17, focus on the same public relations campaign and address the following topics around evaluating campaigns in your presentation or report.

1. Assess the methods used to evaluate public relations campaigns, including how these assessed the success of a campaign against the original SMART objectives.

2. Conclude your presentation or report with a discussion of the importance of ongoing evaluation of public relations campaigns and what PR professionals can do to identify early successes and areas for improvement to help make a campaign more successful.

Further reading

Books


Websites

The Financial Times www.ft.com

Economist Conferences www.economistconferences.co.uk

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) www.cbi.org.uk

Conference Alerts www.conferencealerts.com

International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) www.amecorg.com

Chartered Institute of Public Relations www.cipr.co.uk

Public Relations Consultants Association www.prca.org.uk
About the author

Sheila Gunn MBE was a journalist for over 20 years, including 12 years on the political staff of The Times, before becoming political press spokesman for the then Prime Minister, John Major. After the 1997 general election, she was appointed head of European PR at Healey & Baker (now Cushman & Wakefield). She later moved to the strategic communications consultancy Fleishman-Hillard as associate director. She has also served as a councillor in Camden and stood as a parliamentary candidate in the 2005 general election.

She is now an adjunct professor at Syracuse University, teaching public relations at the London faculty. She is also a visiting lecturer at City University’s journalism department and works with presidential and parliamentary candidates in developing countries. In 2010 she produced the textbook, So You Want to be a Political Journalist.