



Using a balanced set of measures to focus on long-term competency in internal communication

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ABSTRACT

To advance our knowledge on measurement efforts in internal communication, this paper presented the findings from two research projects related to how we can measure the effectiveness of organizations' internal communication initiatives and their contributions to organizations' business performance. Integrated findings from in-depth interviews and a content analysis suggested that although limited financial metrics have been applied to the evaluation process, traditional measurement approaches such as feedback survey, focus group, and qualitative analysis have been widely used. Measurement efforts in employee communication have been largely focusing on employee participation, engagement, satisfaction, and productivity. The paper was concluded with suggested implications for corporate communication measurement challenges.

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1. Introduction

The measurement of internal communication at the financial level attracts increasing attention as the organization moves toward excellence and efficiency. As a crucial feature to the success of organizational sustainable development and financial performance, communication effectiveness has been a promising topic in the fields of organizational behaviors, business management, and communication consulting in recent years (Rust, Ambler, Carpenter, Kumar, & Srivastava, 2004; Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2004). Organizations and institutional communication professions have been continuing exploring effective measurement metrics for their communication initiatives, focusing on how communication practices can be effectively linked to improved financial performance at the organizational level (Broom & Dozier, 1983; Dozier & Ehling, 1992; Meng & Berger, *in press*; Watson, 2012).

Such research seems especially important today as the industry is becoming highly competitive and turbulent and is constantly changing. When the conditions in the industry itself move from being simple to complex, from stable to dynamic, it is crucial for communication professionals to accurately respond to changing situations, in a way that both organizations and clients perceive communication efforts that better fit their needs (Schultz, 2002; Taylor, 2010). Organizations with greater reliance on effective communications will be able to achieve better return on their efforts and improve their performance (e.g., Hurley & Hult, 1998; Narayanan, Desiraju, & Chintagunta, 2004; Powell, 1995; Rust, Lemon, et al., 2004). Although continuous research efforts on the phenomenon of effective measurement in corporate communications in the new century have led to a generic agreement that communication effectiveness has been one of the leading indicators of organization's business performance, it is still very challenging for communication professionals to establish and solidify a set of metrics

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as the main evidence of profits and revenue from communication initiatives. As a consequence, it may reduce the value of communication as a sustainable source of competitive advantage for organizations.

Therefore, to better understand how senior communication executives and their teams measure their internal communications efforts, the researchers analyzed and reported key research findings from two studies relevant to the measurement of internal communication effectiveness. The first study was designed as a preliminary step in investigating this subject by conducting in-depth interviews with 13 Gold Quill award recipients. All interviewed award recipients are currently senior communication executives in diverse organizations. Interview results revealed senior communication executives' experiences and insights about measurement challenges in their communication practices, specifically within the scope of employee/member communication. The second study analyzed the program statements of 75 Gold Quill award winning cases in the category of employee/member communication from 2004 to 2008. The results reflected major, as well as diverse approaches communication teams have used to measure how their communication strategies create value for current activities and future performance. The results from the two projects were synthesized to identify and generalize themes and trends in measuring corporate communications.

2. Research methods

This study combines two perspectives in investigating measurement challenges in internal communication. First, a preliminary qualitative investigation adopts a ground-theory perspective (Goulding, 2005) to gain insights into the ways senior corporate communication executives view measurement challenges that foster or hamper the institutional communication teams' efforts in developing and implementing communication initiatives. To avoid ethnocentric tendencies, this preliminary research includes senior corporate communication executives who were not only the Gold Quill award recipients in 2004–2008 but also are currently working in different countries/regions (such as Brazil, Canada, Mexico, and the U.S.) with diverse institutional conditions. Institutional conditions likely vary with levels of development in the public relations and/or corporate communication industry, which commands the use of communication strategies emphasizing on different levels of business. Moreover, previous studies suggest that the overall advancement of the public relations industry in different economic priorities and societal expectations influences communication team's strategies and organizational leader's view of public relations value (Duhé & Sriramesh, 2009). Second, a content analysis of the Gold Quill award winners in 2004–2008 further advances our knowledge in measurement efforts and perceived challenges in measuring internal communication by presenting the findings identified from those award-winning cases.

2.1. Preliminary research: in-depth interviews

In-depth interviews involved thirteen senior corporate communication executives in different countries: six from the U.S., five in Canada, one from Mexico, and one from Brazil. The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation helped the researchers recruit participants from their database of the Gold Quill award recipients. All participants were the Gold Quill award recipients in the category of "employee/member communication" in 2004–2008. In addition, all participants have worked in corporate communication or related areas for more than 15 years. Their areas of job responsibilities include employee communication, strategic planning, public affairs, and reputation management. They either have used diverse measurement approaches to assess their award-winning programs or have worked for diverse projects that carried out different communication initiatives.

Interviews followed an interview guide questioning organization's application of measurement approaches in evaluating internal communication programs. Questions probed their daily practices with evaluation design, important issues and aspects to measure in practice, major measurement methods used, and current obstacles to advancing measurement efforts. Interviews lasted up to 35 min, were audio recorded and transcribed by two independent transcribers. The exploratory nature of the preliminary research has made purposive sampling, with the goal of high levels of heterogeneity in experience, suitable to gain preliminary insights into the issues of interest and generate relevant coding categories for the content analysis. With the focus on shared aspects of measurement challenges in the respective countries, the researchers argued that sample equivalence should not be an issue of concern.

In the interviews, all senior communication executives confirmed that effective measures are powerful resources for them and the communication team to leverage the value of communication practices in the organization and/or for the client. Participants agreed that measuring the effectiveness of internal communication initiatives should be part of standard operating practice in the organization. Using effective measures to relate communication practice to business results can help the communication team address proficiency and develop relevant strategies to support further actions. Seeing evaluation as their daily job and forcing engagement in measurement actually help convince organizational leaders or clients about the validity of measurement and the benefits communication strategies can bring to them. All participants agreed that it is very critical to chart the progress and quantify the impact of any communication campaigns.

When asked to describe the most effective measurement approach they have used to evaluate various internal communication programs, most participants have suggested that it is more important to focus on outcome measures rather than unified methods. Based on the discussion, the researchers have identified that there are five aspects on the outcome side being measured for different communication programs regularly, which include (1) increased awareness or understanding of the communication program, (2) better concentrated employee engagement, (3) improved job productivity and

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