

Developing a measurement strategy with impact

By Alison Boothby

Demonstrating the commercial value of your internal communications function to the business through rigorous measurement has never been more important. In a climate where proving value is the norm, it pays to be choosy about what we measure.

At a packed London venue on Tuesday 30th April, some 30+ senior communicators came together to share their thinking on measuring the success of communications. Jean Burke of [Esensia Communications](#), who specialises in the research and measurement of communications, led the session and challenged those present to demonstrate the commercial value of internal communications to a business through rigorous measurement and value-adding activities. “It’s not rocket science,” she claims, “But where are the great case studies that demonstrate the clear business case for an internal communications function? If we are serious about IC as a professional management function, it’s imperative that we genuinely believe in what we deliver and can back that up with the numbers.”

Measure what matters

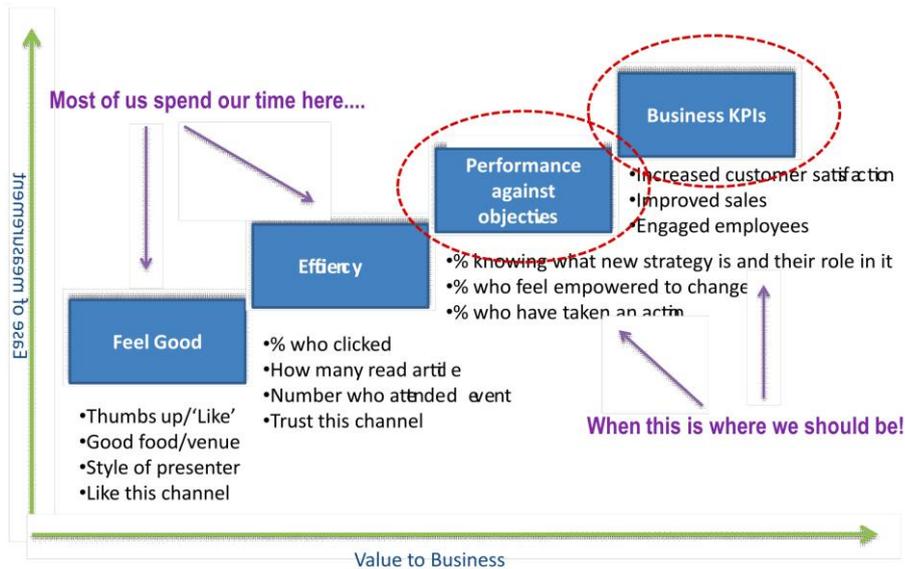
With only about four in ten organisations using measurement findings in planning future communication initiatives and making business decisions (Towers Watson ROI study 2012) there’s a clear opportunity for communicators to set themselves apart by making sure they can demonstrate that their communications add value. Independent IC consultant, Joanne Delecroix, picks up this point: “Whatever our role or goals in an organisation, we need to understand how effective we’re being. Measurement is clearly well understood for all the tangible, financial KPIs. It should be exactly the same for communication, except that, as we know, communication is embedded in everything the organisation is and everything it does, so separating out cause and effect is tricky.”

The question of what exactly to measure will depend on the organisation, but as well as hard metrics there’s great value in the qualitative data too, as Virginia Hicks, Director of [Comma Partners](#) (who hosted the event) commented: “When I worked in-house I found the feedback from regular pulse style commentary and focus groups across the business to be hugely insightful to bring real colour to the numbers.”

But the things that most communication departments are very good at measuring are not necessarily the things that drive business performance. Burke’s Measurement Step Ladder (below) sets this out clearly.



The measurement step ladder



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“The distinction between the lower levels of efficiency measurement and the upper levels of value adding measurement is so easily understood from this model. It was incredibly useful to distinguish between being able to articulate if the channels are working (is there traffic, do people like it) to how we are delivering value as a profession to the bottom line goals of the organisation. I was encouraged that, even if not always successful, we do seem to be trying to move in that direction,” explains Helen Kelley, an internal communication consultant in the public and private sectors.

Presenting the uncomfortable truth

From the lively discussion at the event, there’s no lack of good intention yet to be able to really add value and demonstrate worth, communication specialists must be prepared to have those difficult conversations with the senior team. Being excellent at delivering the efficiency measures goes some way to earning the licence to be a ‘trusted adviser’ and this is where you need to be operating to be truly effective in delivering business advantage.

For many in house teams, this is not where they are – yet. “Political interests and leadership cultures can affect the level of transparency the senior team are comfortable with and this can certainly hamper attempts to measure the things that matter. As senior level communicators, “it’s our job to be courageous and commercial about it and make those tricky conversations happen,” advises Burke.

Jeremy Hicks, Director of Mayfly Consulting and Freelance Account Director at The Loop Internal Communications Agency agrees: “It’s essential to be braver in today’s market place.

Communications is playing a larger part in organisations than ever before and by acting as business partners - not internal service providers - communicators can earn their place amongst senior leaders.”

From Rob Briggs, who has experience of working in large, complex organisations, there’s a word of caution: “As well as defining your objective measurement criteria – your project milestones, for example – it’s vital to understand the stakeholder agenda. Consider your stakeholders and how



you expect them to use the data you'll provide; ensure you understand how to present the data and how your stakeholders like to receive news; will your stakeholders know how to accurately interpret the data? And do you know how they intend to make use of it? Armed with answers to these questions, you can frame your findings in a way that focuses on the right business issues for the relevant stakeholders. The result should be constructive and action focused."

Briggs' point about upfront stakeholder management is well demonstrated in this case in point: An executive in a large company commissioned an independent study into workplace behaviour. He genuinely believed there were business issues to be uncovered and addressed. However, when he was presented with the results, he was upset and came close to shelving the study. Why?

The study contained some uncomfortable points about the culture of the company - and yet the executive had spent years trying to fix the culture and had earned good employee opinion survey scores. To him, the data contradicted what he had been told elsewhere. What was worse was that the majority of the data in this survey *was actually positive*. The consultant reporting it back had chosen to focus on the negative points, the points that needed fixing, without acknowledging the plus points. And that seriously put his nose out of joint.

Reframing the data to confirm the good as well as confronting the issues slowly helped to change his mind. The study was eventually acted upon, but it had been a close shave.

Maximising impact

"There is no point in measuring anything unless there is commitment to do something with the findings," explains Keely Nugent, Director at [The Key 2](#). "And that commitment has to come from the very top of the organisation. Measurement is a means to an end. As communicators we need to help an organisation understand better what issues are helping and hindering business performance. We are the conduit through which the leadership team can discover what's working well and what needs attention and that means first and foremost we need to understand the business and its strategic priorities. We have to set our own egos aside and be prepared to find out the truth – even if that might be hard to swallow."

"Choosing a few critical, high stake business KPIs and focusing on a smaller number of important things to measure is the right approach to take for maximising impact," suggests Burke.

"Considering research methods, sample size, feedback mechanisms and the balance of data and dialogue are all necessary. Then, get in front of the senior stakeholders and tell them the story – backed up with data."

Hicks says, "Interims and consultants have a significant role to play in helping boost the reputation of internal communication as a function. Rightly or wrongly, greater value is sometimes afforded to an external specialist who, having their own back catalogue of experience and success, can earn themselves the 'licence' to have the strategic conversations with leadership teams and use well selected measurement to track progress on key business objectives. They can say with confidence, 'Trust me: I've done it before and it works.'"

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Comma Partners provides internal and change communications managers to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686 or visit www.commapartners.com.