



Present-Tense Measurement

With AMMO, You Don't Have to Wait to Have
Measurement Influence Planning

By Sean Williams

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PR measurement, quite rightly, is receiving more attention than ever before in our profession. Our practice is gradually weaning itself from bogus measures like Ad Value Equivalency (AVE) and overreliance on output metrics in favor of more substantive cognitive, affective and behavioral measures. What persists, however, is a tendency to see measurement as a retrospective tool, a way of evaluating efficacy in the rearview mirror, proving our worth after the fact. While this approach is understandable, it perpetuates a rather limited view of its power.

For example, measurement can also serve as a means of gathering intelligence to inform strategy and planning. The Institute for Public Relations' commission on the subject actually uses three different terms to describe the various applications of these skills and tactics: research (prior to planning), measurement (during the campaign or activity) and evaluation (following completion of the campaign).

One way to approach this question of measurement is to use the AMMO model — audiences, messages, methods and objectives — a simplified planning outline that offers ample opportunity to bring measurement to bear at the outset of a communication planning cycle.

You can arrange the AMMO terms into a two-by-two box, moving from audiences to objectives to messages to methods. This ensures strategic alignment and a practical outline for proceeding. Here's how it works:

- **Audiences:** Ideally, we'd start with an exhaustive outline of the relevant stakeholders, the groups of people (and even individuals) with whom we need to build effective relationships through communication. The use of the term "audiences" might imply one-way or asymmetrical communications, but not necessarily.

Dr. Brad Rawlins of Arkansas State University states that using a disciplined means of evaluating and prioritizing stakeholders by their relationship to the organization, messages or issues ensures that attention is being paid correctly and strategically. Measuring the strength of the relationship between organization and audience at the outset makes for more effective planning. The work of Dr. Linda Childers Hon and Dr. James Grunig also offers a flexible approach that is easily adaptable to measuring relationships.

- **Objectives:** The centerpiece of effective measurement is the objective. It should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound. Generally speaking, good objectives should read like this: "Change this metric by this much over the following time period." Merely saying "improve awareness" is far too general. Awareness is a valid metric, but to be measurable it must be quantifiable in some fashion. That means having a benchmark, a target and a time frame. Comparing communication objectives to business objectives for proper fit is another measurement tactic that is important for planning.

- **Messages:** A message map or architecture is often seen as

immutable, but examining several aspects of message strategy should be more common than it is. Just as business as a whole is dynamic and changeable, your messages should be too. To what extent have they resonated with your intended audiences? Are people aware of them? Do people know which messages apply to them?

In internal communications, these questions are critical. Measuring the knowledge of and belief in these messages can lead to rethinking a host of communication strategies.

- **Methods:** Evaluating the effectiveness of specific communication activities in some ways has never been easier. Between comprehensive and formal means of marketing mix modeling, focus groups, interviews and Web metrics, organizations are not at a loss for data about their communications.

The costs associated with the most formal methods can be significant, but many less complex and expensive means of measurement can be brought to bear with great effect prior to final planning. Looking at methods from the specific audience's point of view, for example, may yield important information that needs to be accounted for in your plan.

What might be the impact of knowing your current AMMO situation before you start writing your plan?

Global manufacturer sees improved collaboration

As an internal communications leader at a large global manufacturer, I used leadership interviews to determine the current strengths and weaknesses of the company's internal communications programming. These brief discussions, held over a period of several weeks, revealed that many systems and nearly all content were mainly North American and quite headquarters-specific, even though the company desired to promulgate a more global image and message across its employee base. Manager communication was uneven from business to business and location to location. There was little understanding of the strategic role internal communications could play in the company and little recent history of it having an impact.

The insights from the meetings informed several items in the new communication strategy, including an editorial plan that put a premium on increasing internal news from across the globe, a reporting schema to share with senior leadership, improvements in employee use of communication tools (such as the intranet) and a way to evaluate employee attitudes and beliefs both through formal surveys and a nonscientific intranet poll. A manager communication program became part of the plan, as upcoming changes in support of Sarbanes-Oxley legislation would require a sweeping set of business conduct and ethics communications.

This was the first communication survey they had conducted in some 10 years, and the questionnaire emerged largely from the leadership interviews, as did the overall strategy for revamping the company's primary intranet. The firm's global footprint and decentralized communication structure had made reform difficult in the past; interview participants had not realized how a more unified corporate vehicle could save time and money. Most important, however, was the way the

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resulting strategy led to improved coordination and collaboration among communication teams in different locations.

Regional bank streamlines communications

At a major regional financial services company, interviews with leadership set the stage for more effective planning during the financial crisis, as siloed communication structures led to duplicative efforts and poor communication between headquarters and the lines of business. A summit meeting of communicators fostered common goals and a shared approach, starting with improved communication and leading to coordination and collaboration, while preserving the independent and entrepreneurial attributes of the communication leadership team.

We had to first agree that we were all on the same page — something that should have been self-evident but wasn't. Informal conversations among communication leads established the primary issues and potential solutions, with development of more formal intrateam communication tactics bringing stronger alignment and improved collaboration.

School uses pre-planning data to establish foundation

A pre-K–12 independent school used previous research among parents and a digital activity audit to inform the plan's development. The prior survey helped to establish initial messaging and gave insight into possible methods of communication. The digital audit revealed that none of the school's competitors stood out with either its website or its use of social channels, bringing additional credibility to plan activities that included improvements to both areas.

During an in-person planning session, participants shared informal observations about existing families, the communities the school served and the administrators themselves, which heightened cooperation and led to increased buy-in on plan recommendations and priorities.

Elegant and simple solutions to planning issues

Enabling measurement prior to planning can be a way to discover traps and pitfalls in the planning process, and it can also improve baseline knowledge. Evaluating current news media or social media content ahead of time, for example, may lessen the risk of reinventing plans that are working just fine, or ignoring plans that aren't.

For internal communicators, there may be a perception that managers do not communicate effectively. Conducting a manager communication audit is often the best way to establish the bona fides in such matters, but getting a quick read on the situation through a brief survey might be more effective, not to mention less costly.

For example, according to one research report, four questions about manager communication activities explained 40

percent of the variance in employee comprehension of strategic messages:

- My manager...
 - o Helps me understand how my performance contributes to our company success
 - o Is positive about the company's prospects for the future
 - o Shares business information with me
 - o Regularly discusses my personal development with me

This type of very short survey can reveal whether the organization has an incipient problem with manager communication or if it is in good shape. Consider the differing strategic needs the answers to these questions might present.

How to measure

There are several ways to start measuring now:

- **Measure impact or value.**
 - o What do people do with your information? Measure the extent to which it is accessed, downloaded, read carefully, understood, believed to be valuable, shared and impactful. This is fairly easy to measure online, but it can also be measured offline through discussions, interviews, focus groups or surveys.
- **Measure activities or channels.**
 - o Which vehicles are most used? Which are most valued? Compare the answers to these questions with internal metrics on usage, attitudes and beliefs.
- **Examine manager behavior.**
 - o Work with human resources to get information about employee attitudes about their managers, such as results of 360-degree reviews. This can be redacted to preserve confidentiality, but it can be a very powerful source of intelligence as you develop your plan.
 - o Survey a sample of managers to determine how frequently they hold staff meetings and informal conversations with their team members. Compare this data with a similar set of questions asking employees about their managers' behavior.
- **Do an abbreviated news content analysis.**
 - o Look only at coverage of you and your two prime competitors, and only in the four most important media outlets for you. Where do you stand?
- **Examine outbound news media calls versus inbound calls.**
 - o What are your ratios of successful media hits from each channel?

Beginning your measurement process just makes sense, especially because it will improve your planning, your strategy and your results. ■



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