Public relations evaluation in Australia: practices and attitudes across sectors and employment status

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Abstract

In 2004 the authors presented their initial findings of a national survey of evaluation practices amongst Australian public relations practitioners who were mostly Public Relations Institute of Australia members. They found a media relations-centric focus. There was an increase in research and evaluation activity, compared with Walker's study in 1993, but the focus remained on outputs, not outcomes of communication. The analysis showed that measurement of public relations causes anguish for many practitioners. This investigation used a cluster analysis technique to examine differences between consultant, government, commercial and non-profit practitioners, the effect of budget size, and the influence of management responsibility on evaluation attitudes and practices. In particular, it compared responses to clusters of questions on evaluation of outcomes and outputs, belief in the measurability of evaluation, and perceptions of barriers to evaluation. It found that all sectors focus on the evaluation of outputs more than outcomes, although government was less likely to evaluate outcomes than the other workplace sectors. Senior managers/directors were more likely to measure outcomes than practitioners with lower level responsibility. Commercial practitioners reported higher levels of pressure from employers to demonstrate results.

The data suggest a commonality of attitudes and practices on evaluation issues across budget size, employment categories and operational sectors that may signify a consolidated picture of Australian attitudes and practices. The attitudes expressed show that industry calls for improved evaluation have been heeded and accepted as important by public relations practitioners, but not generally acted on. Consequently it is argued that further industry attempts to improve evaluation should focus on the value of outcomes rather than outputs, and be supported by a program of support for improving understanding of public relations evaluation among employers and clients.

Introduction

For well over a decade, the evaluation of public relations has been atop the issues that cause concern for practitioners (White & Blamphin, 1994; Watson, 2001). In a study of Australian attitudes conducted in 2003, using a sample drawn mainly from members of Australia's peak public relations professional body, the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), the authors of this paper identified practitioner attitudes in all areas of practice. This study takes a second look at that research on Australian practitioners' evaluation practices and attitudes, examining differences and similarities in evaluation between sub-samples of practitioners, using levels of management responsibility, employment sector and budget size to define the sub-samples.

Data reported earlier (Watson & Simmons, 2004) suggest that despite the attention paid to evaluation by the academy and industry, practitioners still focus on measuring outputs, not outcomes, to demonstrate performance, and continue to rely heavily on media-based evaluation methods.

Research into practitioner attitudes and evaluation practice consistently indicates that that evaluation is perceived as essential to practice but is still talked about more than practised (Gregory, 2001; Judd, 1990). Whereas Center and Jackson (2003) suggest there is an increasing emphasis on measuring program outcomes in terms of impact on publics, a number of studies have established that generally evaluation is restricted to program output (Gregory, 2001; Pohl & Vandeventer, 2001; Walker, 1994; Watson, 1997; Watson & Simmons, 2004; Xavier Johnston & Patel, 2004).

Research into practitioner evaluation usage also reveals that no one country practises evaluation more than another (IPRA, 1994). In Canada, Piekos and Einsiedel (1990) found scientific research methods were seldom used for impact evaluation and similar results were reported by Dozier (1990) who found that the more scientific the style, the less frequently it is used. Two 1993 surveys of Australian practitioners found a substantial gulf between practitioner attitudes and practice (Walker, 1997; and IPRA, 1994). Walker (1997) reported that although most practitioners agreed that research was an accepted part of public relations planning, only 55% of practitioners reported very frequently or occasionally evaluating the impact of their programs. Half of the practitioners surveyed did not believe that they could precisely measure public relations effectiveness (Walker, 1997).

Summarising a series of studies by Dozier, Watson reported a consistent finding that ' ... evaluation of programs increases as the practitioner's management function develops whereas it either plateaus or falls away if he or she has a technician role (writing, media relations, production of communication tools)'(1997, p. 286). Higher management responsibility and desire to prove worth (Watson, 1997) appear to be linked to increased research practice, but the nature of the link remains in doubt. Do evaluators rise to become managers or do people do become evaluators once they become managers?

During the background research for this study the authors met with senior industry figures and discussed other factors that influence evaluation attitudes and practices. All felt that the amount and quality of evaluation would increase with higher budgets. There was interest in, but mixed feelings about, the relationship between industry sector (commercial, government, consultancy and non-profit) and evaluation practices.

In 1994, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) gold paper on public relations evaluation stressed the need for professionals to demonstrate their accountability through evaluation (IPRA, 1994). A decade on, evaluation and accountability are recognised as a strong part of good practice, however, research suggests that practitioners still have limited understanding of the use of evaluation research or restrict its use to particular methodologies (Phillips, 2001; Watson, 2001). Pohl and Vandeventer (2001) found less than half of the respondents identified formal evaluation methods in their campaign plans.

Australian studies (Macnamara, 2002; Walker, 1994, 1997) have found that while practitioners use a mix of evaluative measures, there is a focus on media coverage that lacks sound analysis, and measures to validate program effectiveness are not used. Given the international interest in evaluation practice, this study sought to map contemporary Australian practice, and to consider whether there are differences in practice between sub-samples of practitioners in different sectors and of different employment status.

Research Questions

Three research questions informed the construction of the survey instrument:

(RQ1) What methods of measurement and evaluation are Australian practitioners using to demonstrate performance in public relations activity?

(RQ2) What factors influence the choice of methods of measurement and evaluation used by Australian practitioners to demonstrate performance in public relations activity?

(RQ3) What are the key issues to address in education and other training activity to support improved performance in measurement and evaluation amongst Australian public relations practitioners?

Method

Major studies of evaluation practice have used professional bodies to reach a practitioner sample (see for example, Dozier, 1985; 1988 with the PRSA and IABC; and Watson, 1994; 1996 with the IPR), and used targeted samples of practitioners in prominent organisations (see for example, Lindenmann, 1990, and Walker, 1997).

In consequence of this acknowledged research path in public relations, this study used a two-step research methodology. Public relations practitioners were surveyed to elicit their views on evaluation practice and asked to comment on the key drivers and barriers for evaluation practices.

As noted in the authors' earlier paper, this involved the administration of an online survey of Australian practitioners, based on Watson's (1996) study of United Kingdom practitioners. After completing a series of questions posed on a Likert scale, respondents were asked: Is there anything you would like to add about public relations evaluation and research? The initial findings from the quantitative analysis of practitioner attitudes and some qualitative data have been reported elsewhere (Watson & Simmons, 2004; and Xavier, Johnston, Watson & Simmons, 2005) and are summarized below. Further data from the quantitative analysis is reported here.

Sample

The anonymous practitioner survey was distributed in an online form by the PRIA, which also endorsed the study. An email with a web link to the questionnaire was sent to approximately 2,800 PRIA member email addresses in late 2003. A further 100 members of the Local Government Public Relations Association of Australia were also emailed the survey. The earlier paper reported on the 216 completed surveys received initially, while this paper uses data from 227 completed surveys, including 11 received shortly after the initial data was processed. The 5.1% increase in the sample has not notably changed the profile of the sample.

Data analysis and coding

The first round of statistics used to describe the whole sample was completed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Excel. To make comparisons between the subgroups (management status, workplace sector and size of budget) on a range of variables (outcomes, outputs, belief in measurability, barriers), a cluster analysis technique was used. Statistical tests of significance were performed on differences and among the various subgroups and on each of the measures. Frequency counts and descriptive statistics were calculated for the relevant variables with chi square analyses and ANOVA conducted where appropriate. A t-test assuming unequal variances was performed in the subgroups to detect homogeneous clusters.

Limitations

As noted in Watson and Simmons (2004), distribution of the survey was limited to the members of two industry organisations and thus, is not generalisable to the entire population of Australian practitioners. As participation was voluntary, it is arguable that those with strong views on the topic were more likely to respond. Cameron, Sallot and Curtin (1997) have suggested that samples drawn from a voluntary professional public relations society may represent the views of practitioners who are more idealistic, better-trained and more ambitious than those who are not members. The clusters of questions used to gauge the variables of outcomes, outputs, perceived barriers and belief in measurability of public relations communication were developed without tests of validity or individual item reliability. The wording of some items more precisely reflects the concept labels than others, but were not weighted differently. The items used in the clusters are available on request.

Results for the whole sample

(RQ1) What methods of measurement and evaluation are Australian practitioners using to demonstrate performance in public relations activity?

The initial results for the whole sample are reported more fully in Watson and Simmons (2004) and can be summarised as:

a) Research methods used:
   - (i) Media coverage monitoring and media content analysis dominate the research habits.
   - (ii) More than four out of five practitioners said they often or always use media coverage monitoring (clippings/transcripts and the like) to plan (82%), monitor (88%) and evaluate (87%) public relations communication.
   - (iii) Media coverage monitoring has increased since the 1993 survey by Walker (Walker 1997).

(iv) Media content analysis was the second most frequently used method overall. Some 64% said they often or always use media content analysis to plan, 69% to monitor and 74% to evaluate.

b) Social science methods used:

(i) Practitioners use social science methods, such as surveys and interviews, much less frequently than media-centred techniques.

(ii) Use of surveys appears to be very low, compared with US practice which has surveys as ' … the most commonly used researched methodology today' (Stacks 2002, p. 174).

c) Measures used

(i) The most widely used measures identified by the survey are all output measures, and five of the six lower-ranked measures deal with outcomes. This is consistent with the domination of media-focused methods reported above.

(ii) Media coverage monitoring and media content analysis are the most frequently used research methods.

(iii) The most frequently reported outcome measures were business indicators, such as sales, turnover and costs (44%) followed by measurement of changes in attitude or perception (43%). The often debated output measure Advertising Value Equivalent was the least used measure (26%).

Results for the sub-groups

(RQ2) What factors influence the choice of methods of measurement and evaluation used by Australian practitioners to demonstrate performance in public relations activity?

The results were analysed to identify factors that might be influencing the choice of methods of evaluation. The analysis examined three categories of factor or sub-group variable: workplace sector, management responsibility, and the size of budget normally applied to campaigns or managed annually (in-house respondents).

Each of the sub-groups was then analysed against scores for responses to four clustered sets of items representing attitude and behaviour dimensions of concern to the study. The items used Likert-style 1-5 scales with choices expressed as: Never (1), Rarely (2), Sometimes (3) Often (4) or Always (5), or as Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4) and Strongly Agree (5). A higher score in the cluster indicated more frequent use of the measure or greater agreement with an attitude.

The clusters developed were:

- Frequency of measurement of outcomes:
    - Five items asking the frequency of use of specific outcome measures by the respondent's organisation, for example, 'how often does your organisation measure changes in behaviour resulting from PR communication?'

- Frequency of measurement of outputs:
  - Five items asking the frequency of use of specific output measures by the respondent's organisation, for example, 'in relation to media coverage, how often does your organisation measure inclusion of the organisation's key messages in the media coverage?'

- Perception of barriers to evaluating:
  - Six items asking for level of agreement on statements concerning barriers to evaluation, for example, 'that practitioners often forego evaluation because of lack of time'. In this case the scale was expressed as Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4) and Strongly Agree (5).

- Perception of the measurability of PR:
  - Three items asking for level of agreement on statements concerning the extent to which PR is a quantifiable endeavour, such as 'PR is an 'art' and therefore difficult to measure'. A lower score on this cluster indicates a greater belief in the measurement of PR communication.

The data from the clusters has been analysed against the practitioners' workplaces, their position in management and the budget available for evaluation, as shown in Table 1. Some items relating to the barriers to evaluation, budgetary allocation and trends, and perceived pressures to evaluate have been analysed to enable further comparison between Workplace sectors. The most important findings follow.

Table 1

1. Employment sector – what term best describes your workplace?	
Consultancy	95
Government or Government agency	76
Commercial	29
Non-Government or non-profit	21
Other	7
2. Level of PR management responsibility	
Senior manager/director	99
Manager	38
Executive	71
Assistant	19
3. Size of budgets – What size PR communication budget do you normally work with?	
$0-$20,000	67
$20,000-$50,000	27
$50,000-$100,000	51
$100,000-$500,000	57
$500,000 plus	22

Workplace sector sub-groups

The workplaces were Consultancy, Government, Commercial, and Non-profit. Those working in Consultancies, Commercial and Non-profit were more likely to report that they measure outcomes than Government. Overall, barriers to evaluation were perceived similarly across the sectors; however, some barriers were greater in some sectors than others. There were different beliefs about the measurability of public relations and the pressure to demonstrate results. On the item ‘There is pressure from clients/employers to more clearly demonstrate results of PR communication’, the strongest agreement came from the Commercial sector (4.0) followed by Consultancy (3.92), and Government and Non-profit (3.68).

Table 2 Pressure to demonstrate results, by workplace sector

1=Strongly disagree 5=Strongly agree	Consultants n=95	Commercial n=29	Government n=76	Non-Profit n=21
There is pressure from clients/employers to more clearly demonstrate results of PR communication	3.92	4.0	3.68	3.68

Those in the Commercial workplace perceived greatest pressure to demonstrate results, but had less belief that public relations is measurable than the Government, Consultancy and Non-Profit groups.

Table 3 Public relations is difficult to measure, by workplace

Groups	Count	Sum	Average
Commercial	29	277	9.55
Government	76	552	7.26
Consultancy	94	675	7.18
Not for Profit	21	131	6.24

The Non-profit sector was most confident about the measurability of public relations, followed by the Consultancy and Government sectors.

In two out of four analyses – output measurement and barriers to evaluation – the clusters indicated a near commonality of attitudes. Consultancies, Commercial and Non-profit were more likely to measure outcomes, but Government was less likely to. Non-profit was more likely to believe in measurability, but, along with Government, was under less pressure to demonstrate results. Consultancies, too, were under pressure to evaluate but had slightly higher confidence in measurability.

Both the Commercial and Consultancy groups, it can be contended, may need to focus more on education and training in evaluation methods to meet the demands of clients and employers. Government practitioners may need training to keep pace with their private sector colleagues.

Management sector sub-groups

The analysis by management function had four groupings which were derived from the survey – Senior Manager/Director, Manager, Executive and Assistant. In terms of frequency of measurement of Outcomes, there was a clear distinction between Senior Managers and the other three groups that indicated that Senior Managers are more likely to research outcomes. The other groups had very similar data showing that less emphasis was applied to outcome measures. However, when it came to frequency of measuring outputs, the 'boss' and the 'junior' – Senior Manager/Director and Assistant – formed a superior cluster in advance of mid level Managers and Executives.

Table 4 Frequency of output measurement, by management position

Position	Count	Sum	Average
Senior Manager	99	1969	19.89
Assistant	19	363	19.11
Manager	38	702	18.47
Executive	71	1285	18.10

Management level appears to have little or no influence on the perception of barriers to evaluation or on the measurability of public relations communication.

There was greater commonality of attitudes in Management positions than might have been expected. The Senior Manager/Director was in superior clusters for Outcome and Output measurement, joined for Output by the Assistant. An explanation for the out-of-ranking position for the Assistant in Output measurement could be that this work is undertaken, typically in-house, by this level of employee. The Senior Manager would be unlikely to collate the information but would commission the work and prepare reports on the results.

Budget sub-groups

Budget is the third factor in this analysis. The categories relate to the survey question, 'What size PR communication campaign budget do you normally work with?' and are:

- $0 to $20,000
- $20,000 to $50,000
- $50,000 to $100,000
- $100,000 to $500,000
- $500,000 plus.

For simplicity, they will be called Level 1 to Level 5, with Level 1 being the lowest budget and Level 5, the highest budget.

In the measurement of Outcomes, Levels 2-5 formed a superior cluster most likely to undertake this task, while Level 1 – with the lowest budgets – formed an inferior cluster much less likely to do so. In measuring Output, there were three clusters with Level 2 in a superior cluster, followed by Levels 3 and 4 in the middle with Levels 1 and 5 – the lowest and highest budgets – in an inferior (less likely) group. This is an odd distribution; it defies a 'common sense' explanation that would argue lower budget levels are most likely to undertake evaluation of Output because it is seen as more affordable than outcome measurement. However, Level 1 may be seen to be struggling to undertake any evaluation, while a slightly larger budget at Level 2 has resources to undertake evaluation, while Level 5 is more focused on Outcomes and strategic communications.

As in the Workplace and Management analyses, there was commonality in perceptions of Barriers to evaluation. Analysis of workplace sector against the individual response items making up the barrier cluster shows that consultants tend to perceive greater budgetary, training and client acceptance barriers than other sectors. Government practitioners perceived time as their greatest barrier, relative both to other sectors and to other barriers. Commercial practitioners reported less difficulty obtaining budget.

The measurability of public relations activity also showed near-homogeneity, with the exception of Level 3 budget. The data do not suggest a reason for this difference in the belief of measurability.

Table 5 Public relations is difficult to measure, by budget

Budget	Count	Sum	Average
Level 1 (lowest $)	67	500	7.46
Level 2	27	202	7.48
Level 3	51	339	6.65
Level 4	57	443	7.77
Level 5	22	168	7.64

It appears that the size of budget made little difference to the frequency of evaluation activity and perceptions. Three of the four analyses had homogeneous or near-homogeneous attitudes with only Outputs having the three-way split that was discussed above.

Summary

Out of the 12 cluster measures across the three factors, there were seven that showed homogeneity or near-homogeneity, indicating that there are common attitudes amongst Australian practitioners in important aspects of practice and attitudes towards the evaluation of public relations communication. The majority of the differences in evaluation practices and beliefs that were identified were linked to Workplace sector and level of management responsibility. Low budget was linked to lower likelihood of measuring outcomes, but attitudes and practices were otherwise very similar across different budget levels.

The most notable practice differences relate to measurement of Outcomes and Outputs. All sizeable groups are more likely to measure Outputs than Outcomes, but Consultancies, Non-profit and Commercial practitioners are more likely to measure Outcomes than Government practitioners. Senior Managers/Directors are more likely to measure Outcomes than practitioners with lower levels of responsibility. People in senior positions have greater influence over evaluation practices than others because, it can be argued, they have control over budget, responsibility for communication strategy and management knowledge/ experience.

All levels of management have similar beliefs in the measurability of public relations communication, and report that the main barriers to evaluation are time, lack of training and budget. Commercial practitioners have lower belief in the measurability of public relations, but report higher pressure to demonstrate results than the other sectors.

Discussion and implications

(RQ3) What are the key issues to address in education and other training activity to support improved performance in measurement and evaluation amongst Australian public relations practitioners?

The picture of the Australian public relations evaluator is of a mid- to senior level manager employed in a medium-sized organisation, most probably a consultancy, who is working under tight financial limits. She is university educated in communications or public relations, in her mid-30s and earns around $80,000 a year. Despite budgets of $50,000 to $70,000 for programs, there is little available or earmarked to fund the evaluation of public relations activity. So the emphasis is on in-house measurement of media relations, as the measurable material is easy to gather and gives a nice 'thud' when reports are delivered to senior management who aren't sure what 'PR' is.

Our evaluator learnt about advertising and public relations and social science research methods in her undergraduate days but has never put them into action. The methods applied are those used by her first boss, a former journalist, who didn't believe that public relations activity was measurable. 'How can you be scientific about a black art?' was his dismissive comment when she asked him about researching the outcomes of her first campaign. 'We just need lots of cuttings'. And the clients liked that, too. So the focus on media relations was set in place and monitoring of media coverage and media content analysis became *de rigueur* as she moved between positions in government and consultancies. In recent times, the only change has been to use Internet searches to do environmental scans while preparing proposals and plans, but it's still a mystery how to monitor online media and give it any value, when compared with clippings and transcripts.

So how is the media relations/output measurement mould broken and how do new methods get introduced? Practitioners mostly disagree with the statement that 'PR evaluation is too costly', but there appears to be a self-imposed limit on the application of broader outcome-focused methods. Although practitioners agree with the statement that 'There is pressure from clients/employers to more clearly demonstrate results of PR communication', change is resisted.

This study has identified issues that can assist the development of evaluation practices, at least among members of professional bodies. First, it found that most practitioners believe, with some variations between sectors and management levels, that public relations communication should be evaluated, that it can be measured, and that there is pressure from their clients and employers to more clearly demonstrate results. The calls to improve evaluation have been heeded and accepted by practitioners. Enough of the issues recognition! The challenge is to find strategies that enable practitioners to do more evaluation of the outcomes of their communication.

Two linked strategies that the PRIA can focus on to help enable its members' evaluation are training for practitioners, and awareness-raising for clients and employers.

Practitioners from all sectors frequently call for:

- cost-effective standard measures ' … so as an industry our ways of working can better be measured by client organisations' (Government, Senior Manager, NSW);
- models: ' ... a model must be established' (Commercial, Senior Manager, Vic); and
- tools: ' … PRIA as peak industry organisation could establish an industry standard tool to measure evaluation of public relations campaigns' (Consultancy, Senior Manager, NSW).

> I think the establishment of a standard evaluation method for PR would be of immense benefit to the PR practitioner, the client and more importantly the PR industry as a whole, which suffers due to under-developed and unclear practices. The sheer broad nature of PR work alone, stresses the importance of developing universal tools for all (Manager, Government, NSW).

Because of the 'sheer broad nature' and complexity of Public Relations situations, techniques and purposes, requests for standard measures and tools are impossible to satisfy. Between the PRIA, and academic and other experts, a strategy should be developed that aims to raise practitioner understanding, skills and confidence in evaluation of outcomes through a course of training, provide a toolkit of techniques, possibly modelled on the United Kingdom's Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) kit, and empower practitioners to be part of the second arm of the strategy, a program of awareness raising for clients and employers.

Many of the difficulties and frustrations experienced by PR practitioners can be attributed to insecurity experienced by practitioners who know that they are working on 'gut feel' or 'flying by the seat of the pants'. Lack of evidence to support strategy selection, lack of results to demonstrate effect or value, and working in professional isolation among marketing and other professionals make PR practitioners feel vulnerable on several fronts. The cycle of undeveloped practice needs to be broken. A campaign of awareness needs to aim to establish a more common understanding of the evaluation of public relations concepts and practices, with a view to matching the expectations of all involved. A strategy that includes engaging target audiences in joint problem solving might in the end be more effective than 'selling' PR. However, case studies that highlight successes, application of techniques and data, costs, models and barriers should also be used.

Like every profession, public relations will always wrestle with issues of accountability, and entrenched and sometimes unhelpful attitudes about better and worse practice. Practitioners (especially members of the PRIA) will be aided by their peak professional body explaining debates, taking positions where it is helpful to do so, and providing clear information about where practitioners can turn to for training, advice or other support.

Future research must get closer to the participants and their imperatives and organisation cultures than this present study, and many previous survey research approaches, have been able to. The cluster analysis of attitudes and practices by workplace, management and budget categories conducted here has tended to suggest a large degree of practitioner homogeneity. Yet there are indications in the quantitative and qualitative data that there are important differences between the workplace sectors on areas such as: the pressure to demonstrate results; what counts as an acceptable result in the short and long term; and resource commitments to evaluation in the form of time and money for gathering, and analysing and using, data. These differences, and the motives for research, whether formative or evaluative, are central to the working lives of practitioners and deserve much further examination. The field is ripe for improved understanding from in-depth approaches that explore the different realities for practitioners involved in different communication across a range of settings, for large sample studies that statistically test multiple hypotheses, and for joint practitioner/ expert review of low cost methods. Certainly this study found many practitioners frustrated by the mismatches between what can be, what should be, and what is evaluated. They will welcome more research in this critical aspect of practice.

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