The standard for social media

Industrywide initiatives help communicators assess program value

by Pauline Draper-Watts
Good public relations programs are built on a strong foundation of sound research and measurement. However, simply conducting research for its own sake is not enough. Over the years I have seen all types of measurement programs, running the gamut from incomplete and insufficient to effective and groundbreaking. Increasingly, organizations are asking for measurement initiatives—for both traditional and social media—that adhere to industry standards and exemplify best practices. Indeed, there are some standards in place, and others are being developed to cope with the ever-changing media landscape.

In 2010, delegates at the second European Summit on Measurement, hosted by the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) and the Institute for Public Relations (IPR), established the Barcelona Declaration of Measurement Principles. The seven principles were proposed by five professional organizations (AMEC, IPR, the International Communications Consultancy Organization, the Public Relations Society of America, and the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management) with input from their members, and set some very straightforward guidelines for measurement:

1. Goal setting and measurement are important.
2. Measuring the effect on outcomes is preferred to measuring outputs.
3. The effect on business results can and should be measured where possible.
4. Media measurement requires quantity and quality.
5. Advertising value equivalents (AVEs) are not the value of public relations.
6. Social media can and should be measured.
7. Transparency and replicability are paramount to sound measurement.

Certainly there have been many efforts aimed at establishing common language, standards and best practices for media measurement. For example, IPR, with support from other associations, created the Traditional Media Measurement Standards, to be used for print, broadcast and online content. These address some of the most commonly debated data points in traditional media analysis that are core to PR measurement and evaluation, and set out best practices for how to calculate impressions, what to analyze, how to calculate tone or sentiment, and more.

But social media measurement brings new questions. Hence the creation, in 2011, of the Social Media Measurement Standards Coalition (#SMMStandards), a cross-industry, united-standards development effort targeted toward social media (the sixth of the Barcelona Principles). #SMMStandards is currently made up of 11 industry associations (including IABC) and more than six leading clients, including Dell, Ford Motor Company, Procter & Gamble, SAS and Southwest Airlines.

#SMMStandards features a four-phase collaborative process around six topics: sources and methods transparency; reach and impressions; engagement; influence and relevance; opinion and advocacy; and impact and values. The process starts with working-group development and continues with discussion. Typically, each working group includes three people whose experience and expertise qualify them for discussion of the topic. The working group then submits proposals to the larger group. This leads to an interim standard for open feedback and comment from a wider audience, and then to final approval. As such, it is a market-driven process with opportunity for any member, stakeholder or practitioner to provide input.

Sources and methods transparency
It is not always clear which factors have gone into an analysis of a media communication effort. Indeed, two people doing the same analysis might see different results based on different content or methodologies. #SMMStandards has produced a table to guide practitioners in citing the sources of their analysis. This table should be a part of every report so that every reader has a clear understanding of the basis for the findings and knows how the data were collected and from which channels, how key metrics were calculated, and the depth of analysis and methodology applied. (See sample
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Reach and impressions
Accurate data about impressions—the number of people who may have seen an article or heard a radio segment, for example, about a company or service—can be hard to source, especially global impressions. What’s more, people have different understandings of what’s meant by impressions, reach, OTS, audience size and circulation. For instance, when calculating online impressions, some people will look at the number of unique visitors to a web page per month; others will factor in a multiplier or divisor to that number to try to get the most accurate figure. For example, unique monthly visitors is the number of unique visitors throughout a month, but an online news story that gets a lot of attention on one day will be buried on another day. Thus the number of unique monthly visitors is an inflated figure. I have seen people apply a divisor of 2, 3, 4, 15 or 30 to statistics like this. (The Institute for Public Relations recommends dividing the unique monthly visitors by the number of days in the month.) I have also seen inflated figures where a multiplier is used, which results in a large but unrealistic number. This variation highlights the need for some consistency and reinforces the value of the transparency table.

Practitioners tool: #SMMStandards’ Sources and Methods Transparency Table
To address the seventh Barcelona Principle, “Transparency and replicability are paramount to sound measurement,” an #SMMStandards working group produced a table (shown here, with examples in red) to guide practitioners in citing their sources and help readers understand the findings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeframe analyzed</th>
<th>January 1, 2012–December 31, 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research lead(s)</td>
<td>Pauline Draper-Watts, Edelman Berland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channels analyzed</td>
<td>Twitter (partial), Facebook (brand pages only), LinkedIn, YouTube, blogs, forums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data/content sources</td>
<td>Google search, Radian6, Sysomos, BrandWatch, Twitter API, Facebook API, YouTube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis depth</td>
<td>❑ Automated ❑ Manual ❑ Hybrid ❑ All content reviewed ❑ Rep. sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source languages</td>
<td>English, French, German and Mandarin only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search languages</td>
<td>Native-language queries: English, French, German, Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentiment coding</td>
<td>❑ Automated ❑ Manual ❑ Hybrid ❑ Manual sampling: every 50 posts coded ❑ 3-pt. scale ❑ 5-pt. scale ❑ Other scale ❑ At entity level ❑ Paragraph/doc level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spam/bot filtering</td>
<td>❑ Automated ❑ Manual ❑ Hybrid ❑ Includes news releases ❑ Excludes news releases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metrics calculation and sources</td>
<td>Reach: Daily unique visitors for specific URLs via Comscore (no multipliers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engagement: Channel-specific metrics direct from channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influence: N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opinion/advocacy: Human reading and coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proprietary methods: No proprietary methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Search parameters: See full search string list in appendix of this report</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Engagement
Engagement has sparked considerable discussion within the #SMMStandards group. At the last annual meeting (which takes place in September or October), we considered the variety of factors that could constitute engagement:

- **Engagement is defined** as some action beyond exposure to a message and implies an interaction.
- **Engagement occurs** in response to content—that is, when someone engages with you.
- **Any measure of engagement** must be tied to the goals and objectives for your program.
- **Engagement occurs** both offline and online, and both must be considered if you intend to integrate your metrics with other marketing or communication efforts.
- **Online or social media engagement** includes such actions as likes, +1, shares, votes, comments, links, retweets, Facebook’s “Talking about you,” etc.
- **Engagement types and levels** are unique to specific channels.
- **Engagement actions** should be counted by the number of interactions, the percentage of people engaged (by day, week or month) and the percent of engagement per post.

Another parameter to consider is the level of effort involved when people engage with your company: Is it a single click on a link? Are they “liking” your content? Are they providing identifying information about themselves? Then there’s the quality of engagement: Does it resonate with or reflect your messages?

Influence and relevance
Influence occurs when you are persuaded to change a behavior or an opinion that would otherwise have stayed static. It happens online and offline, and both should be measured. Influence can be exerted on a media outlet or a person, and should be tied to a specific topic, brand or issue. Considerations include reach, relevance to topic, authority/ability to get the target audience to change, level of engagement around the outlet/individual and frequency of discussion. Consider also that influencers may change over time. A friend of mine tells the story of how she scores highly on tools like Klout as an online influencer on relationships/marriage because she is always talking about “engagement.” In reality, she is divorced and not contemplating marriage but talks about engagement in her research and measurement. Thus, it’s important to validate any people you are considering as influential on a topic.

Opinion and advocacy
Sometimes opinion and advocacy are measured by tackling sentiment—for example, an online review from a customer saying, “I just bought X and love it!” would reflect positive sentiment and endorsement/advocacy. However, sentiment alone is insufficient to get at opinion and advocacy. For example, a review that says “X is expensive but worth every penny” is a positive endorsement, but the word “expensive” might be construed as negative by an automated sentiment detection service. It requires more detailed analysis to evaluate opinion and advocacy, but typically is much more valuable to practitioners. Looking at the Net Promoter Score (NPS), which is based on online customer recommendations about products or services, will get closer to opinion and advocacy; overlaying this with primary research will enrich the analytics.

Impact and value
Impact and value will look at the effect of communication initiatives—the impact on the business and the return to the organization. They are best reflected through objectives and outcomes. It is important to note that they are distinct from return on investment, because they may or may not include a financial component. If the objective is to build the company’s brand, then ROI might not be appropriate; if the objective is to drive sales, then it is highly relevant.

Impact and value measurement tie in well to Barcelona Principles 2 and 3, which focus on outcomes and business results, considering survey research for awareness, behavior and attitude change, purchase consideration, and integration with other metrics such as marketing mix models.

These initiatives are a starting point for organizations seeking to develop robust and affordable measurement and evaluation programs, for both traditional and social media. Given the breadth of these efforts, there should be no excuse for bad measurement or evaluation.

Pauline Draper-Watts is executive vice president at Edelman Berland, a global, insights-driven market research firm, where she heads the measurement and analytics practice. She is also the past chair for the Institute for Public Relations Commission on Measurement and Evaluation, and an active member of the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication’s North American chapter.

For more guidance and news on measurement standards, check out the resources from these groups:

- **Institute for Public Relations**
  [www.instituteforpr.org/topic/measurement-and-evaluation](http://www.instituteforpr.org/topic/measurement-and-evaluation)
- **International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication**
  [http://amecorg.com/important-stuff](http://amecorg.com/important-stuff)
- **#SMMStandards**
  [www.smmstandards.com](http://www.smmstandards.com)

[www.iabc.com/cw](http://www.iabc.com/cw)