

Do we measure up?

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The debate around the effectiveness of Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE) for public relations (PR) practitioners is nothing new. More recently, concerns around automated analysis have also gained momentum with cynics arguing that neither of these components provide a suitable platform on which to gauge the success of PR activities.

In 2010, PR practitioners from more than 30 countries attended a summit in Barcelona, which resulted in the establishment of the Barcelona Principles - a set of voluntary guidelines to measure the efficacy of PR campaigns. For the uninitiated, the principles are as follows:

- Goal setting and measurement are important;
- Media measurement requires quantity and quality;
- AVE is not the value of public relations;
- Social media can and should be measured;
- Measuring outcomes is preferred to measuring media results (outputs);
- Organisational results and outcomes should be measured whenever possible; and
- Transparency and replicability are paramount to sound measurement.

Great. But do international and local agencies even care about them? Perhaps the better question to ask is whether clients exist that do not see AVE as the Holy Grail of holding their agencies accountable for those multi-million rand campaigns. Even though international standards and industry bodies clearly emphasise that AVE is not a suitable, strategic measure, many practitioners still use this in isolation and state that it measures ROI.



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Is it easier just to conform to traditional sentiment around the role of the PR agency and to 'give the client what he wants?' The concerning thing is that these principles (effectively debunking the value of AVE when it is used in isolation) have been established five years ago. Hands up how many local agencies have managed to convince their clients to share a similar viewpoint.

But let us not belabour the point. The reality is that PR, monitoring, and analysis agencies need to put their heads together and find a system that actually provides strategic insight into measuring the return on investment of campaigns. Clients should be able to live in a world where they get access to metrics that work for them and enable them to guide their communications strategy more effectively. After all, when it comes to measurements, no client has the same requirements. Why then do so many agencies adopt a 'one size fits all' approach when it comes to metrics? It is essential that agencies need to understand the requirements of their clients and then develop a measurement and analysis approach to fit.

AVE and automated analysis have a time and place. While it might not necessarily give context, it does provide a sense of the quick wins accomplished in a campaign. But even the most basic of metrics need to be interpreted in order for a client to better understand what the numbers mean in the context of a campaign. So whether it is pure AVE, the clip count, or even just the percentage of positive versus negative sentiment, a trusted analysis partner must be on hand to give insight.

So are impact and outcomes-based analysis potential solutions to supplement the traditional way of measurement? Some might balk at the idea of academically founded and human analysis because of its resource intensity and potential cost impact. Yet, 'cheap' and 'dirty' might not always do the trick.

The monitoring and analysis agencies that can provide PR practitioners with something that gives strategic insight will be the ones that drive the new era of measurement. But this has to be a multi-pronged approach. Practitioners and agencies alike need to educate their clients about the benefits of such approaches. After all, if they see the strategic impact that a different way of measurement can have on their communications, they would not hesitate to welcome it with open arms.

ABOUT JACO PIENAAR

Jaco is an MA Information Science graduate who specialises in research, analytical framework development, and content analysis. His thesis was on Intellectual Capital measurement and he applies this to his framework developments as well as knowledge strategies. Professionally, Jaco has worked in the journalism field, academic environment, multi-national research environment, and media analysis environment. He is currently the Chief Knowledge Officer at Professional Evaluation and Research.

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