DISSECTING
FOFO

The shift from vanity metrics to real impact

Dwindling team numbers and lofty expectations mean communications professionals are under gruelling pressure. How can new measurement metrics be encouraged? **Rebecca Pardon** reports

If you had the misfortune of being a spectator to a surgery in the 19th century, you would find the room adorned with blood-encrusted aprons and laden with unwashed surgical instruments. However, in 1871, as Joseph Lister readied himself to perform a crucial surgery on Queen Victoria, the moment signified an equally crucial turning point for the profession. Armed with his surgical instruments, chloroform and, importantly, sterilising spray, this surgery marked the arrival of radical change in the form of anaesthetic carbolic acid.

Today, Lister is referred to as the 'father of modern surgery', but his contemporaries were less convinced. Lister was met with sharp backlash from many of those at the top of their professions who found difficulty accepting that their well-honed strategies had been inadvertently killing their patients for years. Jesper Andersen is founder of communications consultancy Quantum PR Measurement and frequently uses this analogy to illustrate why the communications industry is slow to adopt new measurement techniques today. "It took a generation of doctors before it became mainstream to actually disinfect your equipment. Similarly, young people who are gradually coming into our industry are open to the idea that measurement is not an enemy."

Although a far less bloody and macabre conundrum, research shows that communications professionals are reluctant to embrace the data analysis functions that other departments, such as marketing or sales, have been practicing for years. A 2022 study by PR agency ITPR found that almost half (42%) of UK medium-sized businesses were not measuring the impact of their internal communications departments, and 43% found it difficult to do so. This is despite a growing interest in the value of data; last year, global research by software company Salesforce found that eight in 10 business leaders believed data to be critical to making decisions at their organisations. For communications, a solid grasp of data analytics can mean improved messaging, employee engagement, decision-making and enhanced credibility.

Legacy key performance indicators (KPIs) are a popular metric used by communications professionals. However, these increasingly fail to deliver specific or detailed information and insight. True measurement would support the pursuit of strategic objectives by tracking a campaign's progress, aligning people and processes, prioritising resources and bringing accountability. Andersen believes that fear sits at the heart of communicators' reluctance to embrace more thorough metrics, having termed the phenomenon the 'Fear of Finding Out', or 'FOFO'. Metrics used by communications today are too heavily focused on volume of interest generated over the quality of impact or response, he says. "95% of communicators – if they do measure at all – measure outputs and then they stop."

A widely used and accepted metric in PR is the 'advertising value equivalent' (AVE), measuring the success of a campaign by the estimated monetary value of its placement in a media outlet. "At the executive level, particularly in the United Sates, they like expressions of communications as a dollar figure," says Andersen. "So, they are basically telling communications teams they have to deliver this dollar value in AVE, even though it's a bullshit figure. They don't look at the impact or the effect, or the outcomes. Everything else just falls by the wayside."

Quantum PR Measurement is a member of the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), a UK-based trade body. AMEC has developed its own guidance for communications professionals in the form of its 'Integrated Evaluation Framework', which suggests a process for "setting targets and measuring outputs, outtakes, outcomes and impact" and is promoted at AMEC's annual global summit.

This year held in Bulgaria, Andersen despondently observed that most attendees to the summit were companies selling output measurement and readership, as opposed to "the outtakes", suggesting an industry-wide disinterest in data and measurement. Acknowledging that some of this is down to budget constraints, Andersen believes a wider culture of underestimating the value of measurement has led to complacency. "You can get away with giving management reports about the 'share of voice' you have in the market or how much publicity you generated last year.

"But if you were pressed on the outcomes and impact of all that communication you did, you're going to be standing there with just nothing."

Part of this, Andersen believes, comes down to a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of communications that has been allowed to fester. "We've had continuous myth-building in the communications industry around the idea that communication can't be measured. We can count how many press clippings we've generated, but we don't ▸

really know what happens when people actually read the newspaper."

Most communications professionals would blanch at being called complacent, however. Gearóid Godson is corporate communications adviser at Shell UK, having previously worked within the measurement

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department of MEC advertising agency. He believes that, while there is always the tendency to reach for flattering "vanity metrics", there is an appetite for change. "I have seen people ask for the context behind the numbers. People are interested in knowing this, and they do want to find out.

"In an ideal world, you want to know what changes a campaign has driven, whether it has changed people's minds and if it has driven sales," he continues. "But this kind of bespoke research is going to be relatively expensive and it's going to take time."

In a survey by Ragan Communications in 2022, industry professionals identified time pressures, understaffing and insufficient technology as their top challenges when measuring their work. Last year, only 5% of internal communications professionals reported having all the technology needed to do their job effectively, and a third of organisations were found to not provide training for new tools. Andersen concedes that the issue stems from beyond just communications departments. "A lot of management teams simply don't understand communications. They think of communications as a discipline that is supposed to always succeed, without any element of uncertainty."

Feeling misunderstood or overlooked is not new to the communications industry, which is often campaigning for a seat at the table. In recent

research from Gallagher, 27% of professionals described a lack of recognition from leadership and feeling left out of decision-making, and 23% felt their work was undervalued.

Cai Kjaer is CEO at measurement agency SWOOP Analytics. He attended a communications conference a few years ago where the diminutive sizing of most corporate communications departments became apparent. "There were 300 people in the room and one of the presenters asked them to sit down if they had over five team members, then four, and, by the time they got to one team member, half the room was still standing. You get a sense that these teams are really small with not a lot of time, and their day is one of hectic chaos being driven by whatever disaster has hit that day," he continues. "This means that you might have the desire to be strategic and forward-thinking, but it's a tough environment. Internal communications professionals typically deal with very senior stakeholders, so there's a lot at risk.

"Drinking from the firehose and trying then to be strategic when you're really short of resources. That's tough."

In its latest report on the sector, ITPR found a 'lack of communication from senior management' was the most common complaint by 34% of survey respondents, and recent research covered by *Communicate magazine* has found that internal communications is facing a 'wild west' of uncertainty around new technology, as three quarters of executive teams offer no guidance on how to use AI tools. "Management doesn't really understand what we could do if we were given the resources and the training to actually produce outcome and impact," says Andersen. "We need more training to be able to function at the level that is required to prove outcome and impact."

Another aspect contributing to trepidation around measurement is the fear of being found out, stemming from a belief that communications campaigns are underperforming and not creating the tangible impact desired. Kjaer believes this fear is exaggerated, however, due to a widespread misunderstanding of the responsibility of communications professionals. "Honestly, I think most communications departments would find out they are doing pretty well and, if there's a certain channel that's not working, it's not the fault of the internal comms team, for example."

Applying thorough metrics that may return poor results carries different risks depending on your work culture. Does your boss, for example, see disappointing outcomes or low levels of impact as an opportunity to learn and improve, or as an irreparable failure? "I see a lot of executive teams that set up what you might call 'success parameters', or requirements for their communications teams that are usually something like big quantifiable numbers," says Andersen. "And those numbers always have to go up.

"This produces a tricky situation for communications professionals because now they have a gun to their heads and must continuously perform. So, you don't really want to measure if the measurement puts you at risk of revealing that a campaign may not have performed well."

An environment of low resources, high pressure and lofty expectations can breed bad behaviour. For professionals working agency-side, for example, Andersen describes how he has seen clients tricked by PR teams who wait to see the number of press clippings a campaign has generated, and only then set the campaign's target number for just below that. "And the clients don't know any better," he says. "A lot of buyers of PR agency services are immature buyers; they don't know how to ask for the success criteria upfront."

And, of course, human nature is a significant factor. After clocking in at 9am on a weekday morning, most would prefer to focus on their tasks for the day, rather than new metrics for which they have not had adequate training and may unearth unflattering results. Georgie Cade is head of communications at University College London and emphasises the impact uncertainty can have. "I think part of it is psychological in that data still feels like an 'unknown' in some ways.

"As an industry, communicators have for too long left data as the job of other departments, like marketing," she continues. "I think people can be fearful of what happens if we go beyond surface level, and the results we find aren't what we hoped or are confusing to understand.

"This is more reason than ever why we need to do better and claim data analysis and insight as something that is firmly in the remit of communications, or we'll never improve what we're sending or how to prove our true worth."

Culture matters enormously. While analytics can bring greater credibility, transparency and value to communicators' work, in an unhealthy work environment, it can also contribute to a sense of paranoia around productivity. Questions arise around whether managers choose to 'improve' or 'remove' the measurably underperforming, and whether analytics are used to help people perform better, or to identify the cost-centres within an organisation. Many may be investing more thought into acquiring analytic capabilities than confronting the accountability crises they may create.

Accountability is often the unhappy by-product rather than desirable outcome of innovative analytics, and greater accountability makes people nervous: the more data organisations gather from more sources and algorithmically analyse, the more individuals, managers and executives become accountable for any unpleasant surprises or inefficiencies that emerge. "A lack of trust and transparency means you build up this armour of protection around you, which

slows everything down," says Kjaer. "If you work in an organisation where you are worried about the implications of measuring something, and it's not seen as an opportunity to improve, you are giving someone the ammunition to shoot and criticise you. I would certainly be nervous."

There is a concern that, at some organisations, the steady creep in measurement tools can lead to surveillance that is not spread equally and this, in turn, can breed resentment. The emerging cultural challenge for leadership is whether analytics-driven accountability cuts both ways: are business unit leaders and top executives prepared to use analytics to make themselves more transparent and accountable, too?

Executive teams want to drastically improve productivity but may be ambivalent about comparably increasing their own accountability. "If you have a culture in the company that says you either win or you get docked in your pay because your campaign didn't work, then people are going to be cherry picking their results," says Andersen. "If we do not allow communications to fail – and openly fail – and learn from failing, then we're asking to be deceived. We're asking to be lied to. We're asking to be manipulated by the communications team because we are putting a gun to their heads saying: 'You must succeed, always.'"

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Since 2017, AMEC has been campaigning to remove the popular AVE metric, based on unreliable numbers and the lack of interest in the content of the campaign or its impact. However, Andersen believes that real progress comes with generational change. "We need to grow out of that old role of just being wordsmiths and people who put together messages and communications. We need to be strategic in an entirely new way.

"I think the old guard is changing," he continues. "When I talk to students at the university, I tell them the story of Joseph Lister, and how it took a generation for his findings to be popularised and accepted.

"People my age are probably never going to change, so, when I go out to universities and give guest lectures, I look into the eyes of these 20-something year olds and say: 'You're the ones I'm pinning my hopes on'." ∎