IT'S 9 AM, DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR MEMBERSHIP IS?

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO MEASURING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR MEMBERSHIP

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Whether your organization's membership consists of 100 civil engineers or 10,000 surgeons, maintaining good relationships with those members and understanding how those members view your organization is critical to your success. You can communicate all you want, get great press and still lose membership if your members don't feel that they are getting good value for their money.

So how do you know just how good your relationship is with your members? You measure it.
That's right, as warm and fuzzy as it might sound; relationships are highly measurable, thanks to the work of Drs. James and Laurie Grunig and Linda Hon. Their breakthrough work in measuring relationships has provided us with proven methodologies for measuring relationships.

In the past, the occasional membership survey would attempt to get feedback from members, but the questions changed from year to year and very few could afford rigorous (and statistically valid) research methods. Today, with standardized survey instruments, inexpensive online survey options and more efficient ways to reach out to your audiences, measuring relationships is an option for even the smallest of organizations.

Step 1: Identify and prioritize your audiences

The field of communications research has its roots in psychology, sociology and public relations. So, not surprisingly, the first step in measuring relationships is to understand the psychographics and characteristics of your various audiences. And the first thing you have to remember is that your constituencies are not homogenous. There are new members, old members, non renewing members, and former members just to name a few. With that in mind, the next step is to prioritize which relationships are most important.

To do that, you need to understand how a good relationship with that constituency benefits your organization – or how a bad relationship can hurt it. Good relationships with long-standing members of your organization may bring in dues, but their value may be much greater if that's where your pool of leadership talent resides. Similarly, new members have value far beyond their dues since they may help spread the word, provide volunteers, or become attendees at new events. So make a list of all your constituencies, then, next to each one, list the benefits that a great relationship with each group brings to your organization.

You will then need to gather all of the senior management and key communications people within your organization and get them to prioritize the audiences. The way we do it, everyone receives 10 colored dots, each one worth $100,000 of the communications budget. (Just think of it as Monopoly money.) We then ask all participants to "spend" their budgets in the ways that they think are most appropriate. After all of the money has been allocated, the audience with the most dots is clearly the most important.

Step 2: Define your objectives

The most important thing to remember about any measurement program is that you become what you measure. Those metrics that you define as important will be the ones that everyone in communications will attempt to achieve, so getting them right is crucial. One exercise we put our clients through is to get them to close their eyes and imagine their CEO delivering a case of Don Perignon to their desk in gratitude for the best year ever. Then I ask them what has changed, or what is different from a year ago.

Start by going back to your list of the benefits that a good relationship brings to the organization and see if any of them would make good objectives. For example, if your organization's number one priority is to grow, then *communications cost per new member added* might be a key metric. If your mission is to enact or defeat legislation, the metric might be the number of bills passed, or the degree to which your point of view is communicated in discussions in the media. If you're trying to sell product via your website, you might want to use *web traffic* as a key metric.

Step 3: Understand where they're coming from

When you're thinking about metrics, remember that audiences do not live in a vacuum, nor do they only hear your messages. In today's society any one of your members is hit with some 5000 messages a day from a wide variety of sources, some, like advertising and direct mail you can control. Others like the media you can't. A good measurement program looks at as many different influences as the budget allows. At the very least you should take into account what your members are seeing in the media., what they're exposed to on line, what they're hearing from you, what they're taking away in terms of impressions, awareness or understanding and ultimately what actions do they take i.e. renew membership[or get friends to join, volunteer etc.

All these various influences affect your relationship. So it's necessary to understand and quantify those influences if your want to understand why the relationship is improving or declining.

Step 4: Establish a benchmark

If I tell you that 35% of your members think your organization is the best thing that ever happened to them, you don't know if that's good or bad. It could be bad that 65% of the audience DOESN'T feel that way, but on the other hand if only 15% of them thought the competing organization was worth the dues, then 35(%) looks like a great number. Since measurement is a comparative tool, you need to figure out what you are benchmarking your results against. It could be a peer organization or a competitive organization. In the non-profit world, unlike corporate America, cooperation between organizations is much more common, and organizations can partner on the research in order to have something to compare their results to.

Whether you select competing organizations or peer organizations, try to limit the number of entities in any given study to no more than five. Three is ideal, anything more than five becomes unwieldy.

Step 5: Pick a measurement tool

Once you have your objectives clear and your benchmarks established, you can decide whether you're going to be measuring outputs (i.e. articles that appear in the media); outtakes (what people are thinking); or outcomes (what people are doing). Depending on what you're measuring you will either need to analyze your media coverage or survey your membership, or preferably both.

Measuring Outcomes

You don't have to analyze the world, just those publications or media sources that are most important to your audience. Once you've established a key publication list, make sure you have access to all articles in those media outlets, either via your own subscriptions or via clipping service like Bacon's, Burrelles, Factiva, LexisNexis, Cyberalert or CustomScoop.

One thing to remember is that communications professionals do not read the media like normal human beings. We are far too quick to spot a key message (particularly your own) and are much more sensitive to reporters' opinions than normal human beings. Ideally you should find a member of your target audience to analyze the media. Or, if your volume of coverage justifies it you can use one of half a dozen automated content analysis programs available such as Cymfony or Biz360.

Every article should be read for the following criteria:

1. The main subject
2. The type of article it is – opinion, feature story, Q&A, letter to the editor, etc.
3. The visibility of the organization within the article – was your organization the focal point, or did it just receive a minor mention.
4. Who, if anyone, was quoted in the article?
5. The tonality – did it leave the reader more or less likely to join your organization?
6. The type of media in which the article appeared – TV, magazine, business press etc.
7. What, if any, messages were communicated
8. How was the organization (and its peers) positioned on key issues such as "good value for the money" "Effective advocate for the industry," or "responsiveness," for example.

If you don't hire an outside firm to conduct this research, there are several software programs out there that make it a lot easier, including CommAudit, PRTrak and our own DIY Dashboard.

Measuring Outtakes

To measure outtakes you need to a survey to understand how your members feel about your relationship. Drs. James and Laurie Grunig and Linda Hon have developed a standard survey instrument that can be used with a high degree of accuracy to judge the health of your relationship. The methodology is based on the notion that a relationship has five essential components:

1. Control mutuality – The degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another. Although some imbalance is natural, stable relationships require that organization and their publics each have some control over the other.

2. Trust – One party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party. There are three dimension to trust:

    a. Integrity: the belief that an organization is fair and just
    b. Dependability: the belief that an organization will do what it says it will do
    c. Competence: the belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do

3. Commitment – The extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy on to maintain and promote.

4. Satisfaction – The extent to which each party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced. A satisfying relationship is one in which the benefits outweigh the costs.

5. Exchange relationship – In an exchange relationship, one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future.

6. Communal relationship – In a communal relationship, both parties provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other, even when they get nothing in return. For most public relations activities, developing communal relationships with key constituencies is much more important than developing exchange relationships.

For each of these elements, Grunig, Grunig and Hon developed specific agree/disagree questions. Respondents are asked to use a 1-to-9 or 1-to-7 scale to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree that each item listed describes their relationship with that particular organization.

To test control mutuality they would ask respondents to agree or disagree with these statements:

1. This organization is attentive to people like me and what I say.
2. This organization believes the opinions of people like me are legitimate.
3. In dealing with people like me, this organization has a tendency to throw its weight around. (Reversed)
4. This organization really listens to what people like me have to say.
5. The management of this organization gives people like me enough say in the decision-making process.
6. When I have an opportunity to interact with this organization, I feel that I have some sense of control over the situation.
7. This organization won't cooperate with people like me.
8. I believe people like me have influence on the decision-makers of this organization.

The following statements measure trust:

1. This organization treats people like me fairly and justly.
2. Whenever this organization makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about people like me.
3. This organization can be relied on to keep its promises.
4. I believe that this organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.
5. I feel very confident about this organization's skills.
6. This organization has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do.
7. Sound principles seem to guide this organization's behavior.
8. This organization does not mislead people like me.
9. I am very willing to let this organization make decisions for people like me.
10. I think it is important to watch this organization closely so that it does not take advantage of people like me.
11. This organization is known to be successful at the things it tries to do.

The following statements test the satisfaction that your members feel with your organization:

1. I am happy with this organization.
2. Both the organization and people like me benefit from the relationship.
3. Most people like me are happy in their interactions with this organization.
4. Generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship this organization has established with people like me.
5. Most people enjoy dealing with this organization.
6. The organization fails to satisfy the needs of people like me.
7. I feel that I'm important to this organization.
8. In general, I believe that nothing of value has been accomplished between this organization and me.

The following statements test the commitment of your members to your organization:

1. I feel that this organization is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to people like me.
2. I can see that this organization wants to maintain a relationship with people like me.
3. There is a long-lasting bond between this organization and people like me.
4. Compared to other organizations, I value my relationship with this organization more.
5. I would rather work together with this organization than not.
6. I have no desire to have a long-term relationship with this organization.
7. I feel a sense of loyalty to this organization.
8. I could not care less about this organization.

The following statements test the degree to which your relationship is an exchange relationship:

1. Whenever this organization gives or offers something to people like me, it generally expects something in return.
2. Even though people like me have had a relationship with this organization for a long time; it still expects something in return whenever it offers us a favor.
3. This organization will compromise with people like me when it knows that it will gain something.
4. This organization takes care of people who are likely to reward the organization.

The following statements test the degree to which your relationship is a communal one:

1. This organization does not especially enjoy giving others aid. (Reversed)
2. This organization is very concerned about the welfare of people like me.
3. I feel that this organization takes advantage of people who are vulnerable. (Reversed)
4. I think that this organization succeeds by stepping on other people. (Reversed)
5. This organization helps people like me without expecting anything in return.
6. I don't consider this to be a particularly helpful organization.
7. I feel that this organization tries to get the upper hand.

These questions can be administered in person, by telephone or by email. Administering them in person will probably yield the most accurate responses, but it is very time consuming and therefore the most expensive alternative. Phone surveys are probably the best way to get a sufficient quantity of reliable data, but they too can be expensive. Online surveys by companies like SurveyMonkey and Zoomerang are essentially available for free, and thus can be done very inexpensively. The trick is to make sure you have a good email list of your members.

For a complete list of survey research options, see Dr. Don Stacks' Primer of Public Relations Research, available on www.measuresofsuccess.com/books.asp.

Measuring Outcomes

Member behavior can take many forms – renewals, web traffic, email responses, phone calls, attendance at trade shows or votes. All are relatively easy to measure, once you have a tracking system in place. The key is to keep track of them on a monthly basis, and then compare the results to your media activity and ideally to the attitude research. With sufficient data you will be able to see correlations between activities in the media, communications with your membership and behavioral outcomes.

Step 6: Analyze the data and glean insight

All the data in the world is simply trivia if you can't draw some conclusions from it. So, when the data is in, look for trends, differences between new members and old members, males and females, and by all means look most carefully at the bad news and the failures, because that is where you will learn the most.

Step 7: Make changes and measure again

Once you have your relationship measurement program in place, you need to make it a regular, ongoing part of your communications process. When the data comes in, you learn from your mistakes, make changes, and then see the results in the next reporting process. One caveat – make sure the data is available when you need it. If you do all your budgeting and planning in August, having end of year data does you no good whatsoever. The data should be fresh just as you are beginning your planning process.