GUIDELINES FOR
SETTING MEASURABLE
PUBLIC RELATIONS OBJECTIVES

May, 1999

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WHY SET *MEASURABLE* PR OBJECTIVES?

The goal of virtually all public relations (PR) is to help an organization achieve its "business or performance objectives." How does PR do this? It begins by setting *measurable* objectives.

Measurable objectives in public relations do two things:

1. They **facilitate and support business objectives**, thus demonstrating that PR activities support the business or performance goals and are thereby "strategic"

2. They enable PR practitioners to show they have achieved what they set out to achieve, and thereby **demonstrate accountability**

The reason to state *measurable* objectives is that if you do not, you are likely to suffer the following consequences:

> *Where the process of goal setting and evaluation seems to have become perfunctory or sporadic over time, there seems to have been the greatest downsizing in* [corporate communications] *staff and activity.* (Barlow 1993, 8)

> *Only one practitioner – a public affairs advisor for an oil company – said that his department has no written goals and objectives. He described a situation of great instability in which the business units of his organization are driving the goals of public affairs, while corporate public affairs is being downsized drastically.* (Hon 1998, 118)

SETTING *MEASURABLE* PUBLIC RELATIONS OBJECTIVES

Link PR Objectives to Business and Organizational Objectives

Getting a clear understanding of an organization's business or performance goals is the PR practitioner's first step in setting measurable objectives for a communications program, yet it is probably the most often overlooked. When management asks what it is getting for its PR investment, it is asking for evidence that communications activities have advanced business goals. If public relations practitioners do not have a clear understanding of what these business goals are, public relations can succeed only by chance.

Business goals might include:

1. Increasing share price

2. Increasing sales

3. Increasing market share

4. Increasing productivity

5. Reducing employee turnover

How do we obtain this information? In the ideal world, senior PR staff has been at the table with the rest of senior management helping to set the organization's objectives. So senior PR staff knows. However, in some organizations, PR has not yet achieved this level of influence. If this is the case, other avenues for determining business goals are to engage senior managers in discussions of the organization's goals and the factors managers think will impact achieving these goals. Ask to see business plans and marketing plans. Talk with those involved in other communications disciplines about what their programs are designed to accomplish. Do your own research into industry issues and trends and your target audiences. Make this kind of situation analysis a routine element of program planning.

Of course, understanding the organization's business goals is easiest when the public relations practitioners who develop the communications plan take part in setting the organization's overall objectives as well.

To help ensure that PR objectives are linked to business objectives, ask the following questions:

1. What is management trying to achieve and what will help or hinder its success, from a communications perspective?

2. How are stakeholders likely to respond to management decisions?

3. What response would management like from target stakeholders?

4. How can PR programs help achieve these goals?

5. What is the most effective role for PR in relation to other communications disciplines? What can PR do more effectively than advertising, promotions, management consultants, etc.?

Answers to these questions will help identify business goals and guide PR efforts in the most productive directions.

Tieing Objectives to Measures of Program Success

The foundation for effective program evaluation is setting objectives. Program evaluation is the process of measuring progress toward objectives. If the objectives are unclear, the evaluation will be weak. Further, the creation of objectives is critical to managing expectations for the program, especially where specific targets for outcomes are set (e.g., increase awareness by 20 percent).

Creating *Measurable* PR Objectives

In the case of objectives, wishing (or simply calling something an objective) won't make it so. An objective must:

1. Specify a desired outcome (increase awareness, improve relationships, build preference, adopt an attitude, generate sales leads, etc.)

2. Directly specify one or several target audiences

3. Be measurable, both conceptually and practically

4. Refer to "ends," not "means." If your objective outlines a means by which to do something, (often prefaced by the words "leverage" or "use"), you have a strategy, not an objective.

5. Include a time frame in which the objective is to be achieved, for example, by July 1.

In general, process goals, such as "get publicity," "launch a product" or "create a brochure," make poor objectives. They do not relate to broader organizational goals and are not measurable in any specific, concrete, or truly meaningful manner. ("I did it"/"I didn't do it." does not count as measurable.) A useful way to replace these "process" objectives is to ask yourself, "What is the purpose of (insert objective)." The answer to this question is likely to move you closer to a clear, actionable objective.

Examples:

Publicizing A New Line of Women's Clothing

Let's suppose the purpose of "get publicity" is to help sell a new line of women's clothing. While PR cannot ensure sales, a sound publicity program can generate the awareness and possibly build the motivation necessary for sales to occur. So, "get publicity" could change into "increase awareness of our new line of women's clothing within the next six months among women in the top 10 ADIs, between the ages of 40 and 64, with household incomes of $50,000 and up."

Note: By spelling out the proposed publicity campaign in this very precise manner, all five of the requirements we had listed above are covered, and the PR effort now becomes something that can be specifically measurable.

Informing Motorists About Changes Pertaining To A New Toll Road

When a privately financed and developed toll-road first opened in a given location, it turned out that traffic was far below that which had been anticipated by the developers. The business objective of the agency that was responsible for managing the toll road clearly was to increase traffic as quickly as possible. Research showed that potential users of the toll road -- residents of the nearby communities -- did not like the look of the existing toll structures and also were concerned about noise and air pollution. The toll road authority immediately took steps to improve the look of the road's toll structures and also erected barriers as a means of limiting and controlling noise and air pollution. The toll road authority set for itself an objective of seeking to increase traffic to 30,000 cars per week day within a six month time frame. The communications program that was developed and put into place, was directly linked to that objective -- that is, within a six month period of time, the aim was to educate and inform a large enough proportion of residents of neighboring communities about the changes that had taken place, that

would eventually lead to an increased number of motorists considering the possible use of the new toll way, as an alternate means of travel.

Note: By linking the public education program to the business plan, by adhering to the exact same time frame of six months, and by targeting community residents, a set of measurable communications objectives was put into effect.

Restoring the Reputation of A Distributor Of Computer Products

A distributor of computer products and services had achieved an enviable reputation among those in the financial community and in the business press, chiefly through the successful marketing of its products to four very specific audience segments.

In an effort to expand its market share, the company made a dramatic foray into a sales channel in which it was not at all well known. The venture failed, and this unexpected turn of events had an extremely negative impact on the manufacturer's overall reputation on Wall Street.   Even though the company was continuing to experience success in market areas in which it had dominated in the past, the unsuccessful venture left financial analysts and those in the media with the impression that perhaps the firm was no longer as successful an organization as it had been perceived to be in the past.

The organization's management regrouped after the failed venture and began to not only meet, but also exceed, its sales goals among the other four target audience segments to which it had been selling its products and services in the past.

What management needed from the communications program was to increase the number of financial analysts with positive attitudes toward the company.   Specific media placement and financial community targets were set and a one-year time schedule was implemented.

Note: The PR objectives that were set were very specific, very measurable, and were clearly tied to the organization's business objectives.

Determining The Value Of A Corporate 'Event' Sponsorship Program

For years, a manufacturer and distributor of cellular phones had actively been involved in sponsoring and promoting a local golf tournament, which received national exposure one particular weekend each year. Although the company knew that linking its name to the tourney was generating a good deal of goodwill, the firm's business officers challenged the PR people to link the publicity effort to the sale of cellular phones to golf enthusiasts.

In this case, a long-term PR effort with only limited "business" objectives, suddenly was given a new mission: link the PR to possible sales. To do so, the PR professionals commissioned research "around" the golf tournament -- conducting research with a sample of golf enthusiasts who were familiar with and likely to watch the tourney, either in person or on television, *prior to* the holding of the event to determine their interest in and possible purchase of cellular phone products, followed by a follow-up poll *immediately following* the event, to determine what impact, if any, the company's sponsorship might have had in possibly generating sales interest. The *before-and-after* impact of the company's publicity and promotional efforts relating to the golf tourney also were measured.

Note: As in the previous examples, the target audience was clearly defined in advance and the data that were collected were quite specific, and directly relevant to the organization's business objectives.

Should A New Product Be Promoted With Ads, Publicity or Both?

A distributor of meat products was planning to distribute a brand new product during a given period of time, but the marketing staff was not certain if it would be more effective to promote and publicize the product only with paid advertising, only with "free" publicity, or with a combination of both.

In an effort to resolve the dilemma, the company's advertising and public relations departments both were asked to develop materials to be used in the promotional effort. In setting their objectives for their efforts, both departments clearly recognized that they ultimately would be judged not just on how much "exposure" they achieved through their communications dissemination efforts, but also by whether or not what they did actually "moved" product.

To precisely document and measure the effectiveness of their efforts, the departments identified four somewhat similar communities, then introduced the new product in the first community using advertising techniques only … introduced the product in the second community using publicity techniques only … introduced it in the third community using a combination of both … and introduced it in a fourth community with no advertising or PR support at all -- in an effort to set up a "control" group.

Before and after research was designed and carried out in all four communities, to precisely measure consumer knowledge of and attitudes toward the company and its various meat products *prior to* the new product launch, and two weeks after the launch.

Note: This particular effort gave the company's marketing managers precisely what they needed: hard, measurable data pertaining to which approach worked best, which the company could then use for its marketing and communications efforts overall.

Developing A 'View' Book For Use In Student Recruitment

The public relations officer of an academic institution was asked to prepare a booklet that could be used by the college to more effectively market and promote the institution to a certain segment of its prospective students.

Loads of materials about the college already existed -- including a catalogue, various brochures that described different curricular offerings, and fact sheets that offered background information about different degree and non-degree programs.   The new booklet was deemed necessary to enable the school to reach one special segment of the population with which the college had had only limited success in the past: representatives of a certain racial and ethnic minority group.

In planning for the development of the new promotional booklet, the PR department focused on such issues as the book's eventual distribution to the audience that was being targeted … the desired receptivity to and interest in the contents of the book on the part of that segment of the public … and on the ultimate value that the book might generate for the school, by resulting in increased inquiries, possible applications (and eventual enrollments) by those in the target audience population.

Note: By specifically defining all of the functions that the new book was intended to fulfill, by focusing not only on its contents, but also on its possible means of distribution, the likelihood of it being received, understood and effectively used by those in the target audience group, and the ultimate purpose of the booklet as a means of motivating those in a particular sector to possibly consider applying to the school, the college public relations officer was able to set -- in advance -- very specific measurable objectives that the book's creation was intended to meet.

Be Realistic

Be *realistic* when you develop PR program objectives. A common problem for PR program goal-setters is the temptation to over-promise or to fix on objectives like "drive consumer sales" or "build awareness of the product" without much attention to whether there is anything in the program that could achieve such an objective.

Proper attention to program evaluation can help ensure that objectives are realistic. Consider, for example, a $50,000 recipe service campaign. If the objective were to build national awareness of the food product featured in the recipe campaign, the most likely means to measure success would be a national survey to track consumer awareness of the product and the campaign. (Build awareness; measure change in awareness.) This kind of evaluation is unlikely to show measurable increases in national awareness simply because we are designating some 200 million people as our target audience. It might be better to promise something that can be achieved with $50,000, such as building the brand's visibility among key food reporters and editors, a much more limited -- and realistic -- target audience.

Other ways to be realistic include checking industry benchmarks, comparing notes with colleagues who have done similar projects and reviewing secondary literature. One place to look for comparative benchmarks is in the award application archives of PRSA and CIPRA.

Hopefully, the attached form will help you articulate good PR program objectives.

Business Objectives
1. Who is target audience?
2. What does the organization want target to do?
3. By when must this be accomplished?

How can PR help achieve business objective ?

State how PR can help as objectives:

Objective Test:
1. Is it measurable?
2. Is it an end, not a means?
3. Is it realistic?
4. Time frame?

Revise objective to improve and pass test

Works Cited

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