

Dispelling the Myth of PR Multipliers and Other Inflationary Audience Measures

Paper by

Mark Weiner
President
Delahaye

Don Bartholomew
Senior Vice President
MWW Group

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Mark Weiner
President, Delahaye

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Summary

Multipliers are often used by public relations professionals to factor circulation or audience figures when calculating impressions. Multipliers are generally rationalized by users to take into account pass-along circulation and/or to assign a higher value to PR impressions than advertising impressions due to a perceived higher level of credibility. The authors argue that the facts do not support the use of multipliers, and their use may actually hurt the credibility of the profession.

Background

In their search for a meaningful measure of public relations performance, PR professionals turn to a variety of metrics: in terms of news coverage or “outputs,” common metrics include volume of news coverage, quality of news coverage, and combinations thereof such as the delivery of key positive messages; in terms of impact on the target audience or “outcomes,” common measures include awareness, attitudes, preference and, finally, behavior. The purpose of this paper is to discuss and properly qualify the use of “PR Multipliers” in the assessment of outputs, particularly in the form of quantifying news coverage. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors. While they are consistent with Institute for Public Relations guidelines, this is not intended to be used as strict rules but rather as an expression of a particular viewpoint.

The *Dictionary of Public Relations Measurement and Research*¹ defines an impression as “the number of people who might have the opportunity to be exposed to a story that has appeared in the media; also known as ‘opportunity to see’ (OTS); usually refers to the total audited circulation of a publication or the audience reach of a broadcast vehicle.”

Users of PR Multipliers inflate their results by multiplying the total audited circulation/audience by a certain factor or multiplier. Factors ranging from 2.5 to 8.0 have been reported anecdotally. When program results are presented, data are often reflected in terms of both the actual circulation/audience alongside PR impressions, the term that is frequently used to represent the factored or post-multiplier circulation/audience figure.

¹ Don W. Stacks (Ed.), *Dictionary of Public Relations Measurement and Research*, Institute for Public Relations, 2006.

Those who use and advocate the use of PR Multipliers base their argument on one or more of the following assumptions:

- “Pass-along Circulation,” which assumes, for example, that more than one person reads each newspaper or magazine which is purchased, and therefore, straight circulation and audience figures undercount the actual reach of the news item.
- “PR Value,” which assume that public relations is more credible and carries more impact than advertising and therefore deserves a higher weight than straight circulation and audience.
- “All Hits Are Created Equal,” which assumes that all sections and every edition of a newspaper or magazine, and every broadcast regardless of time of airing, provide the same circulation or audience by using average circulation and audience figures. What is more, some news items contain more or less of PR’s key message points. A story that is loaded with key messages, visuals, headline treatment, product recommendations and is 100% positive in tone is as controlled and valuable as a media placement can be. Unfortunately, a very small percentage (less than 10%) of all coverage meets these criteria. Most coverage presents just a fraction of the intended messages and visuals, sometimes yielding no key messages or references at all. One can argue that a public relations hit totally devoid of key messages actually has little if any value.

Pass-Along Circulation

It is important to note that there are some inconsistencies in the use and reporting of pass-along receivership data. Many publishers conduct their own readership studies and ask their subscribers how many additional individuals typically read their copy of the publication. The combined figure is often reported as the circulation.

BPA Worldwide conducts media audits, including pass-along research for publications and reports the findings. The pass-along readership studies are now conducted independently from subscriber qualification research². The studies ask primary subscribers how many other individuals regularly read their copy of the publication and asks for general classification information (e.g., job function) for the additional individuals receiving the publication. Samples of BPA pass-along research are available on their website.

The unproven value of pass-along readers – the old argument is that if they really valued the publication they would be primary subscribers/readers – is compounded by the multiplier effect. Let’s take a look at three examples of how pass-along distorts the total audited circulation reported by three publications.

² See note from BPA website, www.bpaww.com.

Publication	Primary Circulation	Projected Pass-Along	Total Circulation	Multiplier
<i>Magazine A</i>	9,698	46,874	55,838	5.6
<i>Magazine B</i>	400,100	1,436,804	1,836,904	4.6
<i>Newspaper A</i>	150,000	393,126	543,126	3.6

All data from BPA Pass-along Audit Statements

PR Value

Arguments are often made by public relations professionals that articles, with the implied third-party credibility of the publication in which they appear, have a value that is two or three times that of advertising. The fact is there is no known objective research to support this claim.³

A review of available research on the relative credibility of editorial and advertising shows widely differing results and no consistent winner in the credibility argument. One of the earliest known sources of the position that publicity is more credible than advertising is a paper published in 1968 by Carl Ruff entitled, "Measurement of Publicity Effectiveness by Inquiry Analysis."⁴ Ruff describes a study of inbound product inquiries in which promotional messages about a new product were distributed by publicity in key media and through print advertisements. When an inquiry about the new product was made, the inquirer was asked where they had obtained their information and the answer was recorded. Ruff found that publicity outperformed advertising for that particular product by a 7 to 1 ratio, but noted that for some publications the ratio was only 2.5 to 1, and for others, the reverse was the case and advertising outperformed publicity by a 2.5 to 1 ratio.

Kirk Hallahan of Colorado State University and Glen Cameron of the University of Missouri are two PR researchers who have studied the relative credibility of news and advertising, reviewing the research of others and conducting their own original research.⁵ In one study, Hallahan asked 329 participants to compare news and advertisements and respond to statements measuring credibility and other factors. Respondents generally rated news more highly on credibility than advertising. However, they also:

³ Walter K. Lindenmann and Fraser Likley, "Guidelines for Measuring the Effectiveness of PR Programs and Activities," Institute for Public Relations, 1997, rev. 2003, p.10

⁴ "Measuring and Evaluating Public Relations Activities," a paper published by the American Management Association, (Management Bulletin No. 110).

⁵ For more information see Glen.T. Cameron, "Does Publicity Outperform Advertising? An Experimental Test of the Third-Party Endorsement," *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol. 6, 1994, pp. 185 – 207 and Kurt Hallahan, "No, Virginia, It's Not True What They Say About Publicity's 'Implied Third-Party Endorsement' Effect," *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 25, 1999, pp. 331 – 350.

- Agreed that media often speak for special interests
- Disagreed that reporters and editors are more knowledgeable about products and services than advertising people
- Slightly agreed that they would prefer to get product information in advertisements
- Agreed that advertisements are a more reliable source of product information than news

A pilot experimental study by researchers David Michaelson and Don Stacks,⁶ and sponsored by PRTrak, compared the impact of editorial coverage, print and radio advertising, and web pages on purchase decision factors - message recall, credibility, product rating and interest. The pilot research involved a hypothetical product and University of Miami students whose media use was found comparable to that of the general public. The study found no statistically significant differences between editorial and advertising on any factor. In fact, editorial and print advertising had equal credibility.

In summary, in the words of Hallahan, “If news is more credible than advertising, the evidence is yet to be substantiated.”

All Hits Are Created Equal

Typically, public relations professionals report a single television broadcast audience regardless of the day of the week or the time of day. While it may be impractical to adjust for these variations, most PR media performance reports (clip books, etc.) provide the highest circulation and highest broadcast audience for the day. As such, any use of inflationary tactics such as multipliers inflate what may already be overstated.

The Risk of Multipliers

The practice of using PR multipliers *prima facie* comes with risk and should be avoided. Here are four real-life scenarios encountered by the authors where the use of multipliers proved to be hazardous.

- A marketing client uses more than one PR agency and each agency uses a different “standard” multiplier which causes confusion and undermines credibility and confidence in public relations.
- An agency client compares notes with another of the agency’s clients and discovers that different account groups use different multipliers.

⁶ See Institute for Public Relations website,
www.instituteforpr.org/index.php/IPR/release_single/facing_facts_pr/.

- The product manager replaces one agency with another. The new agency does not use multipliers and has to defend the sizable decrease in impressions compared to the prior agency.
- The client is more familiar with media data than the public relations professional and confronts the PR person to prove the inflationary measure since this measure is unique to PR and is not applied to advertising.

In each of the four cases, the use of PR Multipliers and other inflationary factors actually hurt the credibility of the departments and agencies employing them. Many reputable researchers believe the use of multipliers may tend toward being unethical and dishonest.⁷

Recommendation

The PR profession would be well-served to agree on a common definition of impressions that does not include any inflationary elements including the use of a multiplier of audited circulation or audience numbers, or multiplier to account for added value. In this way we will all be working from the best available data, and can present and compare our campaign results consistently year-to-year, company-to-company, agency-to-agency and country-to-country.

It is recommended that public relations professionals take advantage of the best, most consistent, reliable and defensible media data. Given the availability and widespread acceptance of audited circulations for newspapers and magazines, Arbitron data for radio and Nielsen data for television, there is no credible way or reason to use a multiplier when stating impressions.

Medium	Circulation/Audience Data	To Learn More
Television	Nielsen ratings	http://www.nielsenmedia.com/
Radio	Arbitron ratings	http://www.arbitron.com/home/content.stm
Print	Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) BPA Worldwide	http://www.accessabc.com/index.html http://www.bpaww.com

⁷ Lindenmann and Likely, *op. cit.*

The recommendation for calculating impressions is simply thus:

Print	Impressions = Circulation
Broadcast:	Impressions = Audience
Online:	Impressions = Visitors

Looking Forward

The authors believe that even using Circulation = Impressions without a multiplier overstates the actual, meaningful audience delivery. The fact that there is a difference in receiving a publication and actual readership of a given issue, article or advertisement. Furthermore, for a given publication circulation or broadcast audience, only a subset of the total receivers/readers/viewers are typically members of the intended target audience. Here are a couple of examples to illustrate these two cases:

- There is a marked difference between an impression (opportunity to see) and actually seeing or reading an article. If a receiver of a given publication does not actually see or read your specific advertisement or article, they are not truly meaningful. The probability that any one receiver of a publication will see a given article is relatively small. To dramatize the point, please consider this simple calculation:
 - If regular (3 out of 4 issues) readership of a publication is 70% (it is often lower)...
 - And if through-issue readership (read cover-to-cover as opposed to looking at the table of contents and jumping to a particular article) is 30%...
 - The probability that any one receiver sees your article is as low as 21% (70% x 30%).

In this case, it can be argued that even straight audited circulation data is inflated.

- The PR team is happy – they just got a hit in the prestigious New York Times. According to a recent circulation audit, they claim 4,974,000 impressions.
 - However, if the PR campaign was intended to reach a C-suite/top management audience, they have actually created 598,000 such impressions, only 12% of the original claim.
 - If the campaign was targeted toward women, they have actually created 1,937,000 impressions, or about 39% of the total circulation.
 - If the campaign had hoped to reach those age 25 – 54 years, they have achieved 2,930,000 such impressions, 59% of the total circulation.

In this case, it can be argued that circulation and audience may not be the preferred measure to begin with, and that a measure such as target audience circulation is preferred.

Ideally, information on both of these dimensions would be used to create a much more accurate picture of how many individuals of interest actually saw the article or viewed/listened to the broadcast piece placement. For now, eliminating the use of PR Multipliers would be a meaningful first step for the industry.

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Biographies

Mark Weiner (MWeiner@delahaye.com) is the president of Delahaye, one of the world's leading providers of public relations research, analysis and consulting. Based in Norwalk, Connecticut, Delahaye provides research-based consulting in areas related to public relations, marketing and communication as well as organizational reputation in 40 countries around the globe. The firm's research is used by many of the world's leading companies to set objectives, develop strategy and evaluate the affect of their communication initiatives on the attitudes, understanding and behaviors of their target audiences. The firm currently employs 100 researchers and analysts who provide a range of attitudinal research, traditional and new media content analysis and statistical modeling services.

Since he entered the field in 1986, Mr. Weiner has been a frequent conference speaker and a regular contributor to leading professional journals, sitting on the editorial advisory boards of *Public Relations Strategist* and *PR News*. He is a member of PRSA, IABC and the Commission on Public Relations Measurement & Evaluation, of which he was the 2004 chairman. He is a frequent speaker at conferences and universities and contributes frequently to professional journals.

Previously, Weiner was an editor and syndicated newspaper columnist with the McNaught Newspaper Syndicate after starting his career with *The New York Times* News Service. His book, "Unleashing the Power of PR: A Contrarian's Guide to Marketing and Communication," was published in June 2006 by Jossey-Bass, a division of John Wiley & Sons.

Don Bartholomew (dbartholomew@mww.com) is a senior vice president at MWW Group, one of the nation's top ten public relations agencies, known for its results-driven approach to public relations. Don serves on the Commission on Public Relations Measurement & Evaluation of the Institute for Public Relations. Don has counseled and completed research and measurement projects for numerous companies including Dell, Remy Martin, Merck, Johnson & Johnson, Banana Boat, Forest Labs, Bayer, Boehringer Ingelheim, Eli Lilly and Company, Medtronic, WTA, ATP, SEMATECH, Pioneer, and RadioShack.

Don is a frequent speaker on public relations measurement, ROI and other topics. Recent speaking engagements include Best Practices in Corporate Communications, BMA, PRSA, TPRA, PRSSA, Austin Software Council, The American Gas Association, The Branding Institute and the University of Texas. Don holds a B.S. in industrial engineering and operations research from Syracuse University and an MBA from the University of Dallas.