

# Evaluation

Caroline Kealey

# Setting the Stage

Evaluation has always been the Achilles' Heel of communicators. We have consistently and chronically struggled with evaluating our work and sharing measurement reports in a way that is meaningful and reliable. This challenge has created a systemic credibility deficit for our profession. Too often, we show up to an executive-level gun fight about resourcing or strategy armed only with a fly swatter, because we just don't have the evidence we need. In a data-driven business world, we are falling dangerously behind. We can be sure that if we don't change this dynamic as professional communicators, no one will do it for us.

If we want to replace noise with evidence, we have to step up our evaluation game.

I have found that good evaluation is like a thread, and when you pull up on it, the rest of a communications team's performance is lifted. Elevating your focus on evaluation also yields a by-product benefit: it dramatically increases the sense of morale and purpose among communicators. Rather than feeling like you're running on a hamster wheel with no end in sight, by taking ownership over the process of defining success, you immediately dial up the sense of purpose and agency in your work.

While a whole industry has sprung up to attempt to capitalize on the vexing challenge of evaluating communications, my advice is to keep it simple. At its core, evaluation is a logical exercise of presenting a chain of evidence that connects communications activity to corporate results.



## Focus on Correlation, not Causation

**The first rule of communication evaluation is to demonstrate *directional alignment*, not *causality*.**

It's deterministic and reductionist to claim that X communications activity led to Y outcome. After all, communication is defined as the exchange of information, ideas and emotions, which means it's a messy business. It follows then, that tracking its impact has to take the human factor into account.

The intent of evaluating communication is to illustrate what's working and what's not in contributing to a target business outcome. Your goal however, is not to take credit for the outcome, as it will almost certainly be the result of the combined efforts of communications and other functional groups.

For example, you can demonstrate that your employee engagement videos have high rates of click-throughs on the intranet and strong quantitative and qualitative positive feedback. To state that your employee engagement videos have caused an increase in employee retention would be a leap in logic (what's known as a spurious conclusion). This is the kind of over-simplification that gets us into trouble and is erosive to our profession's credibility.

A more valid and meaningful approach would be to look at a combination of employee communication activities and juxtapose them against business indicators such as retention and reduction in absenteeism. Can you observe a general pattern (e.g. that it appears that the more employee communication activity takes place, the better business indicators perform, or when communication activity stops there is a drop in business indicators)? Again, be careful not to draw cause and effect conclusions, but see if you can tell a story about directional alignment between communication and business results.

Here are a few guidelines on communications evaluation:

**Start with solid objectives.** There is no way you can evaluate anything without first having solid objectives. That's why the Results Map® methodology emphasizes the importance of identifying specific and workable corporate and communications objectives.

**Identify points of comparison.** Evaluation is an inherently comparative exercise: you can't demonstrate progress or change unless you've identified a point of comparison. By analogy, if your objective is to lose weight, the only way you can evaluate your result is to know what your weight was at the start. There are two ways to set up a comparative framework for evaluation:

### 1. Baseline Data

Document the reference point that will be used to evaluate progress. For example, last year's client satisfaction survey may form the baseline against which you will track performance. You may find that your organization has baseline data available from outside the communications branch – investigate whether there are useful sources of data from your colleagues in human resources, operations or the research department, for example. If there are no available baseline sources, don't worry – your initiative will form the baseline which can then be used as a reference point for evaluation in subsequent years.

### 2. Benchmark Analysis

Benchmarking is a comparative exercise usually structured among peer organizations. For example, if you work for a university you might benchmark your communications or recruitment performance against another school (selected based on similar size and scope).

**Think of evaluation as a state of mind.** The most powerful way to step up your game in evaluation is to treat it as a state of mind, rather than as a task. The idea is that you consistently look at your communications activity from a results-based perspective anchored in a relentless pursuit of defining "what does success look like." The mechanics of evaluation are fine, and we'll get to those in a moment, but at its essence, evaluation is about a mindset of seeing beyond output or activity and focusing on results.

A good place to start is to try this exercise: Imagine your internal client is giddy with excitement and delight. What single metric or indicator might have changed to make her so happy? Perhaps it's that sales have gone up by 50% or workplace injuries are down by 80%. Similarly, in your communications context, what would you consider to be a banner win worthy of shouting from the rooftops? Maybe it's the level of employee engagement or the social media amplification you've generated through a digital campaign. The power of an evaluation mindset is that it creates a gravitational pull toward a clearly identified definition of success. This is best achieved with laser-like focus – think about a top business and communication indicator as your target, then use that to guide day-to-day decisions and tactics that will move you in that direction.