ARE WE REALLY MAKING A DIFFERENCE?
The gap between outcomes and evaluation research in public relations campaigns

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Abstract

Public relations helps organisations establish reputations (Plowman, Briggs & Huang 2001), improve community relationships (Ledingham & Bruning 2000, Stark & Kruckeberg 2001), resolve conflict (Coombs 2001, Ehling, White & Grunig 1992, Grunig 2001, Springston & Keyton 2001), and change attitudes and behaviours (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2000), Grunig & Repper 1992, Hendrix 2004). Such outcomes are valued by managers (Guth & Marsh 2003, Newson, Turk & Kruckeberg 2004) who increasingly require evidence of public relations' contribution to organisational goals. Although practitioners use both formal and informal methods to evaluate their effectiveness (Walker 1994, Watson 2001), it is unclear how their reporting of public relations success measures up to actual achievement of outcomes.

Public relations evaluation has received much attention in both academic and practitioner literature (Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore 1997, Cutlip, Center & Broom 2000, Dozier & Repper 1992, Hendrix 2004, Walker 1994, Watson 2001). In 1994, the International Public Relations Association in conjunction with the Public Relations Institute of Australia produced a gold paper on public relations evaluation, stressing the need for professionals to demonstrate their professional accountability through evaluation.

Guided by these recommendations and academic literature, this study uses five years of public relations campaign data gathered from 118 awards case studies to identify evaluation methods and examine the reporting of public relations evaluation against set outcomes. Finally this paper poses a set of initiatives to enhance public relations accountability through effective evaluation and advance the profession's ability to make a difference.

Paper stream: *Public and Political Communication*

Introduction

Public relations helps organisations establish reputations (Plowman, Briggs & Huang 2001), improve community relationships (Ledingham & Bruning 2000, Stark & Kruckeberg 2001), resolve conflict (Coombs 2001, Ehling, White & Grunig 1992, Grunig 2001, Springston & Keyton 2001), and change attitudes and behaviours (Cutlip, Center & Broom 2000, Grunig & Repper 1992, Hendrix 2004). While such outcomes are valued (Grunig 1992, Wilson 1992, Cutlip et al 2000, Heath 2001), organisational managers are increasingly demanding evidence of public relations' contribution to organisational goals. This increased focus on accountability and organisational reporting has been reflected in a number of studies (see, for example, Walker 1994, Watson 2001) and in the continuing professional education programs of industry bodies.

Public relations program evaluation plays a significant role in demonstrating accountability (Wilson 1992) and determining effectiveness (Cutlip et al 2000, Fairchild 2002). As there is no one simplistic method for measuring public relations effectiveness (Lindenmann, 1993, cited in Watson, 2001), practitioners can select among an array of different methods and models to evaluate and demonstrate their effectiveness. Models of evaluation available to practitioners can be categorised into those focusing on a specific process of public relations such as Nobel's (1994) Dimensional Model of Media Evaluation, or those accommodating an integrated planning approach such as Cutlip et al's (2000) Planning, Implementation and Impact model, Lindemann's (1993) two step public relations yardstick and Watson's (2001) Short term and Continuing Models of Evaluation to respond to effects created by a public relations program.

While Center and Jackson (2003) consider that measurement and evaluation have emerged as central to effective practice, it is unclear how the reporting of public relations success measures up to the actual achievement of outcomes. In 1994, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), in conjunction with the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), produced a gold paper on public relations evaluation, stressing the need for professionals to demonstrate their accountability through evaluation (IPRA, 1994). A decade on, evaluation and accountability are recognised as a strong part of good practice (McCoy & Hargie 2003). However, some authors (Phillips 2001, Watson 2001, Kelly 2001) suggest that practitioners still have limited understanding of the use of evaluation research or restrict its use to particular types.

In a study undertaken by Pohl and Vandeventer (2001), less than half of the respondents identified formal evaluation methods in their campaign plans. Paradoxically, practitioners suggested that the pressure to keep achieving sound levels of performance meant that no time was available for evaluation to demonstrate that performance (Pohl & Vandeventer 2001, 361). In addition, Cutlip et al (2000, p. 433) suggest that evaluation may be used by practitioners 'to learn what happened and why, not to "prove" or "do" something'. A major Australian study of public relations practitioners suggests that while practitioners believe in doing research for public relations work, half of the practitioners surveyed did not believe that they could precisely measure public relations outcomes, impact and effectiveness (Walker 1997).

Research question 1: Is evaluation central to demonstrating performance in Australian public relations campaigns?

Many studies have identified constraints on public relations practitioners undertaking appropriate evaluation of public relations campaigns. Such constraints include a general reluctance by clients to invest in research (Walker 1994), limited time (Pohl & Vandeventer 2001), a lack of understanding of the role of public relations by both client and practitioner, and a lack of practitioner knowledge and skills in research and evaluation (Walker 1997).

Given the diversity of public relations practice, it is likely that effectiveness and accountability can best be demonstrated by applying an array of different evaluation methods. However, use of such methods will be limited by the research and evaluation skills of the practitioner. The limited or inaccurate application of appropriate evaluation tools not only impacts a particular campaign but may have the cumulative effect of limiting the demonstration in quantifiable terms of public relations contribution to organisational outcomes in general (Dozier 1990, cited in White & Dozier 1992). Lack of research skills has been identified as a limiting factor in the career progression of public relations practitioners (Cutlip et al 2000, Kelly 2001), increasing the likelihood of a practitioner focus on technician-style or process skills which provide little direct reference to achieving organisational goals.

Wilson (1992) suggests practitioners lack the knowledge to integrate the research, planning, implementation and evaluation steps of the traditional planning process, thereby limiting the effectiveness of the outcomes. Whereas authors such as Center and Jackson (2003) suggest that there is an increasing emphasis on behavioural measurement in public relations, that is focusing on the outcomes of programs in terms of the impact on particular publics as opposed to the outputs of implementation, a number of studies have established that generally the application of evaluation is restricted to program output (Watson 1992, Walker 1994, Pohl & Vandeventer 2001). Cutlip et al (2000) note that this focus on the implementation phase may be due to the convenience and accessibility of data to inform such evaluation.

Reporting on a United Kingdom study of evaluation amongst public relations practitioners in 1992, Watson (2001) found that there was confusion about what the term evaluation meant. Watson (2001) also suggests that there was an oversimplification of evaluation research methodology amongst respondents, reinforcing Kelly's (2001) view that practitioners have a lack of knowledge and understanding of research.

Walker (1994), in researching Australian public relations campaigns, found that although practitioners used a mix of evaluative measures, there was a focus on media coverage that lacked any sound analysis, and no related measures to validate program effectiveness were provided. Advertising dollar equivalent of media coverage, a practice strongly criticised by the PRIA in a policy paper on evaluation (Macnamara, 2004) was also used because it was easy to determine. Watson (2001, p. 285) considers that 'while these types of assessment are widely practised, they are not valid and reliable methods of evaluation undertaken with any consistency or objectivity'. In particular, Fairchild (2002) suggests that the temptation to evaluate public relations

in advertising terms should be resisted not only because of its lack of validity but because it undermines the worth of public relations.

Research question 2: What methods of evaluation are Australian practitioners using to demonstrate performance?

Research question 3: How is media coverage positioned as an evaluation tool within Australian public relations campaigns?

Research question 4: Has the use of evaluation methods in Australian public relations campaigns changed during the period 1997 – 2001?

Cutlip et al (2000) suggest that evaluation needs to reflect different stages and levels in the public relations process, including preparation evaluation (measuring the adequacy of background information, quality and appropriateness of message preparation), implementation evaluation (measures of distribution, coverage, reach and circulation) and impact evaluation (documents how outcomes outlined in the objectives for each target public and the overall program goal were achieved), a process not established as occurring regularly in all campaigns (Pohl & Vandeventer 2001).

While public relations scholars dedicate chapters to research and evaluation (see, for example, Grunig 1992, Cutlip et al 2000, Heath 2001) to inform better practice, research suggests that practitioners still make common errors in applying evaluation techniques to their campaigns. Center and Jackson (2003) suggest one of the most common errors involves the substitution of measures from one level (preparation/implementation/impact or input/output/outcome) for those at another level. For example, practitioners may use the number of media releases sent (an output measure during program implementation) as a measure of program effectiveness (impact), despite there being no demonstrated link to an outcome for a particular public or its relationship with the sponsoring organisation. Such errors have the potential to reduce the credibility of program evaluation and, thus, the value of the contribution of public relations to organisational outcomes.

Research question 5: Do evaluation measures in Australian public relations campaigns reflect different stages and levels in the public relations process?

Research question 6: Do evaluation measures in Australian public relations campaigns accurately demonstrate the achievement of campaign objectives?

Research methodology

To examine trends in public relations evaluation, this study analysed award-winning Australian public relations cases against academic and practitioner evaluation planning frameworks. The coding instrument was drawn principally from IPRA's gold paper on evaluation (1994), which divides evaluation into three categories: input, output, and outcome evaluation. This categorisation of evaluation methods was used as it is endorsed by the PRIA, the key practitioner body in Australia, and was developed by IPRA and the PRIA after consideration of a wide range of available

models. As trends in input evaluation within Australian public relations cases have been reported elsewhere (Authors suppressed, 2003), this paper focuses on in progress and post campaign evaluation practices as represented by output and outcome evaluation methods (see Table 1).

Table 1: List of evaluation categories and methods

Evaluation category	Evaluation methods
Output	Statistics on distribution (messages) Media monitoring Media content analysis Audience analysis Statistical analysis Response rates Coding material Attitude and image studies Communication audit Organisational culture study Analysis of complaints
Outcome	Focus group discussions In-depth interviews surveys Pre and post tests Unobtrusive data collection Quasi-experimental study Activity outcome

Reference: IPRA Public Relations Evaluation: Professional Accountability Gold Paper No. 11, 1994

Sample

The sample for this research is taken from award-winning entries to the PRIA Golden Target Awards. One hundred and eighteen award-winning public relations cases from 1997 to 2001 inclusive were analysed. These awards span seven categories: comprehensive communication program, community communication, employee or member communication, government communication, investor or financial communication, issues or crisis management, and marketing communication. Entries are judged by a panel of senior public relations practitioners and academics and awarded gold, highly commended or commended against set criteria determined by the PRIA. Additionally, entries must meet specific formatting requirements. Each entry is limited to 2,200 words and must include the following sections: executive summary, situation analysis, goals and objectives, research, target publics, communication strategy and implementation, budget, results, and evaluation.

For this study, the specific unit of observation was the results and evaluation sections of each Golden Target Award. The PRIA entry criteria for each section are described in the table below. Each unit was at least one page in length.

Table 2: PRIA awards criteria

	Criteria
Results	Outline what the program achieved and provide evidence of the results.
Evaluation	Assess the outcomes of the program in relation to its objectives

Reference: PRIA Golden Target Awards Entry Criteria, 2001

Coding and reliability

Data were coded by two coders against the categories and methods listed in Table 1. Prior to data collection, the research instrument was tested by both coders on three cases. Coding categories and operational definitions were refined and retested on two further cases, resulting in a reliability score of 0.74 for the instrument. During the coding process, reliability was checked periodically and remained above this level. Krippendorff (1980) argues that reliability is present when scores are better than chance. While reliability for this study is within acceptable parameters, it can be improved in subsequent studies.

Data analysis

Data from the 118 cases were entered into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency counts and descriptive statistics were calculated for the relevant variables with chi square analyses conducted where necessary to ascertain the significance of the frequency distribution by comparing expected and observed frequencies. For continuous variables such as the total number of evaluation methods used per campaign, the normality of the distribution was also tested with skewness and kurtosis measures.

Limitations

There are several limitations for this study. The sample includes only those cases that were entered into the PRIA's awards, thereby representing only a small percentage of public relations campaigns implemented in Australia within any one year. Entry is only open to PRIA members, therefore this study does not map the evaluation practices of non-PRIA members who represent a significant part of the Australian industry. The sample also only includes award-winning cases, thus relying on the original judges' understanding and application of criteria for an entry to be included in the sample.

Walker (1994) set a precedent for using this sample in reporting research trends in Australian public relations. Walker (1994) acknowledged additional limitations in practitioner reporting of research potentially caused by low familiarity with research terminology. Further, the award entry may not give a true or complete picture of the public relations program due to the screening of information by the client, the sensitive nature of some issues and campaigns, and word limitations on entries (Walker 1994).

Results

Is evaluation central to demonstrating performance in Australian public relations campaigns?

An analysis of the data revealed that public relations practitioners are demonstrating performance through output and outcome evaluation. All of the campaigns analysed within this study report on evaluation techniques in some manner. Practitioners use an

average of three evaluation methods ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.56$) per program. A further breakdown of this result revealed that in all but 12 cases ($N = 118$), output evaluation methods, which described implementation or production outputs, were used. On average, two output evaluation methods were implemented ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.48$). Outcome evaluation methods, a measure for the impact of the program, were used in all but 38 cases ($N = 118$), with an average of one tool per campaign ($M = 1.00$, $SD = 0.92$). This frequency distribution is illustrated in table below.

Table 3: Output and outcome evaluation frequencies

Number of evaluation tools used in campaign	Output Evaluation	Outcome Evaluation
None	12	38
1	29	52
2	25	20
3	25	6
4	18	2
5	7	-
6	2	-

What methods of evaluation are Australian practitioners using to demonstrate performance?

Walker (1997) identified publicity tracking or media monitoring, literature searches or information retrieval, and surveys as the three most frequent planning and evaluation research methods. Although this study focused on evaluation research methods, its findings agree with the use of media evaluation methods.

Overall, in evaluating public relations campaigns, Australian practitioners favoured output evaluation methods over outcome evaluation methods. Output evaluation methods accounted for 74 percent of reported methods across the sample.

The most common output evaluation methods were response rates, which included measures such as attendance to meetings or call centre feedback, and media monitoring, where practitioners monitored the amount of media clippings achieved (see Table 4.1). The least common output evaluation methods were organisational culture studies and communication audits with no record of attitude or image studies, as defined by IPRA. This low use of communication audits as an output evaluation method does not correspond to Walker's (1997) finding that audits are a common research tool in public relations consultancy. Interestingly, IPRA (1994) defines communication audits as part of both input and output evaluation categories, with the latter examining the effectiveness of communication channels. The difference in rankings with Walker's study may be based on the different classification of pre-program, in-progress, and post-program evaluation as the former category has been excluded from this study's results.

In a similar trend to that observed in frequency of outcome evaluation, 26 percent of methods reported were evaluated using outcome based methods. The most common outcome evaluation methods were surveys used to confirm change in target publics and activity outcome, used to measure the result of a program aimed at a particular

(see Table 4.2 below). The least common outcome evaluation methods were in-depth
interviews and pre-and post tests with no record of quasi-experimental studies.

Table 4.1: Use of output evaluation methods in campaigns

Output evaluation methods	% use
Distribution statistics	28.81
Media monitoring	64.41
Media content analysis	41.53
Coding material	8.47
Audience analysis	4.24
Statistical analysis	6.78
Response rates	66.10
Attitude and image studies	5.93
Communication audit	1.69
Organisational culture study	0.85
Complaint analysis	2.54

Table 4.2: Use of outcome evaluation methods in campaigns

Outcome evaluation methods	% use
Focus groups	4.24
In-depth interviews	4.24
Surveys	22.88
Pre and post tests	3.39
Unobtrusive data collection	17.80
Quasi-experimental study	0.00
Activity outcome	29.66

How is media coverage positioned as an evaluation tool within Australian public relations campaigns?

While the data show a strong preference for media evaluation by practitioners, the
sophistication of such evaluation varied within the sample. Categorised as an output
evaluation tool, media evaluation comprised two evaluation methods: media
monitoring, and media content analysis (see Table 5). Media monitoring calculated
the amount of media coverage achieved by monitoring press clippings and calculating
supposed audience exposure (IPRA, 1994). Media content analysis involved the
systematic analysis of media clippings to assess the reporting of an organisation's key
messages (IPRA, 1994). Media monitoring was undertaken by the majority of public
relations campaigns, (χ^2 (1, $N = 118$) = 9.80, p < .01), however there is no significant
trend in the use or non-use of media content analysis, (χ^2 (1, $N = 118$) = 3.39, *ns)*.

Table 5: Frequency of media monitoring and content analysis methods

	Media monitoring	Media content analysis
Used	76	49
Not used	42	69

Has the use of evaluation methods in Australian public relations campaigns changed during the period of 1997 – 2001?

Based on data gathered approximately 10 years ago, Walker (1997) reported that 96 percent of respondents believed 'that public relations research, measurement and evaluation projects will almost certainly grow in importance during the 1990s' (p. 108). Furthermore, 53 percent of consultants believed public relations research, measurement and evaluation studies would increase greatly over the following five years (Walker 1997). Although this study did not capture the views of practitioners on the importance of public relations evaluation, the exposure given to evaluation practices within the sample cases suggests there has been limited change in practitioner focus over the sample period, 1997 to 2001.

As outlined in Table 6.1, the number of output evaluation methods used in each case varied from year to year without demonstrating any trend towards greater total use of output evaluation across time (χ^2 (24, $N = 118$) = 29.25, *ns*). In considering individual output methods used, statistical analysis was used most often in the year 2000 (χ^2 (4, $N = 118$) = 10.98, $p < .05$). Non-significant results were recorded for all other output evaluation methods.

Although the use by practitioners of outcome evaluation did show some significant differences over time, (χ^2 (16, $N = 118$) = 36.65, $p = .002$), there was no trend towards a greater use of outcome evaluation methods by practitioners (see Table 6.2). The use, or more particularly the lack of use, has remained fairly constant over the sample period. The use of no (0) methods increased in 1999 and 2000, but decreased substantially in 2001 to only three cases. In the same year, a significant increase in the number of cases using two outcome evaluation methods occurred. The specific evaluation method of unobtrusive data collection, was used most in 2001 and least in 1999 and 2000 (χ^2 (4, $N = 118$) = 31.39, $p < .001$). Non-significant results were recorded for all other outcome evaluation methods.

Table 6.1: Output evaluation frequency trends

Year	Frequency of output evaluation methods per case						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
1997	1	7	7	3	3	1	0
1998	4	4	1	5	2	2	0
1999	1	7	5	5	2	2	0
2000	2	3	4	9	8	1	0
2001	4	8	8	3	3	1	2
Total	12	29	25	25	18	7	2

Table 6.2: Outcome evaluation frequency trends

Year	Frequency of outcome evaluation methods per case				
	0	1	2	3	4
1997	5	15	2	0	0
1998	7	9	2	0	0
1999	11	11	0	0	0
2000	16	10	1	0	0
2001	3	14	9	2	1
Total	42	59	14	2	1

Do evaluation measures in Australian public relations campaigns reflect different stages and levels in the public relations process?

As outlined previously, the cases provide evidence of evaluation being undertaken to measure input, output and outcome levels. This suggests evaluation occurring throughout the campaign process from research, through to implementation and post campaign review. However, equal attention does not appear to be given to each stage. Specific measures on output and outcome levels have been reported under previous sections.

Do evaluation measures in Australian public relations campaigns accurately demonstrate the achievement of campaign objectives?

As outlined earlier, the sample cases suggest that practitioners use output based evaluation methods three times more than outcome based evaluation methods. As output evaluation methods are designed to measure output style objectives and outcome evaluation methods are designed to measure outcome style objectives, a similar level of ratio of output to outcome objectives within the sample should be evident. To test this hypothesis, the objectives section of each case was examined and the objectives listed were classified as input, output or outcome. Input objectives are not considered in these results given the focus is on implementation and outcome based evaluation. Data revealed that campaigns used a fairly even split of both output-based and outcome-based objectives in campaign planning (see Table 7) thereby differing substantially from the ratio of output to outcome evaluation methods.

Table 7: Frequency of output and outcome objectives within total sample

	Frequency within total sample	%
Output objectives	235	48.85
Outcome objectives	246	51.14
Total	481	

Seeking further clarification of the mismatch in the ratios of output to outcome objectives and evaluation, the 38 cases where outcome evaluation was not listed as being used were examined. Interestingly, all of these cases included both output and outcome objectives, however, only output evaluation methods were used to demonstrate performance against these objectives.

Particular examples of the mismatch of use of output/outcome objectives to output/outcome evaluation methods were sought from the cases to illustrate the approaches taken by practitioners. Tables 8.1 and 8.2 provide examples from the cases where a match of output and outcome objectives and evaluation methods were found. Table 8.3 provides examples from the cases where a substitution of approach at a different level was found. It should be noted that in coding the objectives for this comparison, no judgement was made on the standard of the objective in terms of matching recommended attributes such as measurability, target specific or timeframe specific. That analysis is the subject of a different study on objectives within Australian public relations campaigns.

Table 8.1: Match between output objectives and output evaluation methods

Output objectives	Output evaluation
To communicate changes	• Information was publicised in the news section of the seven

to members and potential entrants.	publications • Other initiatives including information on a website, member magazine ad, local government broadcast email, resulted in an enormous increase in enquiries
To generate substantial media coverage of the event in local, state and national media in the 12 months prior to the event, during the event, and in the two months following the event.	• The campaign generated media coverage in every Australian capital city • 209 known print media clippings were generated Australia-wide • 16 known electronic media spots were generated Australia wide • More than 40 percent of these clips were generated during the week itself.
To attract more than 100 general practitioners to each seminary thus being able to talk to GPs face to face	• Of the five symposia held…all were "oversubscribed" beyond the minimum targeted attendance figures…many had a waiting list. • The survey showed that approximately half of GPs in Perth had attended at least one symposium

Table 8.2: Match between outcome objectives and outcome evaluation methods

Outcome objectives	Outcome evaluation
Minimise the loss in sales	• National sales were less than 10 percent down on last year's figures and increasing week-by-week with an expectation the organisation will equal targets in two months
To identify and recruit at least one credible [project] health professional advocate in each state	• Of the 12 attendees, one expert per state has agreed to act as a [project] spokesperson when required.
To increase sales of [product] by 5 % percent compared to 2000 sales data.	• Sales up 5.6% versus 2000 data with 2001 YTD sales up 6.3% versus budget.
To reduce the amount of waste going to landfill by 60% by the year 2000	• Statistics compiled by Council for the period June 1998-June 1999 indicate a 30% per capita reduction in the amount of waste going to landfill. • Since 1990 when the State Government's directive was put into place [local] Council has reduced its domestic waste by 52%. (The domestic waste reduction target was 50%, the overall target was 60%.)

Table 8.3: Mismatch between outcome objectives and output evaluation methods

Outcome objectives	Output evaluation
Gain commitment to market [organisation] as a good place to live, work and do business.	• 14 public sector agency CEOs and 12 agency marketing staff participated in workshops to assist in developing the new brand
Ensure [organisation] employees understand and support e-business, enabling them to act as informal ambassadors to friends, customers, and business colleagues	• Telemarketing results showed that 60 percent of managers had personally presented to their staff on the e-business campaign. Eighty percent of managers said the material was easy to deploy. • Intranet site is receiving on average 3,000 hits per day.
Create awareness of the project as a landmark event for south-east Queensland.	• 11,000 people sought information via the inquiry line, hotline and website. • 35,000 property owners received direct-mail information on 31 changes to local traffic arrangements • 52 community group meetings were held

	• Easy access to information via weekly construction advertisements • [Organisation] will use the communication program as model for other major projects.

Discussion and implications

As a criteria for entry, some discussion on evaluation techniques was expected within each case. A variety of evaluation practices were used in the sample of Australian award-winning campaigns from 1997 – 2001 to demonstrate campaign performance, confirming the wide array of methods available to practitioners for this purpose. Practitioners appear to be overcoming some of the constraints to evaluation research as outlined by Walker (1994) and Pohl and Vandeventer (2001), with at least one method of evaluation being used in each campaign and an average of three methods being used to evaluate performance.   The predominance of output over outcome evaluation methods supports the findings of a number of previous studies (Watson 1992, Walker 1994, Pohl & Vandeventer 2001) and limits the claims public relations can make to contributing to organisational goals (Center & Jackson 2003).

Output methods of evaluation focus primarily on implementation measures, particularly in the areas of measures of distribution, coverage, reach and circulation (Cutlip et al 2000). At best, they demonstrate that the process of public relations activity within a campaign has been completed. Output methods provide very limited measures of any impact on publics, a critical component of demonstrating effectiveness in today's public relations campaigns (Center & Jackson 2003).

The results suggest Australian practitioners strongly use the output technique of media monitoring to evaluate their programs. A similar preference for media evaluation methods was found in Walker's (1997, 1994) study of Australian public relations practice. Walker (1997) identified publicity tracking or media monitoring as the most frequent research technique to support public relations planning and evaluation. While not the most frequent technique found in this study, media evaluation remained one of the most popular choices for practitioners across the five year timeframe.

Walker's earlier study (1994) suggested that media evaluation focused on amounts of media coverage rather than on an analysis of the content of the coverage or its implications for the organisation. This study confirms those findings, with less than half the award-winning cases including any media content analysis and only two thirds of those that included any media monitoring also addressing media content analysis. Although Nobel (1994) suggests practitioners can make cautious links between media evaluation and campaign results, the findings of this study suggest that such caution is not being heeded by Australian public relations practitioners.

Given the prominence of evaluation methods in public relations texts (see for example, Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore 1997, Cutlip et al 2000, Hendrix 2004), the exaltation to increased professionalism in evaluation techniques by industry bodies such as the PRIA, and the predictions by Australian practitioners of a stronger focus on evaluation (Walker 1994), it was expected that some evidence of improvement in practice would be found across the timeframe of this study. However, no such

improvement can be gleaned from the data. There was no evidence of a sustained increase in the number of evaluation methods being used within each campaign over the timeframe, nor any trend towards the higher level outcome category of evaluation methods. In fact, in two of the five years representing the middle point of the study's timeframe, no outcome measures was the highest or equal highest count of outcome measures across the sample. While output measures dominated consistently across the five year period, it is difficult to see how the use of even these measures demonstrate improvement in practice with more than 60 percent of cases reported in the final year of the study still using three or less methods to evaluate an entire campaign. Given the strong positioning of media monitoring as at least one of these techniques, considerable claims of campaign effectiveness are being made from the other methods.

Cutlip et al (2000) suggest that practitioners need to demonstrate how they can contribute to organisational effectiveness and achieve organisational goals. The ability of the award-winning public relations campaigns in Australia to demonstrate this contribution through evaluation measures is questionable. As suggested by Fairchild (2002), theory and exhortation still appear to be much more common than actual practice. The authors of this paper recognise that caution needs to be applied in drawing conclusions on practice by assessing overall frequencies within the sample population rather than on individual measures within individual cases. Notwithstanding such caution, the results of this study suggest that while many practitioners are still focusing on output evaluation measures, even those suggesting they are using outcome evaluation measures may in fact be falling foul of one of the most common errors of evaluation by substituting measures from one level of analysis with another (Center & Jackson 2003). With an equal proportion of output to outcome objectives being recorded within the total sample, but a three to one ratio of output to outcome evaluation, it would appear that campaign managers are using inappropriate evaluation techniques to make claims of achievement for outcome objectives. Further support for this position is provided by the specific examples of a mismatch in objective type to evaluation method included in Table 9.3.

Fundamental to making claims of successful achievement is applying an appropriate technique to support such claims. A lack of practitioner knowledge and skills in research and evaluation has been identified through a number of studies (see, for example, Walker 1997, Kelly 2001) and may be a contributing factor to the application of inaccurate evaluation techniques demonstrated in this study. Further research on practitioners' ability to select and implement appropriate evaluation techniques to measure different types of objectives is needed.

The results of this study do not provide strong evidence that Australian public relations practitioners have adopted Center and Jackson's (2003) position that measurement and evaluation are central to effective practice. In 1997, Walker undertook a major study of Australian practitioners on evaluation practice, demonstrating the need for improvement across the field. Close to a decade on, there appears to be limited evidence of sustained improvement. While evaluation is clearly evident in campaign planning and reporting, the use of evaluation techniques remains limited to particular types and categories that do not demonstrate true impact on publics or contributions to organisational goals. While outside the scope of this research project, the wider implications of presenting national industry awards to

programs that perpetuate basic errors in performance measurement also needs to be examined as award winning campaigns are likely to be used by other practitioners as exemplars of practice, reinforcing a lack of good practice in this area.

Walker's (1997) findings, that a significant proportion of practitioners do not believe that they can precisely measure public relations outcomes, need to be re-examined to ascertain its impact on attempts to undertake outcomes focused research. As the inability to measure public relations outcomes is now discounted in most major texts (see for example Cutlip et al 2000, Grunig 1992, Heath 2001, Hendrix 2004), the practitioner beliefs as cited may be driven by a lack of knowledge and skills in research and evaluation. Further research is needed to better understand the competency of Australian practitioners to apply appropriate evaluation techniques and to identify strategies for improvement in this area. Practitioner competency is only one of the identified constraints to effective evaluation (Walker 1994, Walker 1997) and further research should revisit the identified constraints to assess their influence in evaluation decisions in campaign planning and reporting.

While this study has focused on award winning campaigns to benchmark current practice, further research should be done directly with Australian practitioners to establish how they communicate success to management. In addition, the voices of organisational managers and clients should be mapped to understand their expectations of public relations outcomes and how they expect practitioners to demonstrate their effectiveness.

Public relations has a strategic role to play in establishing and maintaining organisational relationships with important stakeholders (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). However, the true value of public relations as a management function will not be realised unless public relations practitioners can consistently demonstrate their effectiveness in contributing to organisational goals. Central to such demonstration is the ability to apply appropriate evaluation techniques to measure campaign success and to focus on behavioural outcomes (Center & Jackson 2003) as opposed to measures of campaign output.

The inability of public relations practitioners to demonstrate their effectiveness in line with other management functions leaves the discipline open to cannibalisation by other more quantitatively focused sectors. It is unlikely that the public relations industry in Australia has another decade to demonstrate improved performance. Therefore, initiatives to enhance evaluation practice need to be given priority by industry bodies and education facilities. Such initiatives could focus on practitioner education in specific research techniques (particularly non-media based techniques) and their applicability in demonstrating different types of performance measures. To ensure adequate funding for program evaluation, cost benefit analysis of pre and post campaign research should also be conducted. Further initiatives should re-emphasise the different types of campaign objectives and their importance in setting expectations in campaign performance. Finally, the wide distribution of exemplars of practice, demonstrating innovative and accurate applications of program evaluation, will fortify the profession's ability to make a difference.

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