

Measurement or Magic?

Within our communication community there are some great examples of colleagues working with effective measurement that brings value to the business. Not only is measurement part of their strategic thinking, but they understand the basic tools essential for robust, reliable research. Let's call them the "Measurement Maestros."

Then we have the "Listen and Learn" category. These communicators recognise the value of measurement but also that they need to learn more – a fact confirmed by research I carried out last year among communication professionals worldwide when many found one of the main barriers for measurement was a lack of knowledge of methodology to carry it out effectively.

But then we have the third – and fortunately smallest – group. The "La La's" – so named because they put their fingers in their ears rather than listen to the essential information about conducting dependable measurement. They are looking for some "magic" solutions.

It starts at the very first phase of any measurement programme. Our "Measurement Maestros" involve their colleagues, in particular defining with senior management the information they need as part of the business. This, they know, means management will value the measurement as it will relate to what their organisation is aiming to achieve in business terms.

So the coverage of the measurement is likely to include aspects such as understanding of business messages, level of involvement and people's sense of where they fit in the organisation and how they can contribute to its aims.

On the other side, our "La La's" evolve their own plans and hug the project close; they will be surprised and hurt when colleagues take no interest in the results. They will be thinking solely in terms of how many read the publications, how "interested" in their intranet site and other aspects of the media alone.

What about the specific questions? Here the "La La's" have been convinced that they can use a model or an established question set which have been "proved" to correlate with engagement, performance etc. This myth has been exploded by Peter Hutton in his book: "What Are Your Staff Trying to Tell You." So this seemingly easy solution has to be put in the "magic" category.

The "Measurement Maestros" know that one question set cannot provide the easy answer to everything. Not only is each organisation unique, but also the drivers of engagement, performance etc will differ by individuals' job role, function and age. But they do realise that additional insight can be found through some models such as IABC's Trust Model (check this out on www.iabc.com.)

When specific, relevant questions have been developed, the LL's believe they know best and are confident that their questions will be understood – no need to try them out on the employees before going live. On the other hand, the MM's recognise that some terms may be ambivalent or even unknown to their audience and need to be

clarified. This avoids using words like integrity and vision which may be common parlance at the top of the organisation but mysteries elsewhere.

All this measurement, however, needs to be built on firm foundations and this can be the greatest problem. When presenting about measurement I have noticed that when aspects like statistical reliability or representative sampling are mentioned, a glazed expression often comes across the audience. It has been suggested that this is because communicators tend to be “right brained” and uncomfortable with such technical matters. Speaking as one who in her youth was given a detention for insolence by a maths teacher who could not believe I had genuinely scored 0 out of 20 in a test, I say that one does not have to be a mathematician or statistician to make use of these essential tools. They are absolutely essential to produce robust, reliable information.

The “La La’s” just do not want to know this. I was once told that 30% was the “magic” response rate which produces really reliable results. An explanation that this was not the way it worked (later backed up by a top statistician) cut no ice with this individual. And that was because they were looking for this magical, easy solution rather than the real one.

Some favour monthly surveys among 100 staff. Yes, this does give you a quick temperature check but our “Measurement Maestros” are aware that any ups and downs less than 10% when tracking over time could be meaningless. And here there is an easy answer: a website where you can easily work out what sample size you might need or the reliability of your results: www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm.

Of course the most sought aspiration is to prove the worth of communication: its ROI. As Angela Sinikas has proved in her ground breaking work in this area, it is possible to show a correlation between investment and communication. This means that communicators need to identify the organisational facts and figures to identify this correlation. Some communicators are prepared to put effort into finding and defining these measures but others are disappointed there is no “magic” formula which they can put into effect immediately which shows a straight link between internal communication and financial success.

Finally, the prime purpose of any measurement: effective action to bring improvements. Here the “Measurement Maestros” know their work has just begun while our “La La’s” believe their job has ended with the arrival of the results. As in the initial stages, colleagues at all levels need to be involved. The communicators role will be to identify where the various responsibilities for that action lie, from the top board to every individual, present the relevant information in a user friendly form and follow up to ensure that action plans are developed and progressed.

You may already be a Measurement Maestros or you may classify yourselves as wanting to Listen and Learn. But if you do come across any La La’s embarking on measurement – do tell them to take their fingers out of their ears.

Susan Walker

Web site: www.commevaluation.com

e-mail: commevaluation@hotmail.com

December 2012