

# The Future Is Now: Adopting Valid and Reliable PR Measurement Standards

By Marcia DiStaso, David Geddes and David Michaelson

In March 2014, PR News released survey results indicating that 66 percent of respondents had never heard of the Barcelona Principles and 40 percent did not set goals for social media. While this survey also found that most PR pros were measuring their efforts in one form or another, there was little indication the measurement efforts were effective or consistent with those implemented by other companies and competing communication programs.

Measurement standards deliver two key benefits: first, the ability to compare results across programs, business units, partners, and industries in order to understand your program performance in context. Second, the data shows how to improve performance. Using standards, measurement provides a peace of mind that you are measuring what you should be measuring, eliminating some of the common guesswork we often feel when it comes to designing measurement programs. This in turn affords more time to focus on results and actionable insight.

## Why Measurement Standards Should Be Used

Do you use measurement standards? If not, you're hardly alone, but you are a member of a dwindling group. To understand why people are adopting standards, it's probably best to start by explaining the general concept.

The **International Organization for Standardization** (ISO) has a broad concept

of standards. "A standard...provides requirements, specifications, guidelines or characteristics that can be used consistently to ensure that materials, products, processes and services are fit for their purpose." Through these guidelines, standards provide the essential benefit of "a measure, norm, or model [for] comparative evaluations." This gets at the heart of why standard measures are an essential element in public relations.

Comparative evaluation is the objective of all standards-based measurement programs. With a standards-based measurement system designed for comparative evaluation, you can gauge the performance of specific programs and program elements. Standards further enable the comparison of performance within industry and category as well as the performance of the program relative to other industries or categories.

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## What processes and procedures should be used to find comparative results that meet the objectives of a standardized measurement protocol?

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The value of comparative evaluation is found when the ability to determine if specific communication goals are being met (absolute measures) and if these changes in specific measures are meaningful based on the known performance of similar programs or

campaigns that have been deemed successful (relative measures). Essentially, these comparative evaluations enable measuring progress and taking corrective actions if needed to ensure that the campaign is achieving communications goals.

It's important to note that standards should not be confused with or used as a substitute for best practices. Best practices are methods or techniques that consistently show results better than those achieved with other means. Best practices are what we use to create a benchmark. In other words, standards define and determine what needs to be measured while best practices illustrate how to most effectively meet the objectives of the standard.

The fundamental question requiring an answer is: What are the specific measures that need to be employed and what processes and procedures should be used to find comparative results that meet the objectives of a standardized measurement protocol? In essence, we need to make sure that the measures used to gauge public relations effectiveness are valid and reliable.

Prior experiments have attempted to determine both the validity and reliability of specific public relations measures. The **Central Office of Information** (COI) of the United Kingdom conducted the most noteworthy of these experiments in 2009. In that study, COI tested five media measurement and evaluation agencies. It provided a corpus of 138 news items and an identical briefing document that outlined specific measures to be included in the analysis. The measurement goal was to determine how many people consumed the coverage, how much it cost per 1,000 reached and what the favorability and tone of the coverage was. In the end, the five agencies delivered five different sets of results, with a very large range among the specific measures.

Specifically, the agencies reviewed the 138

articles and reported an estimated coverage reach from a low of 46 million readers to more than double that number, 93 million readers. There also was a drastic difference in tonality reported, with the five firms identifying positive coverage ranging from 17 percent to 100 percent. What we can take away from this is that while the basic measures may seem easy and quite clear, the reliability of these measures, or the ability of these measures to be independently replicated, is questionable. This indicates that standardization of public relations measures requires significantly more than a description of the measure to be included in the analysis. Rather, we must identify the implementation of specific research procedures and protocols that will be applied uniformly and consistently.

### **How Measurement Standards Are Created**

For the past several decades, public relations practitioners have been seeking the Holy Grail of measurement for their activities. As a result, we have seen the rise of questionable research methods and the application of black box approaches by media and social media measurement agencies. There is hope, however, because more and more professionals are realizing that to develop effective public relations measurement, we need to include measures that are valid for determining the impact of public relations and research methods that will produce reliable and replicable results.

To create standards, experts work together to come up with definitions, processes, procedures and measures that are then vetted through a larger group of experts. Once there is a general agreement and support for the standard, it's tested in companies. The results are reviewed and the standard is edited where necessary. This is often a very lengthy process, but the rigor leads to valid, reliable standards.

## What You Can Do

We get it. Adopting standards isn't an easy sell when you have invested in a current way of measuring. Compliance with standards will require time. It's unlikely we will see enforcement or policing processes for measurement standards, but all you need to do is review industry awards to see a shift occurring. Today, we see less and less use of AVE (Ad Value Equivalency), multipliers and terms like ROI (return on investment). Review the list of standards provided below. Consider how to adopt them for your measurement efforts. Remember to combine what you need to know (standards) with the best approaches to collect this data (best practices).

### List of Available Measurement Standards

#### Traditional media measurement

[instituteofpr.org/category/research/research-methods-standards/traditional-media-measurement/](http://instituteofpr.org/category/research/research-methods-standards/traditional-media-measurement/)

- Item for media analysis
- Circulation
- Impressions
- Reach
- No use of AVEs

#### Digital/social media measurement

[instituteofpr.org/category/research/research-methods-standards/social-media-measurement/](http://instituteofpr.org/category/research/research-methods-standards/social-media-measurement/)

- Sources and methods transparency table for digital/social media
- Item for media analysis
- Mention
- Impressions
- Reach
- Engagement

## Communications lifecycle

[instituteofpr.org/category/research/research-methods-standards/communications-lifecycle/](http://instituteofpr.org/category/research/research-methods-standards/communications-lifecycle/)

- Awareness (unaided and aided)
- Knowledge
- Interest and relevance
- Relationship
- Intent and preference
- Intent to take a specific action
- Advocacy

## Return on investment

[instituteofpr.org/category/research/research-methods-standards/return-on-investment-and-related-metrics/](http://instituteofpr.org/category/research/research-methods-standards/return-on-investment-and-related-metrics/)

## Ethics in research and measurement

[instituteofpr.org/category/research/research-methods-standards/ethics-in-research-and-evaluation/](http://instituteofpr.org/category/research/research-methods-standards/ethics-in-research-and-evaluation/)

## Employee and organizational communications

- Standard development in progress

## Investor relations

- Standard development in progress

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