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Return on Expectations: Understanding how to measure success in PR

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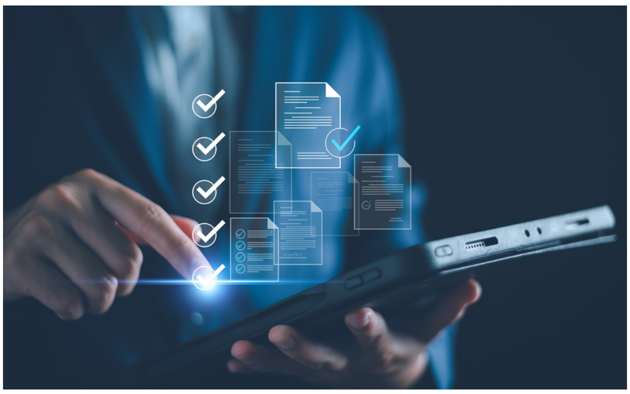
Return on Expectations: Understanding how to measure success in PR

How do you measure the success of a public relations (PR) campaign, or indeed any long-term PR strategy?

The industry has been tussling with this all-important question for decades. Over time, the answers have evolved; for instance, not too long ago, when print media reigned supreme, PR agencies would often use advertising value equivalency – or AVE – to apply a monetary value to a client's media coverage. Agency staff would quite literally use a ruler to measure newspaper and magazine clippings featuring their client, and then calculate what the corresponding advertising cost would be based on the size and placement of the article.

If ever there was an example of why 'you shouldn't compare apples with pears', that is it. Commonplace for many years, we now look back on how clumsy it is to compare earned media mentions for a brand with an advert – two completely different forms of content that will elicit very different responses from the audience and perform very different functions from a marketing perspective.

However, while once fashionable methods like AVE have been consigned to the bin, the thorny issue of measuring success and impact in PR remains. Businesses spending money with a PR agency will, quite rightly, want to establish if they are getting a fair return on investment (ROI). The onus is on agencies to demonstrate this.



Using data in the age of digital PR

The phrase digital PR is effectively redundant today. It goes without saying that PR, comms and brand-building has to take place online, even if print and broadcast media remain important avenues to explore alongside digital activities.

The shift to digital over the past two decades has had knock-on effects for measuring PR success. Namely, with a far larger proportion of coverage now appearing online compared to print, we have a far greater range of tools and data points to help measure the impact of earned media coverage.

It is easy now for PR agencies to report back to clients on the following metrics:

Volume of coverage

how many times (either by individual mentions or articles) has a brand featured in the media.

Readership

what is the estimated readership of those individual articles, or the publications a brand has featured in. Some tools will also – albeit quite loosely – provide insights on a publication's audience in terms of its geography and likely demographics.

Domain authority

each website is given a domain authority, or DA, which roughly determines its credibility based on the quantity and quality of backlinks (links from other websites) pointing to the domain. It can be a useful marker of the quality of media coverage a brand is getting.

Share of voice

looking at how one brand's media coverage compares to its competitors, perhaps focusing on key phrases or within a certain range of publications.

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With so many potential data points available to PR agencies and their clients, the challenge is understanding which ones to focus on. Counting pieces of coverage is of course useful (and a measurement we still frequently use), but it has to have the added context of where that coverage is achieved.

Indeed, be wary of agencies who dismiss core metrics such as volume of coverage – absolutely it is important to make sure it is the right type of coverage, with the right messaging and in the right publications (all based on the audience you want to reach and what impression you want to make), but when it comes to building the awareness and reputation of a brand, it remains crucial that the frequency of the media coverage is sufficiently high to ensure the brand is actually seen. You can never rely on a single or sporadic articles in the media when attempting to enhance the profile of a brand in front of the people it wants to reach.

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Return on expectations

Ultimately, while we now have a significant amount of data at our disposal to show the impact of a PR strategy in terms of brand exposure, translating that data in an ROI is challenging. That is because of the fundamental disconnect between PR and sales.

PR is an exercise in building awareness and trust, as well as managing reputations. Equating a monetary value that an organisation will get back from an investment in PR is, therefore, almost impossible. You can correlate upticks in enquiries, web traffic and social media engagement thanks to successful PR strategies, but the reality is that sales rely on multiple touch points and an integration of PR, marketing and sales.

That is why it is typically better to measure the success of PR based on a different concept: return on expectations (ROE).

ROE is effectively a broader framework for measuring success. It might still rely on data – i.e. one key performance indicator (KPI) might be ensuring a certain volume of coverage, or placing a brand in a certain shortlist of media outlets. But it acknowledges the broader need for agencies and their clients to reach a mutual understanding of what success will look like.

In essence, any effort to measure the success of PR always must start with the initial objectives. So, before questioning metrics, setting KPIs or analysing results, agencies and clients have to have open conversations about what the PR actually needs to achieve.

One client, for example, might want ‘always on’ PR to build and sustain brand awareness. Here, metrics relating to the volume, frequency and quality of coverage – all key indicators that the brand is being seen – are useful. Another client might have a more specific goal of wanting to be seen as the go-to brand for a particular subject or issue; here, setting up competitor analysis and share of voice metrics will allow the client to see how visible their name is when set against a particular phrase.

With a clear focus on the expectations and objectives, measuring PR success and setting KPIs becomes far easier. The conversation needs to start from what the aims of the PR activity are, and –

crucially – the agency needs to be open about what is possible and what is valuable. Moreover, objectives, and the measurements for assessing whether they are achieved, need to evolve over time in line with clients’ wants and needs.

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