

## **“THE MEASUREMENT OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS EFFECTIVENESS”**

Article by Tom Spencer for visitors to his website, [www.tomspencer.info](http://www.tomspencer.info).

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The measurement of public affairs effectiveness is the ‘Holy Grail’ of public affairs studies, which the ECPA has examined on several occasions and in different contexts.

There is an on-going and valid debate between those who feel that public affairs must be measurable if it is to be a real management function and those who feel that all measurement is context-specific and is inappropriate for most public affairs uses. There is certainly a ‘hierarchy of the measurable’ in business headed by sales, then marketing, advertising, regulatory affairs, public relations, corporate social responsibility and finally public affairs. For those who follow Descartes, “I think, therefore I am”, measurement is central to their endeavours. “I measure, therefore I am”. Practical truth lies somewhere between intense and expensive measurement and casual ‘free-hand’ practice.

Some public affairs endeavours lend themselves to one-off decision-mapping where the success or otherwise of public affairs in securing orders for say fighter planes can be measured with a high degree of accuracy. Reputation surveys, if repeated over time and benchmarked against the competition, can clearly be a worthwhile investment in guiding the development of public affairs strategy in certain sectors. It has become increasingly the practice for companies to generate external targets for their consultants or trade associations. However care must be taken to ensure that these exercises motivate rather than lead to divisions inside what should be a unified public affairs team of client and advisors. Recent efforts have been made to produce ‘Whole Team Assessment Appraisals’, which embrace strategy setting, scenarios, resource allocation and even individual performance.

All of these approaches run into three problems. Public affairs time is a flexible concept. Sometimes dramatic results can be seen within days. On other occasions only slow and persistent public affairs activity can change concepts and attitudes in the political world. The first case may make public affairs look too simple and under-value it. The second may challenge the attention span of senior management and be ignored. The classic model in the public mind involves a dramatic intervention to stave off a visible and commercially life-threatening attack by errant administrators. In fact much public affairs involves defending or reducing ‘negative goods’. This may be long-term work to defend a tax advantage or favourable subsidy or, in a reverse of this situation, efforts made to deprive a competitor of an advantage or load them with costs already suffered by one’s own company. Unfortunately measuring this kind of activity is rather similar to the problem of reflecting environmental degradation in National Accounting. The really significant can be lost inside the

statistically complex. Above all we should remember the intangible nature of public affairs in a world where brand value forms an ever increasing part of corporate balance sheets. Public affairs finds itself at the cross roads of political attention and statistical controversy. Attempts have been made to overcome this by Corporate Profile Surveys in which the public affairs performance of a company in the eyes of its stakeholders can be measured against those of their competitors on criteria such as Activity, Credibility, Competence, Influence, Policy Contribution and Sensitivity.

In a recent ECPA survey only 55% of respondents thought that the public affairs function was valued by CEOs. Much could be done to increase this percentage if senior managers were prepared to invest more in techniques such as decision mapping and to devote less time to internal process and more time to scanning the external environment. All such recurring issues are perhaps best viewed as an idea in the mind of God. The question of measuring public affairs effectiveness has a validity as a goal. At this stage of our understanding perhaps the best advice is to 'Measure what you can, but don't fudge what you can't measure'. Public affairs practitioners should remember Donald Rumsfeldt's advice about 'known unknowns'. An awareness of what you don't know can be a valuable management stimulus in its own right.

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