Measuring Relationships[1]

Talking about the importance of relationships is one thing. Actually measuring their value is different. It is like using hard numbers to describe images ever-changing cloud patterns or the movements of the ocean. However, relationship management is an important function for public relations practitioners. They have a vested interest in describing the value of their work in tangible terms easily understood in the boardroom.

The PR Relationship Measurement Scale was created for just this purpose. Public relations researchers Linda Hon and James Grunig created the scale in 1999. Based on a 52-question survey, it measures the intensity of relationships by focusing on six very precise elements or components of the relationships that exist. These are:

Control Mutuality --The degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another. Although some imbalance is natural, stable relationships require that organizations and publics each have some control over the other.

Trust --One party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party. There are three dimensions to trust: *integrity:* the belief that an organization is fair and just … *dependability:* the belief that an organization will do what it says it will do … and, *competence:* the belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do.

Satisfaction --The extent to which each party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced. A satisfying relationship is one in which the benefits outweigh the costs.

Commitment --The extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote. Two dimensions of commitment are *continuance* commitment, which refers to a certain line of action, and *affective* commitment, which is an emotional orientation.

Exchange Relationship --In an exchange relationship, one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future.

Communal Relationship --In a communal relationship, both parties provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other -- even when they get nothing in return. For most public relations activities, developing communal relationships with key constituencies is much more important to achieve than would be developing exchange relationships.[2]

Each of the survey items is a rating scale question, one that measures degrees of intensity. Survey respondents are asked how much they agreed with each statement on 1-to-9 scale. Hon and Grunig developed a series of questions for each of the six relationship components. For example, one of the statements designed to measure trust is "This organization treats people like me fairly and justly." While each statement, in and of itself, offers a glimpse into the nature of a relationship, the entire body of work provides a clearer and fuller picture. The concept is not much different from the federal government's use of various economic indicators to chart the health of the nation's economy.

The answers to each of the questions are tabulated to create a hard number representing the current state of the relationship between the members of a public and the organization. If these procedures are accurately repeated, that figure serves as a benchmark for comparing the relationships among different publics or changes in relationships with a single public over time. These comparisons, in turn, serve as measures of the effectiveness of each organization's public relations efforts.

Approximately three years after the initial research, Grunig published a follow-up paper, "Qualitative Methods for Assessing Relationships Between Organizations and Publics."[3] Maintaining that there are times when numbers alone are not enough, Grunigrunig wrote that qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, can provide more insight into the dynamics of a relationship. In short, the difference between the quantitative and qualitative approaches is a trade off between generating hard numbers and providing intimate detail. Practitioners should choose the approach -- or combination of approaches -- that best suits their needs.

These studies provide a glimmer of hope for practitioners seeking tangible measures of the value of public relations to their organization. However, these methods of measuring relationships are not a magic solution. For many executives, the only numbers that really matter are those found at the bottom of a financial statement. They would first have to accept the Hon-Grunig methodology to see it as relevant. CEOs who understand the value of relationship management are likely to be receptive to this "new math." However, those who are fixated on the bottom line may dismiss this as more "blue smoke and mirrors."

Endnotes

[1] This article is based on "Measuring Relationships" in *Adventures in Public Relations: Case Studies and Critical Thinking* by David Guth and Charles Marsh, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, 2005, pp. 82-84.
[2] The methodology used in developing this scale is detailed in "Guidelines for Measuring Relationships in Public Relations," a publication of the Institute for Public Relations' Commission on PR Evaluation and Measurement. It is available through the institute, located at the University of Florida, or on its Web site, http://www.institutefor.pr.com.
[3] James E. Grunig. "Qualitative methods for Assessing Relationships Between Organizations and Publics." Commission on PR Evaluation and Measurement, Institute for Public Relations. Web posted: http://www.institutefor.pr.com.