

PR measurement is actually about value



By [Louise Marsland](#)

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The Public Relations Consultants Chapter of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) will be taking the issue of setting best practice for measurement standards - in line with international standards - further to meet expectations in the industry.

The debate, hosted by PRISA in association with Bizcommunity.com, filled the 65 seater auditorium donated by FCB Redline in Sandton on 7 July for the breakfast forum. The panelists, made up of industry independents, PRISA and media tracking, gave an overview of current practice, all stressing the need for consistency and credibility.

What emerged from audience debate was certainly a need for a benchmark measure, incorporating local and international best practice, to guide the entire industry. Credibility of the profession is a huge issue and measurement standards will certainly go a long way to removing any 'taint' of exorbitant and undeserved fees.

The lack of any industry benchmark or standard in this area has led to unscrupulous behaviour by some agencies which present results based on AVEs (a measurement based on the advertising value of the media space) multiplied by as much as 10 or 12 when most consultants would use an AVE multiplied by three.

"PR by the kilogram" as coined by Peter Mann from Meropa is definitely not a sustainable measurement!

Outcomes sought

A clear outcome was sought at the beginning of the debate, but what emerged is that there is no "magical silver bullet" and that the industry must work towards best practice guidelines, available to clients, and endorsed by other industry organisations for credibility and professionalism, for example, the SA Institute of Chartered Accountants.

The key points that came out of the forum, included:

1. That Return on Investment (ROI) for clients is the crux.
2. That AVE with a multiplication cost - be it 3x advertising value to get to editorial value, or 14x - was outdated and inadequate.
3. Value to clients was key.
4. Credibility for the industry is paramount.
5. The majority of the industry wants some kind of benchmark standard and would be happy to work off a standard agreed by the industry/industry associations.
6. Public relations is in the business of business intelligence and should be recognized as such.

7. The issue of positive vs negative 'publicity' should be unpacked.
8. Clients should be involved in the measurement of PR value - this was not a PR issue alone.

What was crystal clear, is that public relations value is about far more than column centimeters in the end and that the most important objective of any campaign is to meet the clients objectives - be more outcomes based.

Key points

The main points to come out - towards establishing a clear outcome - were, in summary:

- There is a need to formalize any benchmark or best practice with other industry associations.
- Authoritative research needs to be brought in (ie, Campbell Bellman survey).
- Clients need education, ie, through a consistent and sustained campaign in business media. Utilise the B2B media platforms as well.
- If a measurement tool is to be used, then that measurement tool needs to be agreed on by the majority of the industry and endorsed. Although tools are a means to an end and not the holy grail of measurement.
- PRISA guidelines should be used as a basis for any benchmarking.
- Ethical guidelines for the industry are extremely important to ensure credibility of the process.
- AVE could possibly be used with no multiplication, but with a 'subjective' value added for the intangibles, however, transparent guidelines should be agreed up front with the client.

Reaction to the forum, attended by stalwarts in the industry, as well as younger, but no less high profile PR agencies and media, ranged from "Amandla Bizcommunity.com!" (from comments online) for helping organize the forum, to additional suggested research avenues for PR practitioners who wish to learn more.

'Dumi' writes on Bizcommunity.com that more such forums are needed, while 'Caroline' says it is ridiculous to suggest that one can demonstrate the intrinsic value of media coverage by assigning an arbitrary multiplication to column centimeters.

'Sarah' writes on the Bizcommunity.com comments section: "I was at the forum, which proved interesting, so thanks also to Biz and PRISA. I really feel that because there is such discrepancy between agencies in terms of how much they're multiplying the AVE by, we shouldn't be multiplying at all! Give the client a straight, untainted 'cost' for space - as some clients want some feedback like this for their own reports, but then add to this your own agency's feedback on objectives met, target media obtained etc - much like a report back to a board of directors - not simply 'fairytale' figures you've thumb sucked according to want you feel like multiplying by today."

International issue

South African PR practitioners are not alone in trying to find answers to this controversial topic and give clients real value. An international 'Measurement of PR' symposium has just been held in Slovenia, Europe (1 July 2005) and another summit on 'Public Relations Measurement' is taking place in New Hampshire in the States later this year (28 - 30 September 2005). The September summit's major objective is to enhance the understanding of - and to develop greater use of - the science and art of public relations measurement, evaluation and research. The conference will include case studies about some of the world's most successful public relations measurement campaigns, a review of the latest research innovations and methodologies, and time to ponder the future of measurement. The Measurement Summit also provides learning opportunities for those who purchase or supervise the work of researchers and want to be sure their knowledge about measurement and evaluation is absolutely up to date.

And here is a suggested additional reading list and additional research sources, as suggested by Bizcommunity.com's informed readers and contributors:

- The Public Relations Evaluationists - David Phillips
- PR Trak - Measuring media coverage effectively (white paper)
- The "ad" value of PR? - Jim R MacNamara
- PRSA 4th Quarter 2004 "Growing Need for measurement" - John Scroggins (discusses Miller Brewing's proprietary

measurement tool)

- Check out: www.instituteforpr.com which has free downloads of papers on Evaluation and Measurement, and find out more about a three-day learning and networking forum featuring the leading lights of measurement in public relations and communications internationally - and serious professionals who want to learn from them - in September this year, on the University of New Hampshire campus, New Hampshire, USA.
- The recent international symposium which took place in Slovenia on 1 July 2005 on the Measurement of PR: www.bledcom.com (thanks to contributor, Johanna McDowell).

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

Louise Burgers (previously Marsland) is Founder/Content Director: SOURCE Content Marketing Agency. Louise is a Writer, Publisher, Editor, Content Strategist, Content/Media Trainer. She has written about consumer trends, brands, branding, media, marketing and the advertising communications industry in SA and across Africa, for over 20 years, notably, as previous Africa Editor: Bizcommunity.com; Editor: Bizcommunity Media/Marketing SA; Editor-in-Chief: AdVantage magazine; Editor: Marketing Mx magazine; Editor: Progressive Retailing magazine; Editor: BusinessBrief magazine; Editor: FMOG Files newsletter. Web: www.sourceagency.co.za.

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