

Strategic Communications for Nonprofits
A Step-by-Step Guide to Working with the Media
Second Edition

Chapters Online
Evaluating Your Results

Part of the Jossey-Bass Nonprofit Guidebook Series

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Evaluating Your Results

- Focus on process and outcomes.
- Set evaluation criteria.

You have thought long and hard about your communications strategy, built a creative media team, followed good advice and come up with successful approaches to get your messages across. As a result, you have secured significant favorable publicity for your coalition in general and for your organization in particular, and you have built relationships with key journalists. By all appearances you are a success! But for the purposes of long-term planning and strategy, you still have one vital component to address — evaluation. What works, what does not, and why? And, to put it bluntly, so what?

Anything worth doing is worth evaluating. Impartial, clear-sighted but constructive assessment is a prerequisite for continuous improvement. It ensures accountability, facilitates coordination, points the way to next steps and creates a record against which future activities can be judged. Every organization should create avenues for evaluation through ongoing feedback, both internal and external. Indeed, in more and more organizations today, institutional cultures encourage and value feedback from all sources.

Evaluation should not come as an afterthought. Setting goals and objectives in advance will help you establish benchmarks against which you can measure future activities. It may be very difficult to go back in time and establish a starting point afterward. Plan now to evaluate later.

In planning an evaluation procedure, the first question you need to address is, Who will do the evaluating? In almost every case, staff will be needed to keep simple records, such as the number and frequency of inquiries, attendance at news conferences, the number and quality of print and broadcast reports, use of your Web sites and other new technologies like blogs and podcasts, the tone of editorials and op-eds, and more. You may also call on outsiders to provide objective evaluation of outcomes. Experienced volunteers or board members may make good evaluators because they are familiar with the organization yet may have the necessary distance to be objective. A local academic with an interest in your issue areas may be another good choice.

SOME EVALUATION PRINCIPLES

1. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to evaluate communications campaigns. There should be both recognition *and acceptance* of the fact that different evaluation needs and capabilities require different evaluation designs. The focus and methods should fit the information needs and available resources of stakeholders in the communications effort.
2. Assessing whether a campaign caused its intended impact is often important — and that is the activity funders tend to focus on — but evaluation for purposes of learning and continuous improvement is also important. At the same time, all sides should recognize that leverage to convince sponsors to invest in campaigns will be enhanced by evaluations that assess causation (which often require higher evaluation budgets).
3. Evaluations, like communications campaigns, need to identify up front their purpose and intended audiences. For example, is the evaluation intended to measure the impact of a campaign? Or is it to provide feedback so the campaign can learn over time from experience? Also, is the target audience for the evaluation the sponsoring foundation, the nonprofit(s) implementing the campaign, or both?
4. It is best to design the evaluation early and in conjunction with the campaign. This will maximize opportunities to use the evaluation for both learning and impact assessment.
5. Campaign staff members should participate whenever possible in the evaluation's design as well as its implementation. Campaigners and evaluators both need to understand the existing challenges and opportunities. For example, some campaigns seek to change public opinion and then induce action by policy-makers. Other campaigns build upon existing favorable opinion and then mobilize people to a particular action. Finally, some campaigns or initiatives simply seek to provide more information about a particular issue. Obviously, campaigns to change or mobilize public opinion are more difficult from the start.
6. Evaluation should push for methodological rigor and innovation whenever possible. It should also acknowledge that more than one evaluation approach can capture useful information.

7. Different evaluation designs have different interpretive boundaries. It is important to understand those boundaries and avoid the temptation to make broad claims of success based on limited data or designs that do not warrant such claims.
8. It is important to be realistic about impact. In commercial marketing campaigns, attitude improvements of one-tenth of one percent are deemed important because they can represent millions of dollars. But sometimes funders of communications campaigns want to see attitudinal shifts of 10 to 30 percent. In response, nonprofits sometimes make promises to funders that they cannot possibly fulfill.
9. Sometimes simple things like having a good press list or establishing ongoing professional relationships with key reporters are the most significant measures of success, especially for locality-specific or small-budget efforts.
10. "Values" are important to both campaigns and their evaluation. Typically, nonprofit communications efforts put forth information to achieve either behavioral or societal change. However, widely held and deeply entrenched values can often trump useful information (for example, values about the meaning of "family," "community," "independence" or "self-sufficiency"). Successful communications campaigns must acknowledge the "values vs. information" dichotomy, and the evaluation must take this into account when judging impact.
11. Evaluation should be based on sound (and where possible research-based) theory for predicting how the campaign will achieve social change or provide the public with understanding of the issue.
12. Evaluation *can* respond to hard-to-answer questions about the value and effectiveness of communication campaigns (for example, whether information alone can lead to behavioral change or whether attention to the social and policy context is also a necessary ingredient; and whether media advocacy can contribute).

PROCESS AND OUTCOME

You should also keep two words in mind when establishing a formal evaluation procedure: "process" and "outcome." The process question asks, what information and what other services are being delivered and by whom? The outcome question asks, did we make a discernible difference? In other words, so what?

A day or two after each news event, you should ask all participants to think about the process involved. How were the speakers chosen? How did they do their jobs? Who could use coaching or some practice before the next interview? Was there sufficient coordination of the various messages you wanted to get across? Were there clear assignments as to who would deliver them and in what order?

In terms of outcome, you should discuss how the assembled reporters reacted and what information they used in their reports. Compare today's results with those of the recent past. A social service coalition may find that coverage of its annual news conference, in which it reacts to the governor's budget announcement, has dropped over the past few years because key elements of the budget were leaked in advance, allowing major portions of the story to be written ahead of time. Maybe a different approach is in order. For example, could your group hold an advance briefing on its budget recommendations a few days before the announcement?

There are some objective measures that can assist in evaluation. If you send out a press release with an e-mail address or phone number for more information, you can count the number of responses you get. If you post your press release and background materials on a Web site you can count how many page views there were of your media materials. If you have paid for a satellite uplink of a PSA for TV, you can pay extra to embed an invisible code that will permit detailed tracking of usage. A print ad that contains a clip-out coupon or a link to a Web site affords a quantifiable number of motivated responses. The number of journalists who attend a news conference or participate in a briefing by conference call is clear. In each case, there are concrete results that can be expressed in a number, and these can be applied to the evaluation process.

Even so, it is important to remember that evaluating a communications strategy is not always like evaluating a business plan, which has targets for growth in sales or market share and other easily quantifiable criteria of success. Instead, to judge the success of a communications program, you must use a variety of techniques specific to the kind of work involved.

Acknowledging the Challenges of Evaluation

Measuring the effectiveness of any communications effort raises serious challenges that should be acknowledged up front. Evaluation of nonprofit communications is still a relatively new field, and emerging evaluation techniques are still grappling with how to deal with the following types of challenges:

- To date, standard and widely accepted guidelines for communications evaluation have not existed in either the for-profit or nonprofit worlds.
- Nonprofit organizations and the campaigns they implement are often unique, making the creation and adoption of standard evaluating guidelines difficult.
- It can be difficult to disaggregate the impact of communications efforts and their value added from that of other social change strategies being implemented at the same time, like grassroots organizing.
- Public communication campaigns often aim for complex and hard-to-achieve change (for example, changing public will by affecting norms, expectations and public support, or changing behavior through skill teaching, positive reinforcement and rewards). Campaigns can also often aim for change at multiple levels of society (community, state, national or international).
- Some methods useful to communications evaluation are too costly for many nonprofits (for example, polling) or may require staff time or expertise that is not readily available.
- Communicators and evaluators don't always speak the same language. Most evaluators don't understand communications theory and practice and communications people don't understand evaluation language or methods. One result is that the evaluation's focus can sometimes be misguided. For example, the evaluation may focus only on "placement" of stories in the media as the primary measure of a campaign's success, ignoring the importance of informing supporters and allies through internal communications efforts such as newsletters, e-mails, briefing calls and meetings.
- Often, the goal of nonprofit campaigns is to ensure that an organization's efforts to define a social problem and its proposed solution capture the awareness of those who hold the power to allocate resources and choose appropriate policy alternatives. This is a high standard for success, with implications for evaluation design and data interpretation.
- Sometimes communications resources dedicated to achieving an impact are too limited to be effective. Also, sometimes a campaign is not ready to be evaluated.

- Some campaigns seek incremental change. They are implemented in stages, and initial stages may be modest in impact.

ADDITIONAL FACTORS

When an evaluation is started it is important to understand and determine the campaign’s purpose, scope and maturity.

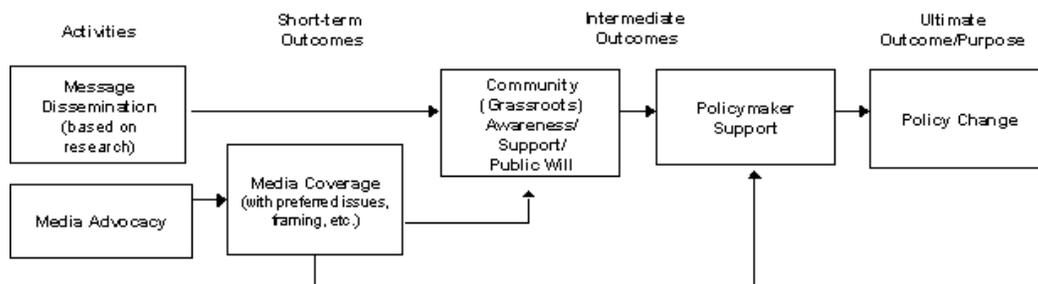
For example:

- A communication initiative’s core purpose might be a public health campaign to help modify an individual’s behavior like an anti-smoking, anti-drug or a fasten-your-seatbelt campaign. Or, the campaign might seek to mobilize popular support around a given issue like global warming or paid sick days, thereby motivating policymakers to react.
- The scope of a campaign, as measured by its reach and campaign length, is also important to understand. For example, is the purpose of the campaign to effect changes at the local, state, national or international levels?
- A final consideration is the campaign’s maturity. Campaigns can vary in length from a few days to several years. Often, campaigns evolve from a purpose of behavioral change to one of changing policy over the years. Mature campaigns might have more formal goals, but within a certain time frame of evaluation, they might be harder to gauge.

IDENTIFYING A THEORY OF CHANGE

A theory of change is a representation of what needs to be in place to make a given type of change happen. A theory of change identifies key strategies that should be used. Once identified, the theory of change acts as a guide for understanding where the evaluation should focus and what outcomes can be assessed. Below is a diagram that outlines a typical theory of change for public will building campaigns.

Theory of Change for Public Will Campaigns



CONSIDERING THE BUDGET

Of course, the budget of a communications campaign is important to consider when deciding to evaluate it. For a large campaign the evaluation budget should comprise at least five percent of the total campaign budget. But, such resources are not always available, particularly in smaller, micro campaigns. Below is a series of evaluation techniques, ranked from simple and less costly, to more costly and more complex.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION

Records of Events

You can review the number and quality of your news conferences, media briefings, visits to your Web site, editorial board appearances, TV news placements and radio talk show bookings. Are events better attended or more appealing than before? How would you improve your planning and implementing of events in the future? What would your dream placement be, and how can you start working to make it real?

Improved Institutional Capacity

When working in a coalition, communications strategists can evaluate their programs by referring to the level of their partners' communication skills, the degree to which communications technologies are used well and the level of integration of communications strategies into the institutional plans of allied groups.

Change in Organizational Participation

Some campaigns are designed to enlist volunteers, raise funds or otherwise improve the participation of a target group. You can measure these efforts against trends in donations and volunteer activity.

Media Content Analysis

A review of the content of media coverage both before and after the implementation of a strategic media campaign can help you assess the impact of your work. For instance, you can simply count the number of newspaper clips on your topic or the number that specifically mention your coalition or group.

But content analysis can be subjective, as well as objective. If your strategy included outreach to editorial boards, for instance, you should analyze the frequency and tone of editorials and the way they supported or opposed your positions. Are you being regularly contacted for comment on developing news stories when you were not contacted before? That can be a measure of progress. Also, find out what the journalists you work with think about your efforts. If you have a good enough relationship, you can ask them, "How am I doing?" and "How can I do my job better?"

Shifts in Public Opinion

Are people more familiar with or more favorable toward your agenda? Has your group's name recognition increased? You can compare the results of scientific surveys at the start and end of a specific campaign, or across any other reasonable time frame, to see how you may have affected public opinion. Comparing the way people responded to key questions then and now can provide evidence of change.

Policy Change

If you are in the business of effecting social change, another measure of success is how policy has changed during the period under evaluation. It is rare that a single group can point to change and claim it for its own. But if the policy context is improved, and if legislation you have supported is in place, you have helped create the climate that made the change possible. What was your organization's role?

Use of These Criteria

Adapt and adopt these criteria where appropriate. And understand that working with the news media necessarily entails responding to events that you could not have foreseen when you made plans — that is the nature of news. Anticipate the worst, hope for the best, take pride in your accomplishments and approach problems as a new challenge. Anyone with a story to tell can get in the news. Your imagination and willingness to try things and learn from them are no less important than your budget and your experience

FINAL TIPS

CCMC maintains an entire Web site dedicated to media evaluation. If you would like to learn more, go to (<http://www.mediaevaluationproject.org>). Remember, what is portrayed on the TV news and cable, aired on the radio or written in the print media and on the internet is not the final word. You

have the opportunity, the clout, the ability and the resources to reach the media and achieve your goals. Keep at it. Do not stop. When your communications plan does take off, record successful techniques for the future. Constantly analyze your efforts. Figure out why they worked or, just as important, why they did not. And remember, review, revise and repeat.