

Research in Public Relations

A review of the use of evaluation and formative research

by Jim R. Macnamara BA, MA, FPRIA, AFAMI
CARMA International Asia Pacific

Introduction

While debate continues over whether public relations¹ fits within marketing or corporate management, or both, there is broad agreement that modern public relations practice needs to function as a management discipline within an organisation's total management team. Grunig, Crable, Vibbert and others point to public relations evolving from a communication *technician* role focussed on producing and distributing information, to a communication *manager* role focussed on building and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders.

The extent to which public relations can realise this transition from technician to manager depends on practitioners adopting the standards and meeting the requirements of modern professional management.

So what are those standards and requirements, and how well is public relations meeting these prerequisites?

The management environment in both the private and public sector has undergone a major transformation in the past 20 years, and in the past decade in particular. Along with technological change, one of the major revolutions has been the demand for and growing acceptance of accountability.

Over the past decade or two, management has adopted various systems and tools to monitor and measure processes and results including:

- Management by Objectives (MBO);
- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs);
- Total Quality Management (TQM);
- Quality Assurance (QA);
- Quality Accreditation (ISO 9000);
- Benchmarking;
- World's Best Practice;
- Customer Satisfaction ratings;
- Balanced Score Card

As part of these management strategies, companies, organisations and government agencies are increasingly using informal and formal research to evaluate key areas of their operations.

¹ In this discussion, the term 'public relations' is used to include public affairs, corporate relations, corporate affairs, corporate communication and other broadly synonymous terms.

This paper examines how well public relations has responded to the trend towards accountability and increasing management demands for measurability?

Public Relations Use of Research – An Historical Perspective

In 1983, James Grunig concluded that a key contributor to the image problem of public relations was the lack of objective, research methodology for evaluating PR programs. Grunig said: “Although considerable lip service is paid to the importance of program evaluation in public relations, the rhetorical line is much more enthusiastic than actual utilisation”.²

Grunig added: “I have begun to feel more and more like a fundamentalist minister railing against sin; the difference being that I have railed for evaluation in public relations practice. Just as everyone is against sin, so most public relations people I talk to are for evaluation. People keep on sinning ... and PR people continue not to do evaluation research”.³

A study by Dr Lloyd Kirban in 1983 among Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members in the Chicago chapter found that more than half the practitioners expressed a “fear of being measured”.⁴

In *Managing Public Relations* (1984), James Grunig and Todd Hunt, commented:

“The majority of practitioners ... still prefer to 'fly by the seat of their pants' and use intuition rather than intellectual procedures to solve public relations problems.”⁵

A Syracuse University study conducted by public relations educator, Judy Van Slyke, compared public relations to Jerome Ravetz’s ‘model of an immature and ineffective science’ and concluded that public relations fits the model.⁶

Professor James Bissland found in a 1986 study of public relations that while the amount of evaluation had increased, the quality of research has been slow to improve.⁷

In his book on PR research, *Public Relations – What Research Tell Us*, John Pavlik commented in 1987 that “measuring the effectiveness of PR has proved almost as elusive as finding the Holy Grail”.⁸

Changing Attitudes Towards PR Research

A landmark 1988 study developed by Dr Walter Lindenmann of Ketchum Public Relations (*Ketchum Nationwide Survey on Public Relations Research, Measurement and Evaluation*) surveyed 945 practitioners in the US and concluded that “most public relations research was

² James Grunig, 'Basic research provides knowledge that makes evaluation possible' in "Public Relations Quarterly" Number 28, 1983, pp. 28-32.

³ *ibid*, pp. 28-32.

⁴ John V. Pavlik, *Public Relations - What Research Tells Us*, Sage Publications, 1987, p. 65.

⁵ James E. Grunig, and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*, Holt Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1984, p. 77.

⁶ *ibid*, p. 77.

⁷ John V. Pavlik, *Public Relations - What Research Tells Us*, Sage Publications, 1987, p. 68.

⁸ *ibid*, p. 65.

casual and informal, rather than scientific and precise” and that “most public relations research today is done by individuals trained in public relations rather than by individuals trained as researchers”. However, the Ketchum study also found that 54 per cent of the 253 respondents to the survey strongly agreed that PR research for evaluation and measurement would grow during the 1990s, and nine out of 10 practitioners surveyed felt that PR research needed to become more sophisticated than has been the case up to now.⁹

A study by Smythe, Dorward and Lambert in the UK in 1991 found 83 per cent of practitioners agreed with the statement: “There is a growing emphasis on planning and measuring the effectiveness of communications activity”.¹⁰

In a 1992 survey by the Counselors Academy of the Public Relations Society of America, 70 per cent of its 1,000 plus members identified “demand for measured accountability” as one of the leading industry challenges.¹¹

In 1993, Gael Walker from the University of Technology Sydney replicated the Lindenmann survey in Australia and found 90 per cent of practitioners expressed a belief that “research is now widely accepted as a necessary and integral part of the planning, program development, and evaluation process”.¹²

The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) used a section of Lindenmann’s survey in an international poll of public relations practitioners in 1994 and confirmed wide recognition of the importance of research for evaluation and measurement. IPRA findings are further discussed in the next section, as this study also examined usage levels of evaluation.

In the same year, a Delphi study undertaken by Gae Synott from Edith Cowan University in Western Australia found that, of an extensive list of issues identified as important to public relations, evaluation ranked as number one.¹³

At an anecdotal level, evaluation has become one of the hottest topics at public relations conferences and seminars in most developed markets during the past decade.

Use of Evaluation and Other Research

Notwithstanding, the application of evaluation research remains low in public relations even as we approach the new millennium.

A survey of 311 practitioner members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia in Sydney and Melbourne and 50 public relations consultancies undertaken as part of research for an

⁹ Walter K. Lindenmann, ‘Research, Evaluation and Measurement: A National Perspective’ in “Public Relations Review”, Volume 16, Number 2, 1990, pp. 3 -24.

¹⁰ ‘Public Relations Evaluation: Professional Accountability’, International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Gold Paper No. 11, 1994, p. 5.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

¹² Gael Walker, ‘Public relations practitioners’ use of research, measurement and evaluation’ in Australian Journal of Communication, Vol. 24 (2), 1997, Queensland University of Technology, p. 101.

¹³ Jim Macnamara, ‘Measuring Public Relations & Public Affairs’, speech to IIR conference, Sydney, 1996.

MA thesis in 1992, found that only 13 per cent of in-house practitioners and only 9 per cent of PR consultants regularly used any objective evaluation research.¹⁴

Gael Walker examined the planning and evaluation methods described in submissions to the Public Relations Institute of Australia Golden Target Awards from 1988 to 1992 and found that, of 124 PR programs and projects entered in the 1990 awards, 51 per cent had no comment at all in the mandatory research section of the entry submission. “The majority of campaigns referred to research and evaluation in vague and sketchy terms,” Walker reported.¹⁵

Walker found that 177 entries in the Golden Target Awards in 1991 and 1992 showed similar lack of formal evaluation, listing sales or inquiry rates, attendance at functions and media coverage (clippings) as methods of evaluation. However, the latter “... rarely included any analysis of the significance of the coverage, simply its extent,” Walker commented.¹⁶

Tom Watson, as part of post-graduate study in the UK in 1992, found that 75 per cent of PR practitioners spent less than 5 per cent of their total budget on evaluation. He also found that while 76 per cent undertake some form of review, the two main methods used were monitoring (not evaluating) press clippings and “intuition and professional judgement”¹⁷

The 1994 IPRA study examined both attitudes towards evaluation and implementation, and found a major gap between what public relations practitioners thought and what they did. The following table summarises IPRA findings.¹⁸

| Research Finding | USA | Australia | South Africa | IPRA members |
|---|-------|-----------|--------------|--------------|
| Evaluation recognised as necessary | 75.9% | 90% | 89.1% | 89.8% |
| Frequently undertake research aimed at evaluating | 16% | 14% | 25.4% | 18.6% |

Lack of objective evaluation has been an Achilles Heel of public relations that has held it back from greater acceptance within management and stood as a barrier to greater professionalism and status for PR practitioners.

Barriers to Using Research

Given the wide disparity between supportive attitudes towards evaluation among PR practitioners and actual application, an exploration began in 1993 to examine the barriers that stood in the way of greater use of research in public relations.

Practitioners most commonly cited lack of budget and lack of time as the main reasons for not undertaking research. However, an examination of PR practices and programs suggests that these factors may not be the main obstacles to applying objective evaluation. It was

¹⁴ Jim Macnamara, *Public Relations & The Media – A New Influence in Agenda-Setting and Content*, MA thesis, Deakin University, 1993.

¹⁵ Gael Walker, “Communication Public Relations Research” in ‘Journal of Public Relations Research’, 1994, 6 (3), p. 145.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 147.

¹⁷ ‘Public Relations Evaluation: Professional Accountability’, International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Gold Paper No. 11, 1994.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 4.

concluded that even if adequate budget and time were available, many practitioners would still not be able to undertake either evaluative or formative research.

An examination of a wide selection of public relations plans and proposals revealed six key barriers or challenges to developing and using effective evaluation research:

1. **Understanding Research**

The first is that public relations executives need to acquire far greater understanding of research to be able to function in the organisational environment of the late 1990s and in the new millennium.

At a pure or basic research level, public relations needs to build its body of theory and knowledge. There are, at the core of public relations, fundamental questions over the nature of PR and what it does in society. The Edward Bernays paradigm outlined in his influential 1920s book, *Crystallising Public Opinion* and expanded in his classic 1955 PR text, *The Engineering of Consent*, on which most modern public relations thinking is based, is under challenge from new approaches such as Co-orientation Theory and the Two-Way Symmetric Model of public relations developed by Grunig.

The Bernays paradigm defines public relations as a form of *persuasive* communication which bends public thinking to that of an organisation - a concept that some, such as Marvin Olasky, say has destructive practical applications, and continued use of which will speed up "PR's descent into disrepute".¹⁹

There is a strong argument that the whole theoretical basis of public relations needs to be questioned and reviewed with further pure or basic research.

At an applied level, public relations academics and practitioners need to greatly expand efforts in both **formative** (strategic) and **evaluative** research. Public relations evaluation research is much more than monitoring press clippings.

Most PR practitioners have only a basic understanding of Otto Lerbinger's four basic types of PR research: environmental monitoring (or scanning), public relations audits, communications audits, and social audits. Many use the terms interchangeably and incorrectly and have little knowledge of survey design, questionnaire construction, sampling, or basic statistics and are, therefore, hamstrung in their ability to plan and manage research functions.

As well as gaining greater knowledge of research, public relations practitioners need to make an attitudinal shift from the view that research is a one-off activity at the end of programs to an understanding that research is **an on-going integral process**.

Marston provided the RACE formula for public relations which identified four stages: *research, action, communication* and *evaluation*. Cutlip and Center provided their own formula based on this which they expressed as *fact-finding, planning, communication* and *evaluation*.²⁰

¹⁹ Marvin N. Olasky, "The Aborted Debate Within Public Relations: An Approach Through Kuhn's Paradigm". Paper presented to the Qualitative Studies Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Gainesville, Florida, August, 1984.

²⁰ James E. Grunig, and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1984, pp. 104-108.

Borrowing from systems theory, Richard Carter coined the term ‘behavioural molecule’ for a model that describes how people make decisions about what to do. The segments of a behavioural molecule continue endlessly in a chain reaction. In the context of a ‘behavioural molecule’, Grunig describes the elements of public relations as *detect, construct, define, select, confirm, behave, detect*. The process of detecting, constructing, defining, selecting, confirming, behaving (which, in systems language, means producing outputs) and detecting, continues ad infinitum.²¹

Craig Aronoff and Otis Baskin echo this same view in their text on public relations research. They say: “... evaluation is not the final stage of the public relations process. In actual practice, evaluation is frequently the beginning of a new effort. The research function overlaps the planning, action and evaluation functions. It is an interdependent process that, once set in motion, has no beginning or end.”²²

The view that evaluation should not be carried out at the end of a communication process, but from the beginning is further amplified in the Macro Model of Evaluation discussed later, and the notion that evaluative research is different to strategic formative research will be challenged. The distinction between the two blurs when evaluation is conducted in a continuous, beginning to end way and the ‘looking back’ paradigm of evaluation shifts to a new strategic, forward-planning role.

2. **Setting Objectives**

The second major barrier to be overcome in order to evaluate public relations programs is to set **clear, specific, measurable objectives**. This sounds obvious. But many public relations plans and proposals examined have broad, vague, imprecise, and often unmeasurable objectives. PR programs too frequently have stated objectives such as:

- To create greater awareness of XYZ policy or program;
- To successfully launch a product or service;
- To improve employee morale;
- To increase sales of ABC Corporation's widgets.

These objectives are open to wide interpretation. What level of awareness currently exists? Within what target audience is greater awareness required – eg. within a specific group, or within the community generally? What comprises a successful launch – and, therefore, what should be measured? What is known about employee morale currently? What does management want staff to feel good about? What level of increase in sales of widgets is the public relations activity aiming to achieve?

Clearly, if the current level of awareness of a policy or program is not known, it is impossible to measure any improvement. Also, if management expects 75 per cent awareness as a result of a PR campaign, and 40 per cent is achieved, there will not be agreement on achievement of objectives.

²¹ James E. Grunig, and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1984, pp. 104-108.

²² Otis Baskin, and Craig Aronoff, *Public Relations - The Profession and The Practice* (3rd edition), Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1983, p. 179.

Without specific, unambiguous objectives, evaluation of a public relations program is impossible. Specific objectives usually require numbers – eg. increase awareness from 10 per cent to 30 per cent – and they should specify a time frame such as within the next 12 months.

An observation from many years working at a practical level in public relations is that *sub-objectives* may be required to gain the specificity needed for measurement. For example, if an overall corporate PR objective is to create community awareness of a company as a good corporate citizen, specific measurable sub-objectives may be to (1) gain favourable media coverage in local media to a nominated level; (2) negotiate a sponsorship of an important local activity; (3) hold a company open day and attract a minimum of 1,000 people; etc. While some of these sub-objectives relate to outputs rather than outcomes (terms which will be discussed in the next section), a series of micro-objectives is acceptable and even necessary provided they contribute to the overall objective. Sub-objectives provide a series of steps that can be measured without too much difficulty, time or cost.

Leading academics point to lack of clear objectives as one of the major stumbling blocks to evaluation of public relations. Grunig refers to “the typical set of ill-defined, unreasonable, and unmeasurable communication effects that public relations people generally state as their objectives”.²³

Pavlik comments: “PR campaigns, unlike their advertising counterparts, have been plagued by vague, ambiguous objectives”.²⁴

With vague or overly broad objectives, it may be impossible to evaluate the effects of PR activity, irrespective of the amount of time and money available. This point is also closely related to the next barrier to measuring results of public relations.

3. **Understanding Communication Theory**

To set realistic, achievable objectives and deliver public relations advice and programs that are effective, public relations practitioners need to have at least a rudimentary understanding of communication theory. Assumptions about what communication can achieve lead to misguided and overly optimistic claims in some public relations plans which make evaluation risky and problematic.

Pavlik makes the sobering comment: “... much of what PR efforts traditionally have been designed to achieve may be unrealistic”.²⁵

A comprehensive review of communication theory is not possible in this paper, but some of the key developments are noted as they directly impact on how PR programs are structured and, therefore, on how they can be evaluated.

²³ James Grunig, and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*, Holt Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1984, p. 122.

²⁴ John V. Pavlik, *Public Relations - What Research Tells Us*, Sage Publications, 1987, p. 20.

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 119.

Communication theory has evolved from the early, simplistic **Information Processing Model** which identified a *source, message, channel* and *receiver*. As Flay and a number of others point out, the Information Processing Model assumes that changes in knowledge will automatically lead to changes in attitudes, which will automatically lead to changes in behaviour.²⁶

This line of thinking was reflected in the evolution of the **Domino Model** of communication and the **Hierarchy of Effects** model which saw *awareness, comprehension, conviction* and *action* as a series of steps of communication where one logically led to the next. Another variation of the Hierarchy of Effects model that has been used extensively in advertising for many years termed the steps *awareness, interest, desire* and *action*. These theories assumed a simple progression from *cognitive* (thinking or becoming aware) to *affective* (evaluating or forming an attitude) to *conative* (acting).

However, a growing amount of research questions these basic assumptions and these models. The influential work of social psychologist, Dr Leon Festinger, in the late 1950s challenged the Information Processing Model and the Domino Model of communication effects. Festinger's **Theory of Cognitive Dissonance** stated that attitudes could be changed if they were juxtaposed with a dissonant attitude but, importantly, dissonance theory held that receivers accepted only messages that were consonant with their attitudes and actively resisted messages that were dissonant.

The view of communication as all powerful was also challenged by broadcaster, Joseph Klapper, whose mass media research in 1960 led to his “**law of minimal consequences**” and turned traditional thinking about the 'power of the Press' and communication effects on its head.²⁷

Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance and Klapper's seminal work contributed to a significant change from a view of communication as all-powerful to a minimal effects view of communication. This has been built on by more recent research such as **Hedging and Wedging Theory**, developed by Professors Keith Stamm and James Grunig, which has major implications for public relations.²⁸

Public relations programs too frequently propose to change negative attitudes to positive attitudes. But, according to Hedging and Wedging Theory, when a person with a firmly held (wedged) view is faced with a contrary view, he or she will, at best, hedge. Hedging is defined by Stamm and Grunig as a cognitive strategy in which a person holds two or more conflicting views at the same time. Thus, it may be improbable or impossible for attitudes to be changed diametrically from negative to positive - or vice versa. Attitudes can be moved from wedging to hedging, or hedging to wedging, but not wedging to wedging. Yet, public relations programs frequently propose to do this.

²⁶ B.R. Flay, 'On improving the chances of mass media health promotion programs causing meaningful changes in behaviour' in M. Meyer (Ed.), *Health Education by Television and Radio*, 1981, Munich, Germany, pp. 56-91.

²⁷ John V. Pavlik, *Public Relations - What Research Tells Us*, Sage Publications, 1987, p. 93.

²⁸ James E. Grunig, and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1984, p.131 and p. 329.

A significant recent contribution to public relations theory is Grunig's **Situational Theory** of communication. In contrast to the simplistic Domino Theory, Situational Theory of communication holds that the relationship between knowledge (awareness), attitudes and behaviour is contingent on a number of situational factors. Grunig lists four key situational factors: (1) the level of problem recognition; (2) the level of constraint recognition (does the person see the issue or problem as within their control or ability to do something); (3) the presence of a referent criterion (a prior experience or prior knowledge); and (4) level of involvement.²⁹

Results of communication will not always be behavioural. The outcomes of communication may be cognitive (simply getting people to think about something), attitudinal (form an opinion), or behavioural. Public relations executives should note that results are less likely the further one moves out along the axis from cognition to behaviour. If overly optimistic objectives are set, evaluation of public relations will be a difficult and frequently disappointing experience.

An understanding of Grunig's **Four Models of Public Relations** which describe the evolving types of PR practice from Press Agency through Public Information to Two-Way Asymmetric and Two-Way Symmetric communication is also important to a study of evaluation, as different objectives pertain to each model and, therefore, different evaluation strategies are required for each.³⁰

GRUNIG'S FOUR MODELS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

| MODELS | PRESS AGENCY | PUBLIC INFORMATION | TWO-WAY ASYMMETRIC | TWO-WAY SYMMETRIC |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Purpose | Propaganda | Dissemination of information | Scientific persuasion | Mutual understanding |
| Nature of communication | One-way, truth not essential | One-way, truth important | Two-way imbalanced | Two-way balanced |
| Research | Little, press clippings only usually | Little – readability tests possibly, readership surveys sometimes | Feedback Formative research Evaluation of attitudes | Formative research Evaluation of understanding |
| Historical figures | PT Barnum | Ivy Lee | Edward Bernays | Bernays, educators |
| Where practised | Sports, theatre, product promotion | Government, non-profit orgs, structured companies | Competitive business | Regulated business and modern flat structure companies |
| % of market | 15% | 50% | 20% | 15% |

²⁹ John V. Pavlik, *Public Relations - What Research Tells Us*, Sage Publications, 1987, pp. 77-80.

³⁰ James E. Grunig, and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1984, p. 22.

In particular, modern Two-Way Asymmetric and Symmetric models of public relations seek to achieve persuasion and understanding rather than simply dissemination of information and, therefore, rely on feedback and evaluative research to gauge results.

This discussion only skims the surface of important communication research and theory-building which are vital to developing professionalism in public relations. The issues raised do not mean to imply that communication has no effect. But they do indicate that it is dangerous to make assumptions about communication outcomes, and suggest that a greater understanding of communication theory is desirable among PR practitioners.

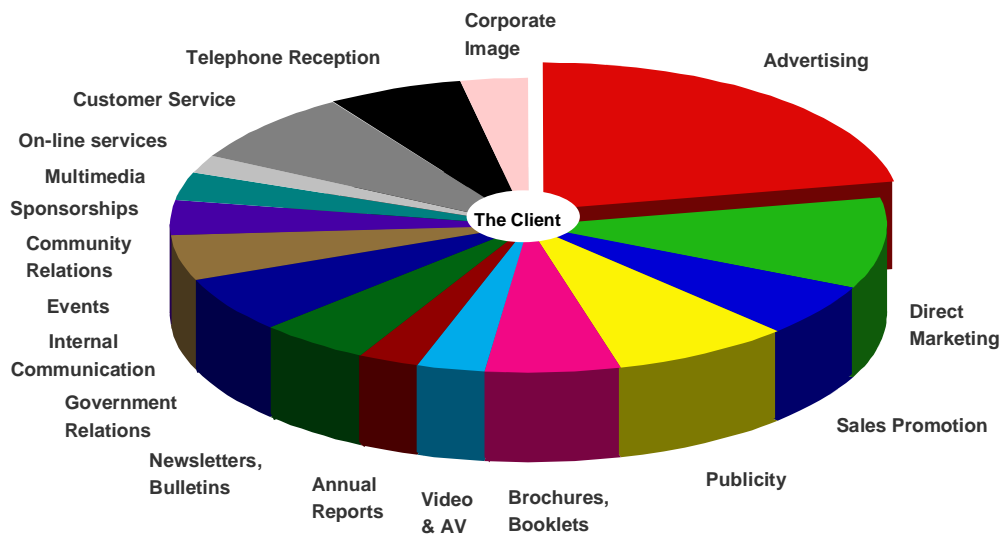
4. *The Multi-Disciplined Nature of PR*

Another of the major challenges in evaluating public relations is the multi-disciplined nature of the practice. Public relations, and its various relatives such as public affairs, corporate relations, etc, are comprised of a number of sub-sets such as media relations, employee relations, community relations, government relations, shareholder relations, and so on.

Also, the practice utilises a wide range of communication tools or channels including publicity, publications, audio-visual and video programs, events, Web sites, sponsorships, etc, to communicate with target audiences. The extensive range of communication activities that can comprise public relations is illustrated in the Macro Communication Model shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

MACRO COMMUNICATION MODEL



© Jim R. Macnamara, 1988

The search for a single method of evaluation for public relations such as an equivalent to advertising TARP ratings, or a PR Index, is therefore unlikely to be fruitful, if not impossible. Public relations evaluation has to evaluate a wide range of communications and relationships.

5. **The Multi-Step Communication Process**

A major breakthrough in moving towards practical methods for evaluation and measurement of public relations was recognition of the practice of communicating in terms of three stages.

Cutlip, Center and Broom in their widely used text, *Effective Public Relations*, present a model for evaluation with three levels or steps which they term “preparation, implementation and impact”.³¹

“Evaluation: The Achilles Heel of the Public Relations Profession”, an MA thesis extract published in *International Public Relations Review* in 1992³² and the 1994 International Public Relations Association (IPRA) Gold Paper (No. 11) advocated recognition of communication projects and programs in terms of *inputs*, *outputs* and *outcomes* and advocated that each stage should be evaluated.

This paves the way for developing a workable system of evaluation which will be examined in detail in the remainder of this paper.

6. **Cost**

Cost, in terms of both money and time, can pose a barrier to evaluation. But it is not nearly as significant as most practitioners believe. The model for evaluation presented in the next section shows that a number of low-cost and even no cost evaluation methodologies and techniques are available and, while none on its own provides a total solution, collectively they equip PR practitioners with effective tools to evaluate.

Furthermore, the previous discussion has suggested that, even if budget and time are available, evaluation is not possible if objectives are vague and imprecise or if practitioners do not understand research methodologies available. And it is doomed to be a disappointing exercise if a PR plan has over-promised and attempted the impossible.

A Macro Model of Evaluation

Borrowing from a number of models and studies published previously, a **Macro Model of PR Evaluation** was first outlined in a paper published by the International Public Relations Association *IPRA Review* in 1992 and then, in more detail, in an MA thesis in 1993.³³

The Macro Model of PR Evaluation, so named because it attempts to pull together the key points of all that has been learned so far and take a broad, comprehensive view, provides a practical approach for planning and carrying out evaluation of public relations.

A key feature of the Macro Model of PR Evaluation, supported by the IPRA Gold Paper on Evaluation, is that it breaks PR activity into three stages, notably:

³¹ Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center and Glen M. Broom, *Effective Public Relations*, 6th Edition, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985, p. 296.

³² Jim Macnamara, “Evaluation: The Achilles Heel of the Public Relations Profession” in *IPRA Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1992, p. 19.

³³ Jim Macnamara, “Public Relations and the Media: A New Influence in 'Agenda-Setting' and Content”, unpublished Masters Degree (MA) thesis, Deakin University, 1993.

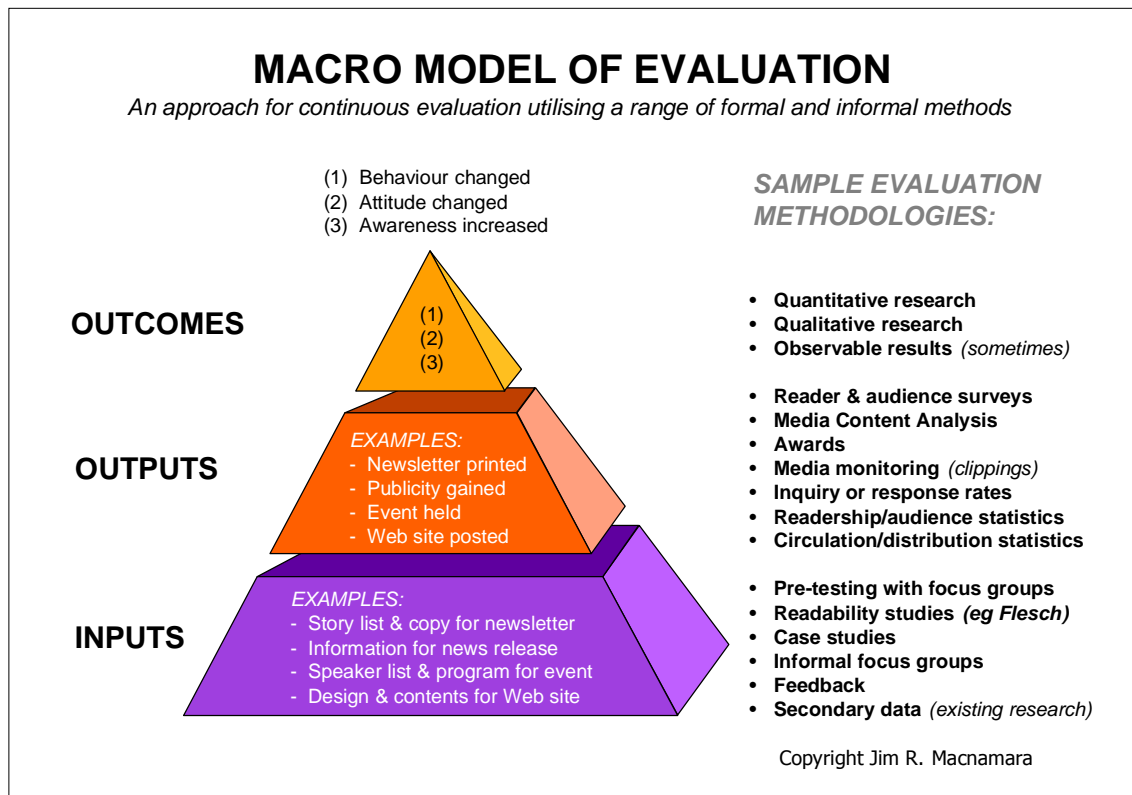
**Inputs;
Outputs; and
Outcomes.**

As shown in Figure 2, each PR project or program is constructed from a series of *inputs*; *outputs* are then produced; and finally *outcomes* are achieved.

Inputs are not well understood in public relations. PR practitioners make many micro-decisions as part of their daily work without consciously thinking of them or critically evaluating them. For example, if a newsletter is to be produced, inputs include the proposed story list, the format (A4 or A3), the name selected for the publication, the type font to be used (as this affects readability), photos to be published, and so on. Even before the newsletter is printed (an output), these input decisions significantly affect likely outcomes. If the selected stories are not of interest to readers, or the type is too small, there is little point in proceeding to produce the newsletter. Surveying readers later will only reveal what could have been determined from the outset (ie. at the input stage).

Public relations can take a leaf out of advertising's book. Few if any TV commercials go to air today without story boards having been pre-tested on sample audience groups. A mock-up of a proposed publication and a draft story list can just as easily be pre-tested with a sample group of potential readers. Readability tests can be done on draft copy. Likewise, proposed speakers and venues for events, logo designs or promotions can be tested in advance.

Figure 2.



* Figure 2 is a simplified and refined overview of evaluation based on the original Macro Model of Evaluation presented in *IPRA Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1992.

Outputs in public relations are the physical communication materials or activities produced such as printed publications, publicity in the media, a staged event, a Web site posted on the Internet, and so on.

It is important for PR practitioners to recognise that a newsletter, brochure or publicity are not outcomes and, therefore, not results in the sense that management usually expects. A printed newsletter, brochure or publicity are simply outputs. The PR practitioner who goes home at night thinking his or her job is done after getting the organisation's newsletter out, or generating a pile of press clippings, is doomed to remain a communication technician. There is no evidence that anyone read the publications or publicity, understood them, believed them, or changed their attitude or behaviour as a result of them.

Similarly, staging an event, signing a sponsorship, sending out a direct mailer or lodging a government submission should not be seen as the culmination of a public relations project. As important as these activities are, they are outputs. The process of communication has only just begun.

Outcomes sought in public relations are typically increased awareness; attitudinal change or, ultimately, behavioural change (eg. buying a product or service, voting a certain way, supporting a proposal, etc).

The list of evaluation methodologies shown in Figure 2 is far from exhaustive. However, it illustrates that a range of techniques, tools and research instruments is available to evaluate inputs, outputs and outcomes. The methods listed range from basic and informal at the early input stage to advanced and formal at the higher level, with a corresponding time and dollar cost.

The list of sample evaluation methodologies provided in the Macro Model of Evaluation can be read in the form of a 'pop up menu' from bottom up, beginning with basic self-administered tests and reviews, and rising to sophisticated (and often expensive) qualitative and quantitative research.

This makes the Macro Model of PR Evaluation a **practical, applied research** approach as it recommends the highest level of evaluation, but recognises that this will not always be feasible. By identifying a 'menu' of evaluation methodologies at the PR practitioner's disposal, or what David Dozier calls a "cluster of technologies"³⁴, some evaluation is possible in every PR program and project. With this approach, there is no excuse for having no evaluation of PR.

Rigorous, objective evaluation methodologies are highly recommended for evaluation wherever possible. It needs to be recognised that some of the basic methodologies, on their own, will not provide reliable evaluation. However, a combination of a number of basic evaluation methods at an input and output level will substantially increase the probabilities of outputs achieving the desired outcomes.

For instance, if the proposed story list for a newsletter has been pre-tested with potential readers in advance, if the name has been selected through a competition involving readers, and if readability tests have been conducted on draft copy to ensure it is easy to understand

³⁴ David M. Dozier, 'Program evaluation and the roles of practitioners' in "Public Relations Review", No. 10, 1984, pp. 13-21.

for the level of readers receiving it, there is a high likelihood that the publication will be well-accepted and read by the target audience.

Progressing further up the Macro Model and evaluating outputs such as measuring circulation to see if it is increasing, tracking responses through a response mechanism (eg. a coupon) and conducting an occasional reader survey, further increases the chances that the newsletter will have a desired impact on its audience.

This evaluation model applies both **closed system evaluation** and **open system evaluation**. As outlined by Otis Baskin and Craig Aronoff, closed system evaluation focuses on the messages and events planned in a public relations campaign and their effects on intended publics. Closed system evaluation relies on pre-testing messages and media and then comparing these to post-test results to see if activities achieved the planned effects.³⁵

Open systems evaluation recognises that factors outside the control of the public relations program influence results and, as the name suggests, looks at wider considerations. This method considers public relations in overall organisational effectiveness. A combination of closed and open system evaluation is desirable in public relations in most circumstances.

The third key feature of the Macro Model of Evaluation is that it demonstrates that evaluation should occur at the beginning, not at the end of the communication process. By identifying potential problems, needs, omissions or opportunities early, changes can be made before expensive programs or projects are implemented.

This approach is in line with Patton's definition of evaluation. He says: "The practice of evaluation involves the systematic evaluation of information about the activities, characteristics and outcomes of programs, personnel and products for use by specific people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions with regard to what those programs, personnel, or products are doing and effecting." In expanding on his definition of evaluation in 1982, Patton said: "The central focus is on evaluation studies and consulting processes that aim to improve program effectiveness".³⁶

David Noble, a senior lecturer in the Department of Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations at Bournemouth University in the UK, supports Patton and argues that evaluation should be a **proactive, forward-looking activity**. "Naturally the collection of historical data is an essential prerequisite, but evaluation is not restricted to making conclusions on past activity. The emphasis on improving programme effectiveness strongly indicates that the information collected on previous activity is used as feedback to adapt the nature of future activities."³⁷

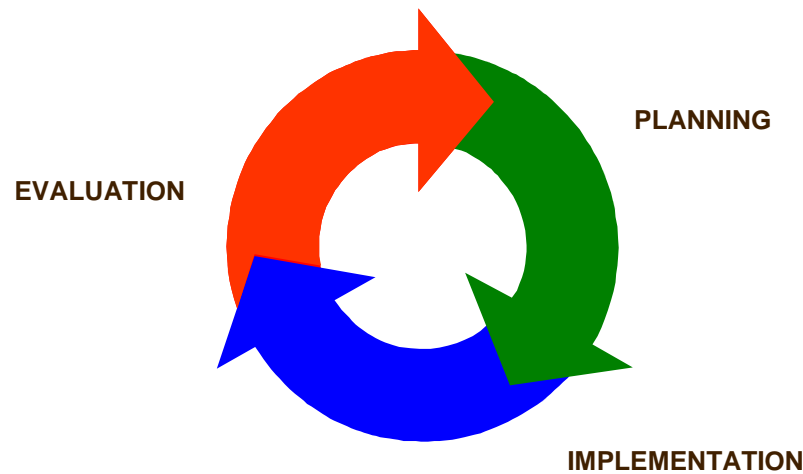
This turns the widely accepted paradigm of evaluation on its head and challenges common management systems such as the PIE model. The PIE approach to management suggested that activity began with planning, then moved to implementation, and concluded with evaluation. One could assume that lessons learned in evaluation were fed into future

³⁵ Otis Baskin, and Craig Aronoff, *Public Relations: The Profession and the Practice* (Third Edition), Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1988 and 1992, p. 191.

³⁶ Michael Patton, *Practical Evaluation*, Sage Publications, 1982, p. 15.

³⁷ Paul Noble, 'A Proper Role for Media Evaluation' in "International Public Relations Academic Review", No. 1, March, 1995, p. 2.

planning, but this model echoed the long-held view that evaluation was something that was done after planning and implementation.



The modified SPIE model which added strategic (formative) research into the beginning of the process still left evaluation at the end and ignored the obvious benefits of gaining early information on whether and to what extent strategies were working.

Moreover, the *Strategic Research, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation* approach to management maintained a long-held distinction between formative research conducted to gain strategic information for planning and evaluative research. As suggested earlier, the distinction between the two blurs when evaluation is conducted in a continuous, beginning to end way and when the ‘looking back’ paradigm of evaluation shifts to a new strategic, forward-planning role.

For instance, is research to identify and track an organisation’s corporate image or reputation evaluative or formative? On one hand, it is clearly evaluative as it is designed to measure perceptions and attitudes held on the organisation’s past performance. On the other, the findings will surely suggest future strategies and be used to plan.

Looking back is only the first stage of evaluation. Information is gathered from the past, but its purpose and the focus of its use should be on the future. When practised in this way, **evaluation is strategic.**

This shift in focus is important in public relations because it can resolve the “fear of being evaluated” which has kept many PR practitioners from embracing evaluation more enthusiastically. When perceived simply as looking back to measure past performance, evaluation can be threatening to public relations practitioners. It appears to be a system for checking up on them. But, when used as a process to gather information in order to advise management on and plan future activity, evaluation takes on a new, much more positive persona. Also, in this context, it is more likely to attract funding from management. This suggests that a **re-positioning of evaluation** is required within the public relations field: from post-implementation reviewing of past performance to a process of continuous systematic gathering of information in order to plan future activity more effectively. The Macro Model of Evaluation also suggests a switch from attempting one large evaluation project to ‘lots of little bits of evaluation’, which makes the process more manageable and more cost effective.

Types of Evaluation

A detailed description of the wide range of evaluation tools, techniques and research methods available is not possible in this short paper, but an overview is provided of some of the main strategies.

Secondary Data

Secondary data refers to information gained from sources other than primary (ie. new original) research. Many research studies are conducted and made publicly available which can assist PR practitioners. These include social research publicised in the media or released by research companies and research reports available on-line through Web sites such as those of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and commercial on-line services such as CompuServe's PR & Marketing Forum.

Case Studies

Case studies are easily collected and can be used for comparison or to serve as a model to follow. For instance, an organisation undergoing a name change and lacking budget to commission research to identify target audience attitudes and needs, collected case studies of a number of organisations which had undergone name changes and then emulated the strategies which seemed to be effective for them. Case studies can be used to identify **Best Practice** and to plan crisis communication.

Readability Tests

While not conclusive, readability tests typically estimate the number of years of education (secondary or tertiary) that a reader needs in order to easily understand the text. Methods include Gunning's Fog Index, the Flesh Formula, the Dale-Chall method, Cloze Procedure or Signalled Stopping Techniques (SST). These are very simple and can be self-administered by PR practitioners with a little training and no cost.³⁸

Media Monitoring

The most common form of evaluating public relations is media monitoring. However, press clippings and transcripts or tapes of electronic media broadcasts, provide only quantitative evaluation. They show how much coverage was achieved – crudely termed 'measurement by kilogram'. They do not show the quality of coverage achieved.

Clippings and transcripts, while useful, perform a limited role in measuring *output*. They are essentially collection of data and, as Gael Walker from the University of Technology Sydney notes: "... collection of data is only the beginning of research".³⁹

Press clippings, tapes and transcripts can also be misleading for a number of reasons:

Negative and neutral coverage are included with positive mentions;

³⁸ Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center, and Glen M. Broom, *Effective Public Relations*, 6th Edition, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985, pp298-299, and James Grunig, *Managing Public Relations*, Holt Rinehard & Winston, Inc., 1984, pp195-198, and Otis Baskin and Craig Aronoff, *Public Relations - The Profession and the Practice*, Wm C. Brown, 1983, p. 186.

³⁹ Gael Walker, "Communicating Public Relations Research". Paper to University of Technology Sydney, 1992.

Coverage is included from **unimportant or low circulation media** as well as major influential publications and programs;

Coverage is included with only **passing mention** of the organisation, its products or services;

Competitors may be mentioned in the coverage and, in some cases, may receive more mention than the reviewing organisation;

Articles **may discuss peripheral issues**;

And, most importantly, the organisation's **key messages may not be included** in the coverage.

Media monitoring also suffers from a practical disadvantage. Piles of press clippings are unlikely to be read by busy management suffering from information overload. A leading computer company, for instance, receives mention in more than 3,000 articles each month in Asia in 14 different languages. Presentation of these clippings to management is not likely to evoke a positive response.

Advertising Value Equivalents (AVE)

Editorial coverage in the media is sometimes evaluated by calculating the advertising value equivalent of the space or time. This is done by multiplying the column inches of press coverage or seconds of radio and TV air time by the respective advertising rate of each medium. This practice provides quantitative data –often large numbers in dollar terms - which makes it appealing as a form of PR evaluation.

However, editorial and advertising are not directly comparable for several reasons. On one hand, editorial is often more credible than advertising because it appears under the imprimatur of the editor or writer and is seen to be independent, objective comment.

On the other hand:

Editorial articles **may be placed anywhere** in a publication or program, including being down the back sometimes, while the positioning (which can significantly affect impact) and design/layout of advertising is controlled by the client;

Editorial may contain **criticism**, which is not present in advertising;

Editorial often contains references to **competitors** or opposition views which advertising does not contain; and

Editorial sometimes contains **errors** or fact or messages which advertising does not.

In some cases, a 'credibility loading' is added to AVE calculations by multiplying the advertising value equivalent by a factor of three or even higher on the assumption that editorial is more believable than advertising. There is no research basis for this practice and it is spurious considering the points raised previously.

Public relations practitioners should be careful in using advertising value equivalents and are well advised to use and recommend more sophisticated and reliable methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis. Advertising Value Equivalents are generally invalid as an evaluation research methodology.

Media Content Analysis

Media coverage and comment are a vast under-utilised body of data in most organisations. John Naisbitt demonstrated in his popular book, *"Megatrends"* that media content analysis can provide valuable insights into what is likely to be on the public agenda in the future.⁴⁰

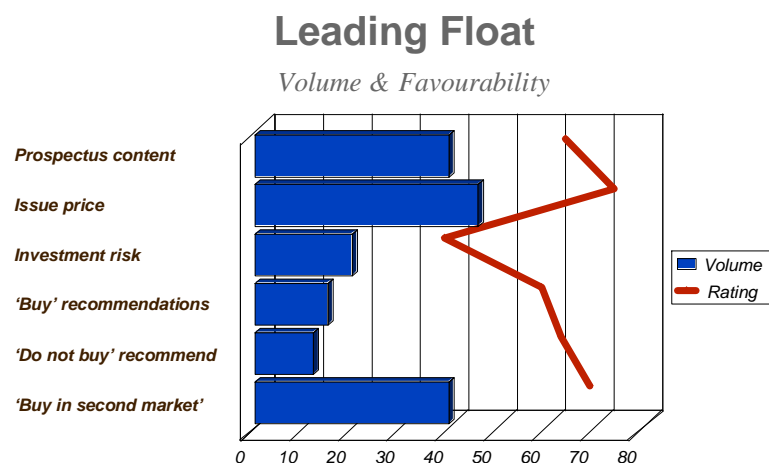
It is perhaps not surprising then that the most widely used method of evaluating PR beyond simple media monitoring is media content analysis. A number of research companies now offer specialist and highly sophisticated media content analysis services in the US, UK, Europe, Canada, Japan and Asia Pacific, including CARMA International, The Delahaye Group, Precis and InfoPress' IMPACT system.

Paul Noble argues that "media evaluation is not the answer to the evaluation of public relations programs as a whole, although one might be tempted to think otherwise given some of the hyperbole surrounding it". However, he acknowledges that "media evaluation does have a very positive role to play ...".⁴¹

The Macro Model of Evaluation clearly suggests that media content analysis is but one methodology or tool for evaluating public relations. But, given the high proportion of PR activity that is still focussed on media relations and publicity, and the ability of computer-aided media content analysis systems to produce numeric data, charts and graphs that meet the information penchant of numerically-orientated management, this field of evaluation is likely to continue to grow.

The sophistication and statistical reliability of media content analysis systems vary, but well-developed systems evaluate *qualitative* criteria such as whether media coverage reaches key target audiences, whether it focuses on the main issues, and whether it contains the organisation's messages. Also, media content analysis can be used to measure share of voice compared with competitors and identify and track issues (ie. environmental scanning). Figure 3 provides a sample media content analysis chart.

Figure 3.



⁴⁰ Scot M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center and Glen M. Broom, *Effective Public Relations*, 6th Edition, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1985, p. 215.

⁴¹ Paul Noble, 'A Proper Role for Media Evaluation' in "International Public Relations Academic Review", No. 1, March, 1995, p. 1.

Media analysis can be a powerful tool for not only looking back, as Noble says, but also for forward planning. The chart in Figure 3, for instance, clearly shows that ‘investment risk’ is the issue which is attracting unfavourable media attention in relation to the company listing and, therefore, public relations strategy can be dynamically altered to address this issue. Such information can be available quarterly, monthly or even weekly through media analysis.

The underlying premise of media analysis, of course, is that media coverage is either likely to influence future public opinion or it reflects existing public opinion. Media analysis does not enter into the controversial debate over whether the media *create* or *reflect* or, as is likely to be the case, both. Whichever is the case, trends in media coverage generally correlate with public opinion and, therefore, can be used as a barometer and an early warning system.

Audience and Reader Surveys

Surveys are one of the most commonly used research instruments, employed for market research, customer satisfaction studies and social trends research. Customised surveys can be used in public relations. For instance, reader surveys can and should be used to evaluate reader attitudes and use of publications. Audience surveys can be used at or after events to evaluate impact (ie. outcomes). Surveys are also a key evaluation tool for use in new, emerging practices such as **reputation management**.

Surveys can be self-administered if budget is not available to engage a professional research firm or consultant. However, it is important that survey questionnaires are properly constructed using reliable techniques such as Likert scale, rankings, semantic differential, etc.

Focus Groups

Public relations can also make use of focus groups, either formal or informal. Ideas can be pre-tested in small focus groups. If formal focus groups are not available or not possible within a budget, a ready-made group can be utilised. For instance, a company planning an employee newsletter and not able to afford formal research had a staff canteen frequented by several hundred employees each lunch hour. The PR consultant visited the staff canteen over several days asking staff what they wanted in a newsletter. It was not statistically valid quantitative research, but it was useful qualitative evaluation that enabled the company to ensure its newsletter met staff tastes, expectations and information needs.

The Benefits of Using Evaluation Research

The approach to public relations evaluation outlined in this paper offers major benefits and hope to public relations practitioners in their pursuit of professionalism and acceptance as part of senior management.

In Australia, marketing writer, Neil Shoebridge, said in a column in *Business Review Weekly* in April, 1989: “For public relations to be widely accepted as a serious marketing tool, it needs to develop new ways to prove its worth and make its actions accountable ... Pointing to a pile of press clippings is not enough.”⁴²

Greater use of objective evaluation research can earn credibility and respect for public relations which it so desperately seeks. The following quote by James A. Koten, then Vice-President for Corporate Communications at Illinois Bell, sums up the situation:

⁴² Neil Shoebridge, column in "BRW Magazine", April, 1989.

“To be influential, you have to be at the decision table and be part of corporate governance. You can be there if the things you are doing are supported by facts. That is where the public relations person has generally been weak and why, in most organisations, public relations functions at a lower level. The idea is to be where the decisions are made in order to impact the future of the company. To do so, you have to be like the lawyer or financial officer, the personnel officer or operations person. You have to have hard data.”⁴³

Professor David Dozier of San Diego State University says: “The power-control perspective suggests that public relations program research is a tool - a weapon perhaps - in the political struggle to demonstrate the impact of public relations programs and to contribute to decision-making Success in this struggle means greater financial and personnel resources for the public relations unit and greater power over decisions of the dominant coalition”.⁴⁴

Dominant coalition theory developed by professors of industrial administration, Johannes Pennings and Paul Goodman, at the University of Pittsburgh, provides an effective model for seeing why public relations is often remote from the centre of decision-making and policy-making in organisations.⁴⁵

A 1985 survey of Public Relations Society of America and International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) members in the US and Canada showed that scanning **research is positively associated with participation in management decision-making and membership in the dominant coalition**”.⁴⁶

In their 1979 and 1985 surveys of 208 Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members, Professors Glen Broom and David Dozier also found that **increases in overall evaluation research activities were associated with increased participation in management decision-making**.⁴⁷

Evaluating inputs, outputs and outcomes in a continuous, integrated process from the earliest stages of planning, using a range of formal and informal methods, leads to evaluation being strategic and more valuable to management than simply finding out what happened in the past. It becomes a tool to plan, reduce wastage, improve effectiveness and even save money. Research tools such as surveys and response tracking allow public relations to implement **benchmarking**; case studies can be used to monitor **Best Practice**; and understanding of inputs, outputs and outcomes enables practitioners to establish **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** for each stage, bringing public relations into line with management strategies and expectations in the ‘Age of Accountability’.

In this context, evaluation is the long-sought key to the boardroom for public relations.

⁴³ David Dozier, "The environmental scanning function of public relations practitioners and participation in management decision making". Paper presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Norman, Oklahoma, August, 1986, p. 2.

⁴⁴ David M. Dozier, 'The Innovation of Research in Public Relations Practice: Review of Program Studies' in *Public Relations Research Annual*, Vol. 2, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990, p. 12.

⁴⁵ James E. Grunig, and Todd Hunt, *Managing Public Relations*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1984, p. 120.

⁴⁶ David M. Dozier, op. cit., p. 19.

⁴⁷ John V. Pavlik, *Public Relations - What Research Tells Us*, Sage Publications, 1987, p. 69.