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A Smart, Simple Way to Track PR Results

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By: Todd Von Deak, CAE, and Brendon Shank

"So, how're we doing on PR?"

That's how it often starts: A conversation between your association's senior executive and the person responsible for media relations (also known as you, the communications professional). "How're we doing?" is an important question and one that can have enormous consequences for the resources dedicated to your public relations program and, ultimately, your organization's public image.

But too often the answer is qualitative (at best) or ad hoc and haphazard (at worst). It's often followed by some information about outputs and maybe an outcome: "We put out a new press release a few weeks ago. And we got mentioned in a newsletter in Lincoln, Nebraska, this week."

There's a better way to report media relations successes and challenges. A PR scoreboard works for us at the Society of Hospital Medicine (SHM) and has won us positive feedback from other organizations as well. A scoreboard is a quantitative snapshot of recent media coverage that not only tracks media hits but also demonstrates how your messages are being conveyed, and to whom, to your executives and board of directors. In the short term, a scoreboard distinguishes the value of one media clip from another. In the long term, it helps you address trends in how your organization is being portrayed publicly among specific audience segments.

For example, after creating our scoreboard, we at SHM made a strategic decision to pursue high-impact PR stories within a limited circle of trade publications that reach hospitals and medical professionals. Sure, [full-page stories in *The New York Times*](#) are great, but we've concluded that the highest long-term return on investment comes from frequent and compelling stories that motivate behavior change among our target audience.

Framing the Game

Before you can keep score, you have to establish what constitutes a point. Rather than assigning qualitative value to particular media hits, evaluate them by the two fundamentals of your larger communications strategy:

Target audiences. By identifying and prioritizing your audiences, you create a bullseye made up of the groups that are most important to your organization.

For example, SHM is working hard to attract hospital-based physicians as members and improve the way healthcare is delivered in the hospital. So hospital-based physicians and hospital leaders are our primary audience. Our secondary audience is the larger healthcare sector; our tertiary audience is the consumer world. As long as we stay on track with our primary audience, we don't lose sleep about missing the others.

Priority messages. Once your association's leaders agree about what these should be, clear and concise messages enable you to differentiate a good media hit from a great one.

Like many organizations, we have three messages that we try to convey to media and target audiences. Not every article conveys all three (and it's rare that an article conveys a message verbatim). In fact, many good articles make a compelling case for just one. But by including message analysis in our scoreboard, we can easily report which messages reached specific target audiences.

What if you haven't already explicitly mapped out your target audiences and messages? Now is the time. Strategically, doing so aligns your leadership's goals with your communications programs. Tactically and logistically, it can help you prioritize your efforts and evaluate outcomes. Instead of telling your boss you got mentioned in a magazine, you can say, "We just had a major media hit that delivered our most important messages to a critical target audience."

Adding Points to the Board

Once you have a foundation of target audiences and messages, create the framework for your actual scoreboard and populate it with information. We recommend including these columns in your scoreboard:

- ❖ **Publication.** For leaders who understand the media marketplace, the name of the publication may say it all about the success of a particular clip.
- ❖ **Date.** Not only can timing show you coverage trends, but it can demonstrate the influence of one story on another or its effect on increased

interest in your products and services.

- ✳ **Headline.** Along with the publication and date, this is likely the biggest thing your leadership will take away from an article. Be sure to clarify whether the headline is representative of the whole article, since often it's not.
- ✳ **Byline.** If the same author keeps showing up on articles you're presenting to your leaders, it's time to evaluate why and figure out how to enhance that relationship.
- ✳ **Target audiences.** We include a column for each of our target audiences and check it off if the publication reaches them.
- ✳ **Messages conveyed.** Like target audiences, we list each message and check off a box if it's included in the article.
- ✳ **Circulation.** This is good for showing your leaders a publication's scope and reach. However, circulation data may be difficult to find unless you're using a media database. Try looking on the "About Us" pages of publications' websites or their advertising rate cards.
- ✳ **Notes.** Use this space to show, for example, how your team is following up on an article.

For us at SHM, simplicity is key. We avoid the temptation to incorporate more information into the scoreboard. The more you include, the more likely it is that your scoreboard's message to your leadership will be either confusing or watered down. Download the sample scoreboard [here](#). (Excel file) Once you have a solid format, populate it with all your media hits and decide how best to report convey your accomplishments to your leaders in a clear, compelling way. If you chose to send the scoreboard via email, we highly recommend sending along a brief commentary about how your best hits happened. Ideally, this explanation is a teaching tool that guides your leadership toward greater successes.

How to Create a Media Scoreboard in Just Five Days

- ✳ **Monday:** Look at your current media assessment techniques and talk about the value of reporting with stakeholders.
- ✳ **Tuesday:** Make sure you have a handle on your audiences and messages. If not, check in with stakeholders to make sure you're aligned with them on these strategic priorities.
- ✳ **Wednesday:** Create your grid and pull recent media coverage together. Decide whether to include old media clips or start with fresh ones.
- ✳ **Thursday:** Populate the grid.
- ✳ **Friday:** Present a draft grid to stakeholders so they can help assess your scoreboard's value. This gives them some input into the process and makes it a collaborative conversation.

Even if your association seems sold on the value of public relations, keeping score of your media outcomes is important. It reassures your leaders that your PR program is on track and enables your PR staff to spot early coverage trends. Most important of all, it lets you frame the conversation about successes and challenges to *your* most important audience.



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[Edward Barks](#), August 17, 2011

Great advice. Too often when looking at ROI, non-communicators focus solely on budget measurements. While the numbers can be important, they are far from the only yardstick indicating the impact of your communications (I have long suspected that the reason numbers get so much attention is that they are easily quantifiable, though that doesn't necessarily mean they are the only thing that should be measured). The writers offer tangible, real world items to consider, chief among them target audience reach and message conveyed. In addition, the one-week, step-by-step advice on creating a scoreboard is invaluable.

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