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**Title: APPLYING A UNIFIED PUBLIC RELATIONS EVALUATION MODEL
IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT**

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Abstract: The evaluation of public relations programmes has been a topic of keen interest to the public relations community for many years. A number of three level/stage models have been proposed to describe and explain the evaluation process. They have not been successful in terms of practitioner acceptance and have been criticised for being unrealistic and lacking feedback mechanisms. More recently the short-term and continuing models have been developed in response to these criticisms. This paper suggests a Unified Evaluation model which uses an established analysis of the communication/persuasion process as a framework to integrate and unify existing models that describe the public relations evaluation process. The proposed testing of this model in a European, transnational context is then outlined.

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Introduction

Evaluation has been the subject of much discussion in public relations circles for 40 years or more and in the wider social science community for longer. Over the last fifteen years, various attempts have been made to design models of the public relations evaluation process. Rather than clarifying thinking on the subject, these models have tended to cloud understanding, if only because (in common with other areas of public relations theory and practice) of the confusing terminology employed. These models have certainly not been successful according to one important test: practitioner acceptance.

This paper seeks to translate the terminology used into one common set of terms and derive from existing models one unified and simplified paradigm. This is designed as an umbrella to act as an introduction to the issues involved in the measurement and evaluation of public relations programmes and activities. The aim is not to make existing models obsolete, but rather to aid understanding of them and thereby aid selection of the appropriate model in particular circumstances. In essence, the unified evaluation model combines the step by step approach advocated by – among others - Cutlip et al (1994) and the requirement for dynamic feedback advocated by Watson (1997).

Models of persuasion

The dominant paradigm of practice is the equation of public relations with persuasion. In order to discuss models of evaluation, the nature of persuasion should be reviewed. From communications psychology, there are schemata and models that offer processes by which public relations practitioners can apply to their own models of evaluation. Among the frameworks that have been proposed, McGuire's (1984) Output Analysis of the Communication/Persuasion process has attributes that can be considered for persuasion-based public relations evaluation. It can be summarised in six steps as:

PRESENTATION	Getting the message to the target.
ATTENTION	Target pays attention.
COMPREHENSION	Target processes messages.
ACCEPTANCE	Target incorporates message as understood and cognitive/affective state is changed as a result.
RETENTION	Target retains message for a specified time
ACTION	Target behaves in the manner desired.

This six step process can be further condensed into three major stages of Output (Presentation); Impact (Attention, Comprehension, Acceptance and Retention) and Effect (Action). Subject to the addition of an input stage, this model will be used as the basis for the Unified Evaluation model.

The implications for public relations evaluation arising from this stepped process are that judgements should encompass the full range of the communication process from Output to Effect. Models or evaluation actions which measure Output are ignoring the full (and sometimes difficult to judge) persuasion process. They only view the first major stage and omit Impact and Effect. Yet it is in the interest of the client/employer to assess whether public relations effort (expressed in terms of time, budget and staff resources) has been effective in attaining the desired goals of Acceptance or Action.

Defining Public Relations Evaluation

The term evaluation is a broad one and this breadth gives potential for confusion. Cutlip et al (1994) both illustrate the scope of evaluation and argue that evaluation is a research-based activity: “The process of evaluating program planning, implementation, and impact is called ‘evaluation research’” (p410). Public relations uses research for a variety of purposes. Dozier & Repper (1992) argue that a distinction needs to be drawn between research designed to analyse the situation at the beginning of the planning process and research designed to evaluate the planning, implementation and impact of the programme (p186). However, they themselves blur this distinction by stressing that the first type of research acts as the benchmark for programme evaluation (input). In short a research-based culture is an evaluative culture and vice versa.

Most authorities argue that evaluation is an integral part of programme planning rather than a separate and optional extra activity tacked on to the end. Planning is itself a circular process with outputs continually feeding back to fine-tune implementation. Consequently, the distinction between research to assist implementation and research to measure results becomes increasingly hazy.

Evaluation as a practice is firmly rooted in social scientific research methods. As Noble (1994) points out: “Evaluation as a means of assessing communications effectiveness is nothing new.” Rossi & Freeman (1982) traced the origins of evaluation as a social scientific practice back to attempts in the

1930s to evaluate Roosevelt's new deal social programmes (p23). However, Patton (1982) argues that evaluation did not emerge as a "distinctive field of professional social scientific practice" (p15) until the late 1960s, about the same time as evaluation began to emerge as an issue in public relations. Public relations evaluation and evaluation as an identifiable social scientific activity have – separately – come under scrutiny over about the same timescale and can learn lessons from each other.

For example, Patton (1982) confirms the broad nature of evaluation with his definition:

"The practice of evaluation involves the systematic collection 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 affecting". (p15)

In commenting on this rather convoluted definition Patton makes the important point that: "... the central focus is on evaluation studies and consulting processes that aim to improve program effectiveness" (p15). This places emphasis on evaluation as a formative activity: that is, obtaining feedback to enhance programme management.

Public relations, in particular, frequently embraces evaluation in a defensive, summative guise: assessing final programme outcome. For example, Blissland (cited in Wilcox et al, 1998) defines evaluation in summative terms: "the systematic assessment of a programme and its results. It is a means for practitioners to offer accountability to clients – and to themselves" (p192). Broom & Dozier (1990) criticise this style of public relations evaluation (which they confusingly describe as an "evaluation-only" approach) because research is not seen as essential for planning, but limited to tracking and assessing impact (p17). It encourages the view of evaluation as a separate activity undertaken at a distinct, late stage in the programme. The implication, frequently made, is therefore that programmes can be implemented without evaluation.

In contrast, Wylie (as cited in Wilcox et al, 1998) presents a more balanced view. He reverts to Patton's emphasis on formative evaluation, but without excluding summative thinking:

“We are talking about an orderly evaluation of our progress in attaining the specific objectives of our public relations plan. We are learning what we did right, what we did wrong, how much progress we've made and, most importantly, *how we can do it better next time*”. [italics added] (p193)

After a short review of what the term evaluation means in public relations, Watson (1997) confirms that there is indeed “considerable confusion”. He asserts that definitions of evaluation fall into three groups: “the *commercial*, which is a justification of budget spend; *simple-effectiveness*, which asks whether the programme has worked in terms of output; and *objectives-effectiveness*, which judges programmes in terms of meeting objectives and creation of desired effects” (p284).

While all these three groups of definitions display a summative ('evaluation only') focus, at least the third group introduces the concept of relating evaluation to the objectives set and therefore – by integrating evaluation into the planning process – at least establishes a formative foundation. It is also possible to argue that an evaluation process that establishes that the public relations programme has achieved the objective(s) set, by definition justifies the budget spent.

Output v. Impact/Effect

Historically, the measurements of column inches of press cuttings or “mentions” on broadcast media were seen as adequate evaluation techniques. These were supplemented by so-called 'qualitative' measures such as those promoted by Jefkins (1998) based on experience and observation: “Many results of PR activity will be of this kind, that is they will not be measured statistically but by experience and self-evident qualities ...”(p123). Jefkins also points to measuring the volume of media coverage and making a “value judgement” which “could be more accurate”. While all these types of assessment are widely practised, they are not valid and reliable methods of evaluation undertaken with any consistency or objectivity.

They fail as objective measures because they cannot demonstrate the scientific requirements of validity and reliability. They can be skewed by the subjectivity of different personalities undertaking the judgement and cannot be replicated. Some are little more than sales leads measures and others which consider "tone" of articles (as opposed to rigorous content analysis), opportunities to see or media ratings are judgements which are made to suit the client/employer rather than to measure the effectiveness of reaching target markets. Too often, the evaluation is determined after the campaign has been set in motion.

Another method of judgement is Advertising Value Equivalents (AVE, also called advertising cost equivalent) where an advertising space value is given to media coverage. This is a measure often claimed for media coverage. Of AVEs, UK media evaluator Dermot McKeone (1995) says, " ... they don't tell anybody how much coverage you've achieved, whether it communicates the right messages and how much impact it has had." (p29). Wilcox et al (1998) say this methodology "is really comparing apples and oranges" (p197); because advertising copy is controlled by the space purchaser while news mentions are determined by media gatekeepers and can be negative, neutral or favourable. It is also inherently absurd to claim a value for something that was never going to be purchased in the first place.

Effects-based planning

To develop a more complete approach to planning (and subsequent evaluation) are the "effects-based planning" theories put forward by VanLeuven et al (1988). These are closely associated with management-by-objectives techniques used widely in industry and government. Underlying VanLeuven et al's approach is the premise that a programme's intended communication and behavioural effects serve as the basis from which all other planning decisions can be made.

The process involves setting separate objectives and sub-objectives for each public. They argue that the planning becomes more consistent by having to justify programme and creative decisions on the basis of their intended communication and behavioural effects. It also acts as a continuing evaluation

process because the search for consistency means that monitoring is continuous and the process of discussion needs evidence on which to reach decisions. Effects-based planning, say VanLeuven et al, means that programmes can be compared without the need for isolated case studies.

The search for consistency is one of the most difficult practical issues faced by the public relations professional. A more disciplined approach will allow the parameters of the programme to be more closely defined and for continuous monitoring to replace a single post-intervention evaluation. It will also bolster the objectivity of the evaluation process.

Objectives and Evaluation

Most authorities would argue that there is no way to evaluate public relations activity *except* by comparing programme outcome with the objectives set for the programme. For example Wilcox et al (1998) state quite baldly: “Before any public relations program can be properly evaluated, it is important to have a clearly established set of measurable objectives” (p193). They then make four general points which approach some key principles associated with public relations evaluation, including an appreciation that the nature of the objectives set is a key factor in the planning and evaluation of the campaign required to achieve them. They use the terms informational and motivational when defining objectives where others might use the terms cognitive and behavioural.

- Agreement on the criteria that will be used to assess the attainment (or otherwise) of the objectives set is an essential prerequisite
- The end of the programme is not the time to start determining how that programme is to be evaluated; it is the beginning.
- If an objective is “informational”, evaluation involves assessing how successfully information was communicated but this says nothing about changes to attitudes and behaviour.
- If an objective is “motivational” (which is more difficult to achieve) then it is important to demonstrate that public relations activity caused the effect and ‘before and after’ research might be required in order to quantify the percentage of change achieved.

While instinctively we might appreciate that awareness/informational objectives are the most common and easiest public relations objectives to achieve, Wilcox et al (1998) argue that they can be difficult to measure. Survey research is often required but frequently practitioners seek to infer (rather than prove) effectiveness by concentrating on measuring media coverage. However, efficient delivery of the message does not prove anything about changes in awareness. Awareness objectives can be regarded as – and may on occasion overtly be - process objectives in pursuance of behavioural objectives. In contrast, motivational objectives may well be more difficult to achieve but ironically it is argued that they are easier to measure:

That's because they are "bottom-line" oriented and are based on clearly measurable results that can be quantified. This is true whether the goal is an increase in product sales, a sell-out crowd for a theatrical performance, or expanded donations to a charitable agency. (Wilcox et al, 1998, p147)

In short, behaviour is easier to observe than cognitive effects. However, it is more difficult to prompt.

Evaluation Models

When practitioners undertake evaluation, there is a tendency to take a narrow view of the methods used and concentrate on simplistic methodologies. However, there are at least four models for the process. It is increasingly recognised that the evaluation of public relations programmes/activities requires a mix of techniques: "In most cases, a skilled practitioner will use a combination of methods to evaluate the effectiveness of a program" (Wilcox et al, 1998, p194). Frequently a triple layered or three-stage model is established as a framework for this 'combination of methods'.

Typical is Cutlip et al's (1994) "Levels and Steps for Evaluating Public Relations Programs" model which discusses three "different levels of a complete program evaluation: *preparation, implementation, and impact*" (pp413-414).

Cutlip et al (PII)

Cutlip et al's evaluation model, known as PII, it is a step model that offers levels of evaluation for differing demands. It does not prescribe methodology, but accepts that "Evaluation means different things to different practitioners" (p413). They make the key point that "the most common error in

program evaluation is substituting measures from one level for those at another level" (p414). For example, an implementation measure such as the number of press releases disseminated is used to claim impact. This "substitution game" is frequently seen when reading articles in the trade press or when reviewing award entries.

IMPACT	Social and Cultural Change Number who repeat behaviour Number who behave as desired Number who change attitudes Number who change opinions Number who learn message content
IMPLEMENTATION	Number who attend to messages and activities Number who receive messages and activities Number of messages placed and activities implemented Number of messages sent to media and activities designed
PREPARATION	Quality of messages and activity <i>presentation</i> Appropriateness of message and activity <i>content</i> Adequacy of background <i>information</i> base for designing program

Figure 1: The PII Model: Levels and Steps for Evaluating Public relations Programs

Each step in the PII model, say Cutlip et al, contributes to increased understanding and adds information for assessing effectiveness. The bottom rung of *preparation evaluation* assesses the information and strategic planning; *implementation evaluation* considers tactics and effort; while *impact evaluation* gives feedback on the outcome.

The PII model is valuable for its separation of output and impact and for counselling against the confusion of these different measures. It acts as a checklist and a reminder when planning evaluation. However it assumes that programmes and campaigns will be measured by social science methodologies that will be properly funded by clients/employers. As a model it puts short and long-term public relations activity together without allowing for their often very different methodologies and goals.

This short-term/long-term distinction is illustrated by White & Mazur (1995) who argue: “There is both a long-term and a short-term aspect to evaluating the effectiveness of public relations. Long-term means measuring over time what can be small but significant shifts, while short-term evaluations can be carried out for specific campaigns” (p110).

Macnamara's Macro Model

The Macro Model of PR Evaluation (Macnamara 1992) is similar to PII and represents public relations programmes and campaigns in a pyramidal form which rise from a broad base of inputs, through outputs to results with the pinnacle being "objectives achieved" (p28). The base inputs are similar to PII and include background information, appropriateness of media and the quality of message. In the middle of the pyramid is a message sequence starting at distribution and ending with the number who consider messages. The results section is concerned with stages of research and ends with the judgement on whether or not objectives have been reached or problems solved.

The model separates outputs and results. For example, a news release can be evaluated as an output in terms of quality, readability and timeliness but not as to whether a communication effect has been achieved. The Macro model lists evaluation methodologies that can be applied to each of the steps in an attempt at developing a completed measurable process. Macnamara says it "presents a practical model for planning and managing evaluation of public relations" (p27) and that it recognises communication as a multi-step process.

Macnamara has put forward a comprehensive menu of evaluation techniques for most public relations situations - from Gunning's Fog Index through media content analysis to observation and quantitative research - but the Macro model lacks a dynamic element. It does not focus on creation of effects or allow mid-campaign variations of strategy or tactics. It is mostly concerned with media relations, which need not be the main strategy in a long-term public relations campaign. Because of this concentration on media relations, the model confuses strategy with tactics. It also offers no feedback element and thus becomes an accumulation of methodology (some 26 methodologies are put forward). In that way, it is not a marked improvement on PII. The Macro model moves Cutlip et al's steps into a pyramid and adds the evaluation menu.

STAGES

ACTIVITIES

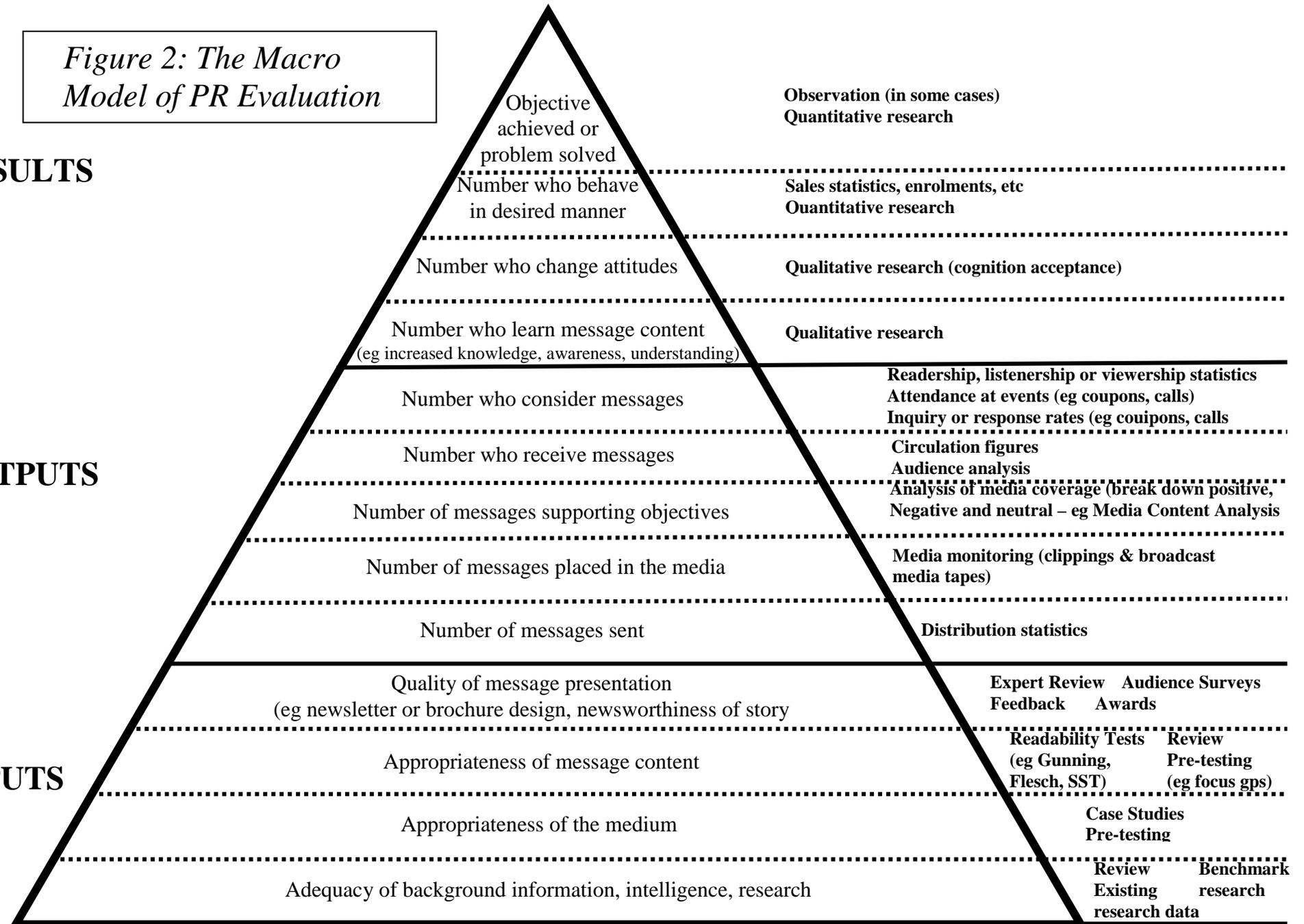
METHODOLOGIES

Figure 2: The Macro Model of PR Evaluation

RESULTS

OUTPUTS

INPUTS



Lindenmann's Public Relations Effectiveness Yardstick

The Public Relations Yardstick model (Lindenmann 1993) differs from the other models because its staging does not progress from planning to objectives. It encapsulates Lindenmann's international practitioner experience and aims to make evaluation more accessible. He argues that it is possible to measure public relations effectiveness and that there is growing pressure from clients and employers to be more accountable and adds that it can be done relatively quickly and at relatively low cost.

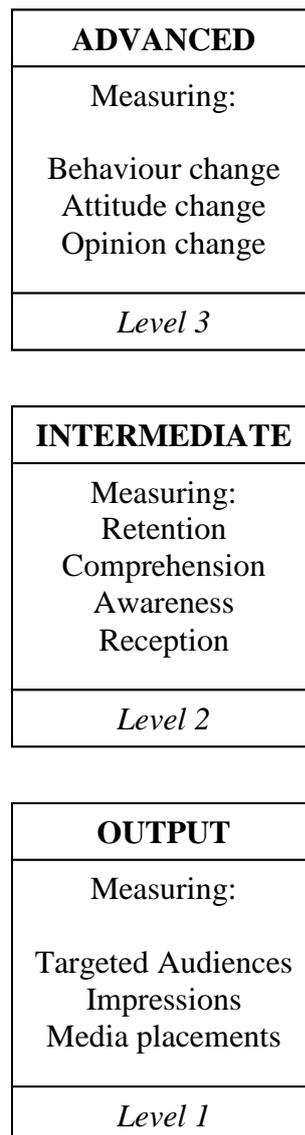


Figure 3: The "Effectiveness Yardstick"

The Yardstick consists of a two step process. First, setting public relations objectives and, second, determining at what levels (of expenditure and depth), public relations effectiveness is to be measured. The three Levels gauge the extent of measurement. Level 1 is the Basic level that measures PR

"outputs": the ways in which the programme or campaign is presented through, typically, media relations. It is measured in terms of media placements and the likelihood of reaching the target groups. The methodology used is media content analysis, measurement of placements or opportunities to see, or simple surveys measuring awareness change among target groups. It is essentially the low cost approach but is more detailed than counting up cuttings or using "gut reactions" which are informal judgements lacking any rigour in terms of methodology.

Level 2 is termed by Lindenmann as the Intermediate level as it uses "outgrowth" or "out-take" measures. These judge whether or not the target audience actually received the messages and so evaluates retention, comprehension and awareness. Practitioners will use a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques such as focus groups, interviews with opinion leaders and polling of target groups. Lindenmann says that this stage is more sophisticated than Level 1. For programmes and campaigns that do not rely solely on media relations for their tactics, this stage will produce data that will be valuable for feedback on strategy and tactics. The data collection methods may not give evidence that attitudes have changed but for practical public relations purposes, it is a lower cost evaluation strategy.

"Outcomes" are measured in Level 3. These include opinion, attitudes and behavioural changes. Lindenmann says that this is where the role of pre- and post-testing comes into its own with the use of before and after polling, observational methods, psychographic analysis and other social science techniques. It is more complete, takes a longer period to undertake and is more expensive, but for a long term campaign, gives a clear cut understanding of target audience awareness, comprehension levels and behavioural patterns. It is the comprehensive and valid test of effectiveness and success.

Lindenmann concludes his article with a statement encapsulating his practical approach when developing the Yardstick:

...it is important to recognise that *there is no one simplistic method* for measuring PR effectiveness. Depending upon which level of effectiveness is required, an array of different tools and techniques is needed to properly assess PR impact. (p9)

Although Lindenmann (1993) takes a tripartite approach (in common with Cutlip et al and Macnamara) he omits preparation/input. His basic level #1 equates to implementation/output but he then splits impact/results into intermediate level #2 (eg awareness) and advanced level #3 (eg attitude change). This is a crucial insight because he therefore separates cognitive and behavioural impact objectives which, almost certainly, will require different evaluative techniques.

Fairchild's Three Measures

In the context of a cyclical planning model, Fairchild (1997) adds to the confusion over terminology by suggesting “three possible levels of measurement” (p24) although he seems to confuse cognitive and behavioural effects by stating “it would be possible to amalgamate levels two and three”

Level One we call **Output** which measures production of the PR effort as opposed to audience response (Out-take or Outcome). Output tells us whether the message was sent and aimed at the target audience.

Level Two measures **Out-take** – the degree to which the audience is aware of the message, has retained and understood it.

Level Three measures **Outcome**. Clearly the greatest value is in knowing whether – and to what degree – public relations activity is actually changing people’s opinions, attitudes and behaviour.

Finally, Fairchild hints that perhaps a four step model rather than a three step paradigm is required by adding the requirement for benchmark research (input) are a necessity for establishing whether or not, and to what extent, Outcome objectives have been achieved.

Watson (1997) criticises the PII and Macro models on the basis that they “are too complex, do not have an integral relationship with the creation of effects and lack a dynamic element of feedback” (pp293-294). The Macro model’s pinnacle of "Objective achieved or problem solved" exemplifies the problem of practical application. In the real world of public relations, nothing stops and activity continues - any valid model must reflect the dynamic, progressive and continuous nature of this process.

Watson then proposes two further models that “take into account the need for accessible, dynamic models of evaluation” (p295). The short-term model concerns simple awareness objectives (normally addressed via media relations), is a linear process with no feedback mechanism, and comes to a simple yes/no judgement on effectiveness. In contrast, the continuing model concerns itself with long term public relations activity and - in doing so – includes a feedback loop as well as taking into account the effects that are being created by the programme.

The Short Term Model

The Short-Term model has a single track, linear process with an outcome. It does not set out to measure effects and because it does not have a continuing existence, there is no feedback mechanism. Typically, the campaign has a simple awareness objective with one or two strategies. For example, the distribution of product news releases to the media is a technician skill of assembling information and photographs or drawings in the manner most acceptable to the media. Measuring achievement of the objectives can be by media analysis, sales response or phone research among the target market.

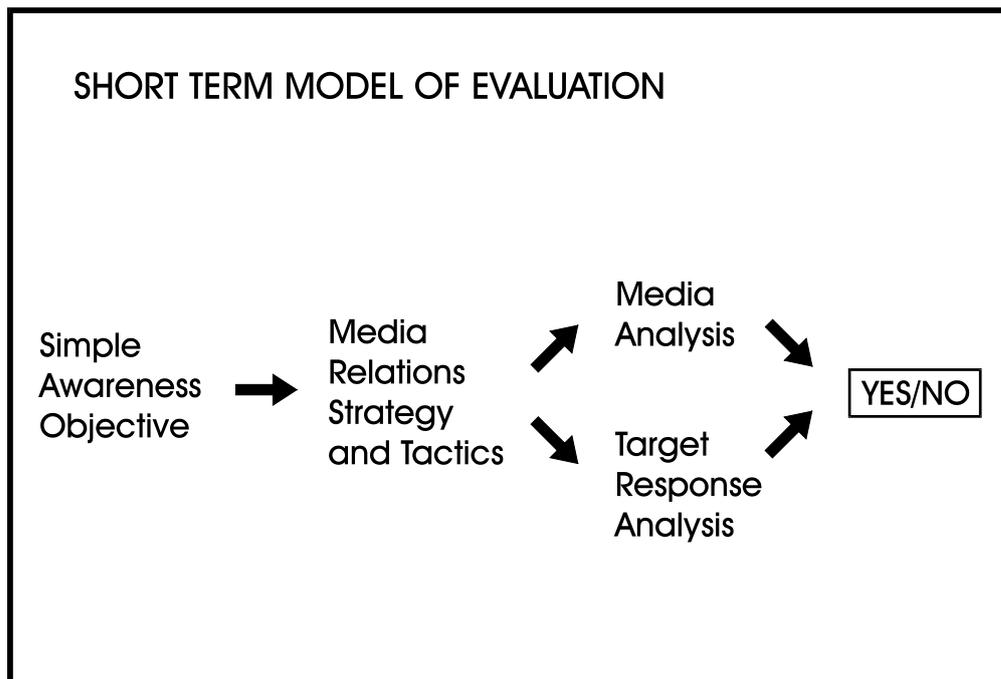


Figure 4: The Short Term Model

This simple model can be applied in different cultures because the accent is on setting realistic awareness objectives and choosing relevant strategies. The terminology can be translated and the model structure is straightforward. If the client or employer sets unrealistic objectives, the model will

be as irrelevant as a step-by-step model or informal "seat of the pants" judgement. The quality of the model's results depends on the professionalism of the practitioner in designing the campaign.

The Continuing model

This model has been designed for use in long-term public relations activity. Examples include a programme such as that for a new settlement (with multiple long term corporate and planning objectives) or for industrial redevelopment (with a medium term objective of planning permission and a long term objective of improved relations with the local community). Such longer terms programmes need a flexible evaluation model.

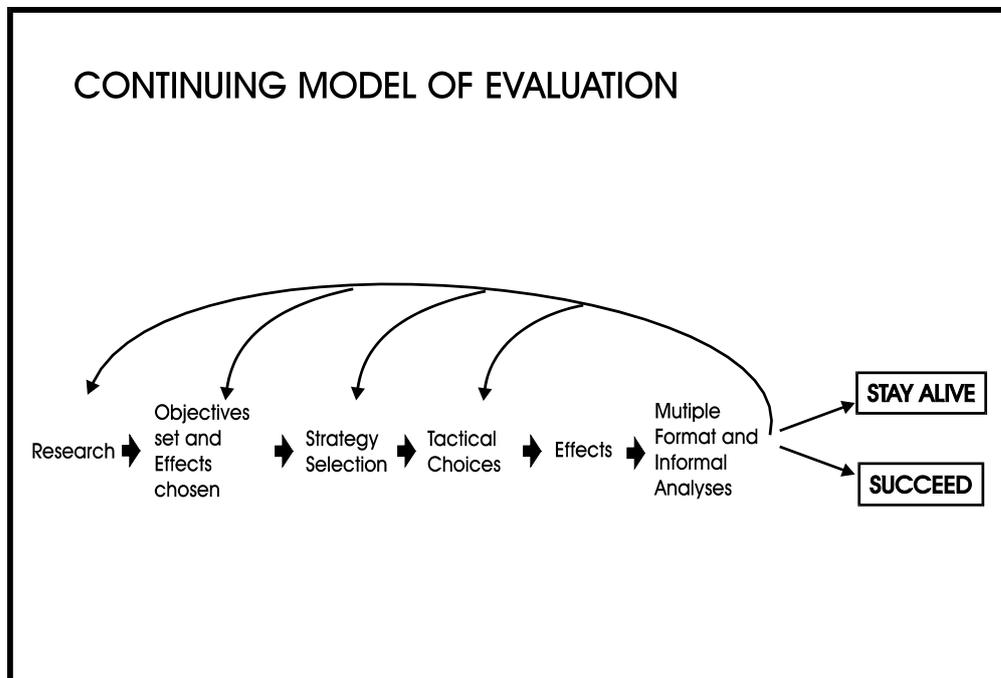


Figure 5: The Continuing Model

The Continuing model offers elements that have not been included in step-by-step models. It has an iterative loop and takes into account the effects that are being created by the program. An additional element is that it offers an opportunity to make a judgement on "Staying alive" - the important stage in a long term, issues-centred program when keeping the issue in the decision frame is important. The Continuing model epitomises VanLeuven's effects-based planning approach. By adopting these principles within the Continuing model, a dynamic and continuing evaluation process is created because the search for consistency means that monitoring is continuous.

The search for consistency is one of the most difficult practical issues facing public relations practitioners. The Continuing model, using effects-based planning, offers a more disciplined approach that allows the parameters of the program to be more closely defined and enables continuous monitoring to replace after-the-event evaluation. The consistency of effects-based planning also aids validity and reliability of data.

The elements of the Continuing model are: an initial stage of Research; the setting of Objectives and choice of Program Effects; from these follow the Strategy Selection and Tactical Choices. As the program continues, there are multiple levels of Formal and Informal Analysis from which judgements can be made on progress in terms of success or "staying alive". The judgements are fed back through iterative loops to each of the program elements. The loops assist the practitioners in validating the initial research and adding new data, adjusting the objectives and strategy, monitoring the progress to create the desired attitudinal or behavioural effects and helping with the adjustment or variation of tactics. This model is a continuing process that can be applied to a specific program or to the overall public relations activities of an organisation.

By highlighting the relative simplicity of short-term, awareness based, public relations activity, and the complexity of continuing programmes probably associated with attitude and/or behaviour change, Watson's models make an important contribution to clarifying thinking on evaluation. However, they complement, rather than replace, the various three-stage linear models. For example, Watson's short term-model sits comfortably with Lindenmann's Level#2 and the more complex tasks associated with the continuing model are appropriate to Level #3.

Modelling evaluation as a continuing activity formalises and reinforces evaluation as a formative – as well as summative – process. The evaluation of a short-term campaign necessarily means that it cannot provide direct feedback as the particular campaign in question has been implemented by the time the evaluation process has been completed. However, by adding to the body of knowledge and experience of running campaigns it does act in a formative role: providing feedback to the communications management process in general, and thereby increasing the effectiveness of similar campaigns in the future.

The Unified Evaluation Model

An analysis of the four existing three level or three stage models indicates that, together, they actually describe four steps and also that they use a variety of terminology to describe exactly the same – or certainly very similar – stages in the public relations process. Lindenmann does well to separate cognitive and behavioural (also referred to as informational and motivational) effects but maintains three levels by omitting a preparation/input stage. The PII and Macro models feature the latter but fail to make this important distinction at the impact/results stage. Fairchild uses different terms for Lindenmann's three levels but separately recognises the necessity for an input stage as a benchmark.

However, and in spite of Watson's criticisms, these multi-level models remain a useful concept. The first stage to evaluation 'wisdom' in public relations is an understanding that public relations is a multi-step process and that different evaluation methodologies are probably appropriate at these different steps. This is the premise behind all these models and grasping this concept leads to an understanding of the pitfalls of the substitution game.

However, the substitution game continues to be played and therefore the models have not been able to do their job in even this simple respect. The suggestion is that their complexity, allied with confusing terminology, prevents them completing this task. Consequently, the unified model first takes a relatively simple approach. Second, it is expanded to four levels so that it can accept both an input stage and split out the evaluation of public relations programmes or activities with both cognitive and behavioural objectives (see Table 1). The terminology used is based on McGuire's Output Analysis to provide an existing framework and integration with existing concepts related to but not directly part of public relations theory. The only difference is the addition of an Input stage which recognises the importance of appropriate planning and preparation in the realisation of effective public relations processes. This is not because of any omissions in McGuire's Analysis, but simply that the Unified model starts one step earlier in the process.

Level/Stage	Unified Model (S)	PII Model (L/S)	Macro Model (S)	Lindenmann (L)	Fairchild (L)
A	Input	Preparation	Inputs	-	(Input)
B	Output	Implementation	Outputs	Outputs	Output
C (cognitive)	Impact	Impact	Results	Outgrowths	Out-take
D (behavioural)	Effect	Impact	Results	Outcomes	Outcome

The next stage is to accommodate the advances in thinking represented by Watson's short-term and continuing models. This is partly achieved by the move to four levels since the short-term model is exclusively concerned with cognitive awareness objectives (represented by the Impact stage in the Unified model) and the continuing model is likely to be concerned with higher level behavioural objectives, represented by the Effect stage of the Unified model.

No methodologies are spelled out in the Unified model. Although it is natural that different methodologies will be required at different levels, the research methodology required should be governed by the particular research problem in the particular circumstances that apply. Consequently any listing would simply be a collection of likely approaches rather than something of universal applicability. Also, given that an evaluation culture is a research culture, as an evaluation culture develops then so should an appreciation of research methods.

However, the Unified model does need to take account of the dynamic feedback associated with Watson's models. This is done in the formative spirit of public relations evaluation but operates at two levels. At one level, there is likely to be formative feedback from one stage to the preceding stage as a means of fine-tuning the current campaign. At another level, there is likely to be lessons learnt from one campaign that will feed back into the planning of future campaigns.

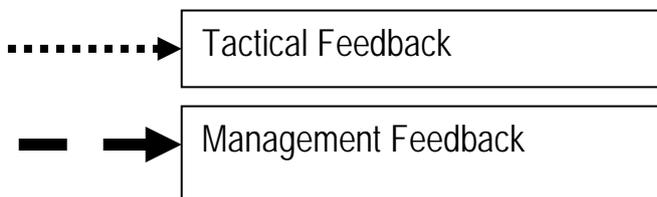
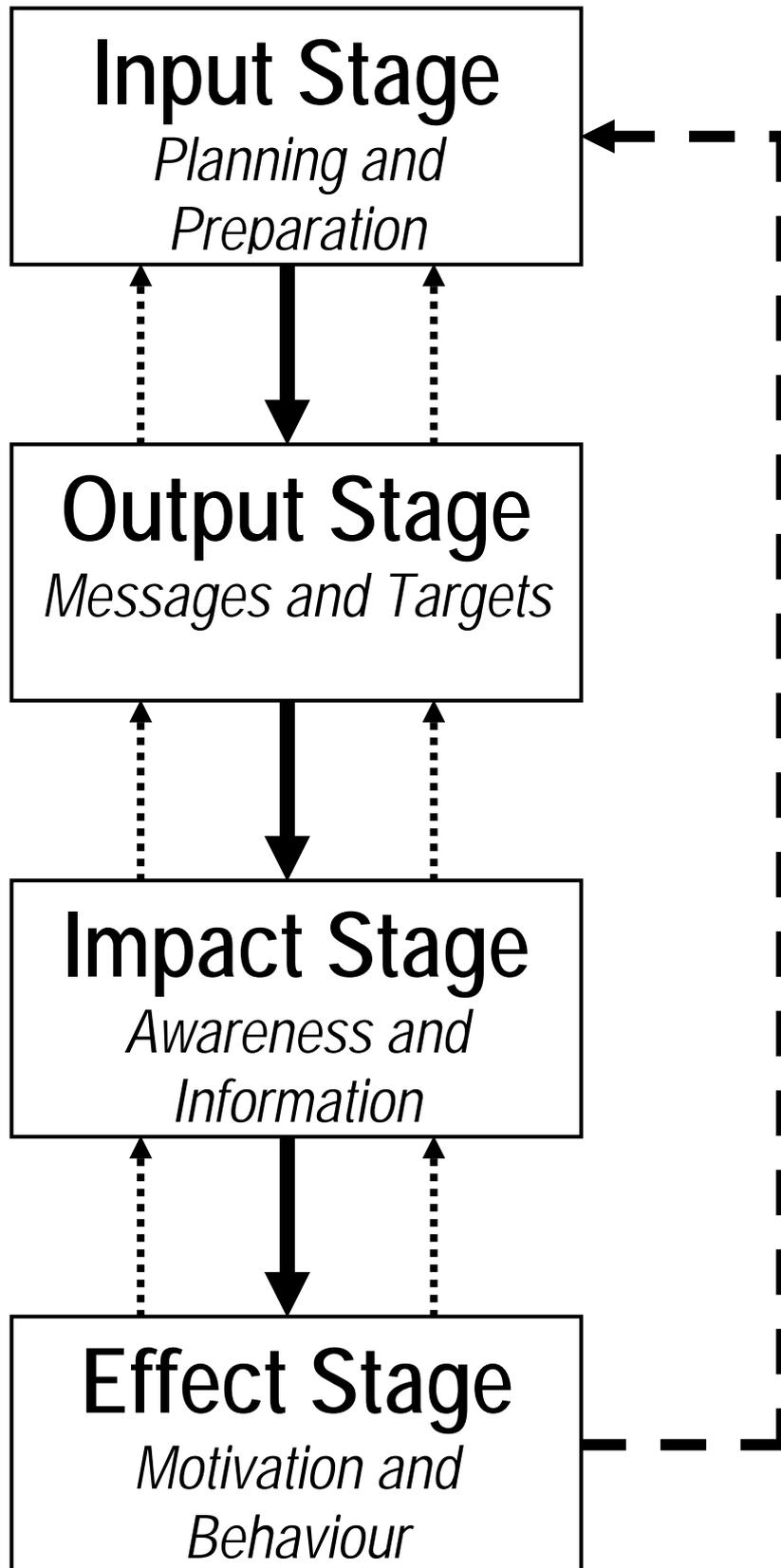


Figure 6
The Unified Model of Public Relations Evaluation

The European Context

Having developed the unified model, the next stage is to test the model in the context of communication campaign case studies. This is at an early stage but one case study being developed examines the model from a European, transnational perspective.

Text 100 is an international Public Relations consultancy that specialises in the technology industry. The company employs more than 300 people in 24 offices spread among 15 countries (mostly in Europe) and its clients include Xerox, Microsoft, Orange and Yahoo!. Text 100 was established in the UK in the early 1980s and now claims to be the Europe's No 1 technology PR agency. In addition to its technology specialisation, Text 100 differentiates itself by a commitment to organic growth and eschews growth through acquisition and the formation of geographical networks which it dismisses as "a loose association of assorted agencies".

The company's rapid growth and its 'organic' philosophy presents particular internal communication challenges. Text 100 regards communication as the glue that binds the company together. It is the means by which management directs the business. It is the basis of how individuals are managed and their skills are developed. It creates team spirit and is the key to motivations. Communication is used to attract the best people to join the company and to attract the best technology companies as clients.

Text 100 has developed a new transnational communications strategy which operates at four levels: individual, team, company and external. A key aspect is a switch from push to pull communication. This was in response to feedback that indicated that people were spending an average of four hours *per day* handling email. In addition to increased focus being placed on face-to-face communication, pull communication has been implemented by establishing an extranet and letting people find the information they need rather than giving it to them whether or not they need it.

The environment in which the strategy will operate is Text 100's concept of principle led company communication. These principles are respect for the individual, liberation of potential, all on the same side, doing what we say we will, taking responsibility and "we dare".

The tactics for the communication programme have already been put in place. At the individual level, this centres on the two-day induction programme for everybody who joins the company. Here the company's Leadership Service Charter is introduced which concerns the process by which people are managed, as well as 'The Edge' which is the company's skills development programme. At the team level, the Leadership Service Charter is developed further with devolved budgets for team 'off-sites' and emphasis on interpersonal skills for team leaders such as feedback, listening and coaching skills. Company wide initiatives are based on a centrally developed communications workshop rolled out for local delivery by general managers, as well as internal awards and incentives. Finally a component of the external communications activity is to attract new recruits (principally through Text 100's website but also word of mouth and reputation) which is linked in to the interview and selection process.

Text 100's new global communications strategy has only recently been launched but short-term adjustments have already been made, and measurement of long term impact planned. In terms of reference to the Unified Model, certainly Input and Output Stages can be clearly identified. The establishment of tactics and a programme of activity indicates 'planning and preparation', while the concept of principle-led communication and the operation of the strategy at four levels indicates careful thinking about 'messages and targets'.

There is also extensive evidence of 'tactical feedback' in the form of responses to activities being used to adjust the nature and scope of those activities. For example, a tactic of 'global headlines' (disseminating news worldwide about events in particular offices/countries) was dropped through lack of input. More positively, the company's internal newsletter was relaunched as a quarterly opinion-based periodical (rather than as a monthly newsletter) in response to feedback from employees. Similarly, a qualitative review of internal training led to it being refocused as a skills-based rather than motivational/inspirational programme.

Importantly, this finetuning is recognised as such and there is no indication of the ‘substitution game’: that is, substitution of this formative evaluation for any long term – summative - assessment of the overall effect of the programme. A key factor in the avoidance of this pitfall is Text 100’s integration of communication into the business process so that the effect of the communication programme automatically becomes a management issue.

In a transnational context, two lessons have been learnt. First, that is very easy for communication to be dissonant when disseminating sensitive information across different time zones. The implications of different time zones have to be considered very carefully. Second, care has to be taken to ensure consistency in the interpretation of key messages when communicating internationally. Presentation material with supporting notes are essential for centrally generated initiatives to reduce the chances of misrepresentation by local managers. At the same time, local managers need to be encouraged and empowered to explain the local implications of global announcements and to put them in the local context.

Where it is difficult to apply the Unified Model, as yet, is at the Impact and Effect Stages but the prospects are good. In the long term, the success of the programme will be measured by its success first on people retention and satisfaction, and then by its effect on client retention and satisfaction (as well as its effect on attracting both people and clients). While these results are firmly motivational and behavioural and therefore in the Effect Stage, current and planned evaluation methodologies indicate that the Impact Stage is and will not be sidestepped but used to check that the programme is on track (and no doubt adjusted if necessary).

For example, an employment satisfaction questionnaire is being used to get feedback on the initial impact of the programme on staff. In terms of people retention, exit interviews and informal feedback from managers will give some insight into reasons for staff leaving the company’s employ while in the longer term staff turnover statistics will give an indication of the effect of the campaign. One challenge in the long term for this case study is whether it will be possible to isolate the contribution of the communications campaign to effects such as client retention from other factors that contribute to this key performance indicator. This remains an open question.

Finally, there is one criticism of the Unified model that arises from an early examination of this case study: the model may be over-simplified. There are two sets of effects that Text 100 anticipates from the successful implementation of its transnational communications strategy: first people (employee) retention and satisfaction, and second client retention and satisfaction as well as attracting new employees and clients. Both these objectives are undoubted behavioural and therefore belong to the Effect Stage. However, the first set is not an end point but simply a means towards achieving the second set of objectives, the ultimate effect of the programme. As well as addressing the issue of disaggregation, it may be that the Unified model has to be developed to accommodate multiple and/or hierarchical objectives within the Effect Stage (and maybe other Stages as well).

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