

Evaluation and Research

Why is evaluating our communications activities a priority issue?

We all know that planning implies having objectives we want to achieve. We all know that it is good management practice to check whether we have achieved our objectives. But although we have acknowledged it as “a good thing”, until recently, there has not been the local political or national legislative ‘drivers’ in place to make it a priority issue.

We may be afraid of being “blamed” if we admit something we did was not as effective as it might have been. But an honest appraisal should be valued. Unless we know what works and what doesn’t, we could be pouring good money after bad – we don’t have the resources to be so random and we all have a responsibility to ensure public money is not wasted.

People may have been concerned that evaluation will take up too much time and effort that they could be putting into other more core activities. But there are real benefits to be gained. What works for one purpose may, or may not, work for another. If we evaluate our efforts and share the results opening, we can all benefit from what has been found to be good practice.

If the people involved in the campaign or programme are also involved in designing and carrying out the evaluation, you are not only likely to increase their knowledge and develop their skills, but you will also gain their commitment to, and understanding of, the organisation’s aims and policies.

Your employer may keep a record of all research being planned or undertaken, so check and make sure you comply with local requirements.

What Research and Evaluation Achieve

Research and evaluation will not only help you spend wisely. It will:

- Encourage you to set clear performance goals for your efforts
- Help you to fine tune your plans to ensure they achieve your goals
- Enable you to monitor the effectiveness of different techniques and so learn from both your successes and your mistakes
- Help to demonstrate value for money which, in turn, helps to develop consent and commitment throughout the organisation
- Demonstrate the contribution your campaign or programme has made to the overall objectives of your department and the organisation as a whole

Action Checklist

1. Setting performance goals

First, you must set out the objectives against which you will evaluate performance. Our major objectives – which should be measurable and meaningful - will be based around one or more of the following:

- Awareness, e.g. to build a positive image in a particular target audience
- Understanding, e.g. to win acceptance for a new form of service delivery
- Direct response or action, e.g. to improve take-up of a particular service or product
- A change in behaviour, e.g. to make people return borrowed equipment
- A change in attitude, e.g. to make more people understand that if they don’t return unwanted or unnecessary equipment, someone else may be suffering because they have to go without

If you feel you want to read more about objectives, see the guide to **Objectives**

2. Adjustments to your campaign or programme planning

If your evaluation procedures are sufficiently responsive, it is often possible to detect whether your strategy is working and, if not, where it is going wrong.

This will allow you to make adjustments as you go and give you a much better chance of achieving your objectives.

An example of this kind of monitoring is as follows:

Question 1: Are we reaching the designated target audience with our communications?

If no: find out why and make adjustments

If yes: move on to Question 2.

Question 2: Is our target audience receiving our key message from our communications?

If no: find out why and make adjustments

If yes: move on to Question 3.

Question 3: Is the target audience responding in the way we wanted?

If no: find out why and make adjustments

If yes: move on to Question 4.

Question 4: Where shall we hold our celebration party?

3. Monitoring the effectiveness of different communications techniques

If your evaluation procedures are adequate, they should show:

- whether the defined target audience are receiving the key message, and
- how they are receiving the key messages.

From this, you will learn that some techniques work well with some target audiences and that others do not. If you discover that leaflets do not work with a particular target audience, you have not wasted money; you have learned something that will save money in the future.

In this respect, senior managers have a responsibility to think before they shoot the messenger when anything goes wrong! If that is all they do, no-one will ever admit that a particular technique has not worked, and the organisation will never learn from its mistakes.

One very good way of evaluating the effectiveness of different techniques is to build in a mechanism to ask people how they heard about something. This could be a simple tick box on a feedback form or making sure asking is part of the telephone answering procedure. Make sure you also record details to identify where the person fits in your target group so you can use the information to link the success or failure of the technique to the target profile.

4. Demonstrating value for money

The Audit Commission, Government and your own senior managers are more likely to value what you do if they know what it really costs and achieves, and can see clearly the relationship between outcomes and objectives.

5. Demonstrating the contribution you have made to the overall objectives of your department and the organisation

Your activities must be seen as a strategic activity. It is the responsibility of management to identify clear objectives, and it is your responsibility to demonstrate the strategic value of your contribution. You will only do this by linking your work to coherent outcomes that serve organisational objectives.

It may not always be easy to evaluate what you are doing, but Best Value and many government targets increasingly demand evidence that a technique works.

6. Research Methods

Evaluation should not be an optional process bolted on to the very end of a campaign. It should be considered from the outset. It may indeed provide a good focus for determining clear objectives and realistic and tangible outcomes.

A major part of the evaluation process will entail some form of research:

- to determine the nature of the need at the outset
- to validate and shape the strategy you choose to meet that need
- to demonstrate the final outcome

Market research

One way of building up a picture about the nature of the need at the outset of a communications or promotional campaign, is to conduct some market research. Market research is the systematic gathering, recording, analysis and interpretation of information to guide the decision making process. Your “gut instinct” probably suggests how people feel about particular issues, but this needs to be verified objectively. Market research will help you do that.

There are two basic kinds of research: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research tells you how many people are happy or unhappy about an issue. Qualitative research helps you understand why.

Quantitative research is often conducted by self-completion questionnaires. It is important that these are straightforward and unambiguous. The value of this form of research is to produce evidence of a weight of opinion, although the validity of a self-selecting sample must always be considered critically. If a depth of understanding is needed, then qualitative research is more appropriate.

Qualitative research elicits feelings and attitudes. It is descriptive and anecdotal in form, and is generally conducted face-to-face, with the interviewer working through a series of question areas on a “topic guide”.

In some circumstances, you may need both quantitative and qualitative research in order to gain not only an understanding about current perceptions, but also an indication of the weight of opinion. Whichever form you choose, you must be clear about what you hope to learn from the research.

There is no single way to evaluate all communications and promotional activities. Different activities may call for different evaluation techniques so you should look at the individual activities listed in this series and think about the evaluation techniques applicable to each. However, the remainder of this section gives some broad approaches that can be developed and adapted to individual circumstances.

7. Benchmark research

There are many circumstances in which you will need to establish benchmarks. If, for instance, you intend to stimulate greater use of a particular facility or service, useful benchmarks might be:

- What percentage of the target audience is aware of the facility or service at the outset of your campaign?
- What percentage of them makes use of it at the outset of your campaign?

At the completion of your campaign, you can re-assess these factors and see how many more members of the target audience are aware of the facility or service, and how many more are using it. This information will allow you to establish a unit cost per extra user of the facility, and thus find out whether the effort made has been cost-efficient or not.

Benchmarks can be established in various ways, such as telephone research, postal questionnaires, street interviews, and discussion groups. They are useful in attempting to bring about a change in awareness, attitude or behaviour. Behaviour is often the crucial quality criteria for your communications or promotional campaign. If 20% more people acknowledge that they know they should return borrowed equipment, but no more is being returned, then not a lot has been achieved.

However, if more people are returning equipment, it is still necessary to identify why - the reasons just might be nothing to do with your campaign. You don't want to convince yourself wrongly about the effectiveness of the techniques used – and then fail in the next campaign, as a result.

Benchmark research has its limitations. One of them is that it tends to tell you only *after* the event whether you have succeeded or not. Obviously, in longer term projects, it is useful to know *before* it ends how successful the campaign is proving. In that way, data gained from the evaluation process can be used to make adjustments to the campaign as it unfolds. This approach allows you to learn as you go and avoid mistakes that are both costly and time-consuming. This calls for tracking research.

8. Tracking research

Tracking research can be used to identify the same kinds of information as benchmark research. In our example campaign to increase the return of borrowed equipment, tracking research can show how many people know about it and how many act upon it. Because the results are tracked throughout the campaign, they will also show how things are developing.

Tracking research is particularly useful where a perceptual or attitudinal shift is needed in the target audience. The use of discussion groups (or focus groups) enables you to monitor shifts and establish their origins.

Organisations often use tracking research to monitor changing attitudes to them as an organisation. In that way, strategic planning can be regularly reviewed and adjusted as necessary, based on up-to-date information about attitudinal shifts in target audiences.

9. Costs and Paybacks

All research, monitoring and evaluation will cost money, whether in direct expenditure or someone's time. When you are setting up your evaluation systems, make sure you have struck a sensible balance.

- What are the costs of the exercise compared to the value of the information to the organisation? Concentrate on just a few key issues, rather than trying to measure every activity in detail. Weigh them up against the overall cost and value of the service itself.
- What action are you going to take as a result of the evaluation? Only invest time and effort where you think some action will be taken as a result. "Nice to know" information is a luxury you can't afford.
- Can you design your evaluation to make use of information gathered, or systems set up, for other purposes (e.g. Audit Commission indicators)?
- One very simple, and free, way of finding which communications techniques have worked best is to ask people how they knew about an event, or product or service.

8. Last but not least

Evaluation should not be the last thing to be done in your activity list. The traditional planning route remains:

Research (Planning (Implementation (Evaluation (and back to more
Research

Evaluation and re-evaluation are essential components of planning.