

Evaluation Research on Public Relations Activities among Public Relations Practitioners in Malaysian Corporations: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Evaluation is the fourth step of the public relations (PR) process (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009). According to Grunig and Grunig (2001), evaluation research is necessary to establish the effectiveness of public affairs programmes and their contribution to organisational effectiveness. The purpose of this research is to assess the perception of Malaysian PR practitioners in corporations towards evaluation research, the extent to which it is conducted, and the criteria and methods used. The researchers conducted intensive interviews with five PR practitioners from corporations in different industries, from banking to automotive and property. The findings show that evaluation is practised in PR corporations and perceived to be important by PR practitioners. The researchers found that common methods of evaluation include survey and media coverage. Corporations also prefer to outsource media monitoring to reduce cost. They also perceive a PR return on investment (ROI) in terms of media coverage and branding. In conclusion, while evaluation is perceived as important, it is not practised as extensively in Malaysia. Evaluation research is mainly used for budgeting and branding purposes in Malaysian corporations. Although evaluation has the potential to help corporations in strategic public relations planning, this aspect has not been explored in depth.

Keywords: Communication audits, evaluation research, public relations activities, techniques and methodology

1. INTRODUCTION

Harlow (1976) defines public relations (PR) practice as “the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communications, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics” (p. 36). Other than managing problems or issues, PR helps management to be informed and responsive to public opinion. In order to do so, PR uses strategic communication activities research as its principal tools (Cutlip *et al.*, 2006). PR plays an important role in organisations because they are representing a broader group of activities, even encompassing all communication

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activities of an organisation (Lee, 2011). The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) also defines PR as “researching, conducting and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programmes of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organisation’s aims” (Cutlip *et al.*, 2006: p. 6). Broom and Dozier (1983) argue that when the communication function in an organisation is not concerned with the effects or the measuring of that function, communication is “relegated to the status of an output function that executives systematically exclude from decision making and strategic planning” (p. 5).

Today’s business environment increasingly puts pressure on PR managers to demonstrate in measurable terms how the results from PR programmes benefit the organisations they serve. The increasingly competitive business and social environment makes it critical for them to understand how to apply PR planning, research and programme-evaluation practices that help ensure success and accountability. Research-based PR practices enable managers to solve complex problems, set and achieve or exceed goals and objectives, track the opinions and beliefs of key publics and employ programme strategies with confidence that they will have intended results (Austin and Pinkleton, 2001). Computers and management information specialists have greatly increased an organisation’s ability to gather, process, transfer and interpret information. Therefore, upper and middle managers often intensify the accountability pressure on PR practitioners. Thus, research is necessary for PR practitioners in the information age (Cutlip *et al.*, 2006).

According to Grunig and Grunig (2001), evaluation research is necessary to establish the effectiveness of public affairs programmes and their contribution to organisational effectiveness. It provides the vital information necessary to plan PR actions. Management demands hard facts, not intuition or guesswork. PR practitioners must be able to demonstrate convincingly their ability to add value in producing a product or service (Baskin *et al.*, 1997). Thus, the evaluation of the effectiveness of PR programmes and activities is of critical importance to practitioners and scholars. The drive towards accountability means practitioners must show that PR activities help their organisation or clients to achieve meaningful goals (Johnson, 1994; Kirban, 1983).

Academics have long lauded the link between PR effectiveness and evaluation. Therefore, much attention has been focused on analysing PR measurement techniques. In a Delphi study conducted by White and Blamphin (1994) among United Kingdom practitioners and academics of PR research priorities, the topic of evaluation was ranked first in the development of PR practice and research. Evaluating PR programmes and activities is the role of PR practitioners in measuring the effectiveness of PR efforts. A systematic assessment of PR programmes and their results enables practitioners to be accountable to clients and themselves (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009).

Because PR professionals have traditionally been doers rather than researchers, they often assume that others see the value of their function (Baskin *et al.*, 1997). However, others may not perceive it that way, and when economic conditions are down, PR practitioners are the first ones to be dismissed. PR practitioners claim that they contribute towards a better understanding between publics and organisations, but they do not present tangible evidence of this contribution (Baskin *et al.*, 1997). Hence, evaluation of PR

activities and programmes is important in order for PR practitioners to speak with authority when asked to prove their value to the organisation. PR practitioners should measure the effects of their programmes, provide sound forecasts of future needs, and account for the resources they consume (Baskin *et al.*, 1997). Practitioners are increasingly being asked to document measurable results and returns from PR programmes compared with costs to demonstrate “return on investment” (ROI). Management evaluates PR practitioners by how much it contributes to advancing the organisation’s mission and achieving organisational goals (Broom, 2009).

Despite the importance of evaluation research in PR, studies of successful measures of PR efforts against actual achievement are still lacking. Lindenmann (1990) found that more than 90% of survey respondents believed that PR research is still more talked about than actually done (Hon, 1998). Xavier *et al.* (2005) claimed that there is limited improvement of evaluation in Australia as evaluation techniques are limited to types that do not demonstrate true impact on publics or contribute to organisational goals. Australian PR practitioners appear to be driven by a lack of knowledge, skills, time and confidence to make a case for evaluation budgets with their clients or managers (Xavier *et al.*, 2005).

Similarly, there is also limited literature on PR evaluation research in Malaysia. This raises several questions as to how Malaysian PR practitioners perceive the importance of evaluation research. There is also very little information on the evaluation methods used by Malaysian PR practitioners and the extent of such use. As such, this research consists of the following objectives:

1. To examine the practice of evaluation research by Malaysian PR practitioners
2. To investigate the criteria and methods of evaluation research in Malaysian corporations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to McDavid and Hawthorn (2006), evaluation can be seen as a “structured process that creates and synthesises information intended to reduce the level of uncertainty for stakeholders about a given programme or policy” (p. 3). A programme is a group of related activities that is purposely designed and implemented to achieve one or more objectives. Thus, the evaluation of programmes assesses the extent to which the respective programmes achieve their intended objectives, and to what extent they were effective. McDavid and Hawthorn (2006) said that assessing programme effectiveness is the most common reason why PR practitioners conduct evaluation. They want to know whether, and to what extent, the programme’s actual results are consistent with the predicted outcomes.

For organisations that emphasise the bottom-line, evaluation has a profit-related significance. Grunig and Hunt (1984) wrote of a PR practitioner who justified the PR budget based on the large volume of press coverage, but who was questioned on its worth to the organisation. White (1991) suggests that PR evaluation helps to answer and justify questions about the investment of time, effort and resources into PR activities.

PR research plays an important role in formulating and interpreting information that is valuable to management in order to achieve best practices. Research is essential to discover which practices are the best, and this includes measurement and evaluation as well as

formative research (Michaelson, 2009). Even if these practices may not be the definite answer to a business problem, it can be a source of creative insights for improvements. Michaelson (2009) suggests that PR practitioners should be clear in their objectives and prepare rigorous research designs. According to Coombs and Halladay (2010), effective evaluation is possible only if there is a measurable objective and each evaluation research determines whether or not the marker of success was achieved (p.75).

2.1 Research on PR Evaluation

Lindenmann's 1988 survey of research activity among PR professionals in the United States suggests a mixed result. The majority of the respondents believe that PR evaluation is and can be an integral part of PR programming. More than half agreed it is possible to measure PR outcomes, impact, and effectiveness precisely. Most respondents allocate funds for PR research such that the number of research projects has increased. However, Lindenmann (1990) also found that more than 90% of the respondents believe that PR research is still more talked about than actually done. About 70% felt that most PR research is still "casual and informal rather than scientific and precise" (p. 15).

Research on PR evaluation can be divided roughly into several main categories. The first category analyses the effect (cognitive, attitudinal, or behavioural) of PR activities on its target public (Hon, 1998). This method according to Reeves (1983) claims that evaluation must include information on the following – content, persons exposed, desired changes or effect– and when and how the effect occurs. Dozier and Ehling (1992) have reviewed literature extensively on communication effects and its implications for PR evaluation. In their view, the domino model – which posits that communicated messages will cause changes in knowledge, attitude, and behaviour among target publics – has limited impact. As the objectives move from message exposure to behavioural change, the likelihood of achievement of objectives decreases.

The next category is prescriptive research, whose main goal is to outline the process and importance of evaluation for PR (Hon, 1998). Weiss (1972) strongly supports PR evaluation, but notes constraints such as organisational resistance to change and the tendency of evaluation to show little or no effect. Broom and Dozier (1983) reiterated that PR evaluation should measure impact rather than process. Dozier (1985) discussed the tendency of PR practitioners to confuse communication products with end results. Organisational resources are focused on measuring output such as the number of news releases and amount of media coverage rather than measuring if the PR programme or activity has achieved the desired effects and end result. Another example of prescriptive research is measuring public opinion (O'Neill, 1984), whereby O'Neill posited that survey research on corporate reputation is important given that organisations are expected to be responsive to publics.

The last category is case studies of PR evaluation and research in various institutions and corporations. Grass (1977), for example, discussed the evaluation of DuPont's corporate advertising. Ever since DuPont started tracking changes in public attitudes in the 1930s, it found that its television advertising was effective, as people's attitudes shifted favourably towards DuPont due to campaign exposure.

Another case study is of the Armstrong Cork Company, which developed a systematic programme for evaluating the value of its product publicity (Marker, 1977). Previously, the success of PR efforts was judged by the volume of press generated. But Marker was forced to develop more meaningful measures when a marketing executive asked him how much the publicity was really worth. One type of PR measurement he developed was the “return-on-investment” model. Marker would calculate by “taking the dollar value of print space and broadcast time generated and dividing it by actual project expenditures” (p. 59).

Some case studies of evaluation have attempted to measure relationship indicators (Hon, 1998). Broom *et al.* (1997) noted that many scholars and practitioners claim PR is about “building and maintaining an organisation’s relationships with its publics” (p. 83). Thus, relationships between organisations and publics should be a primary focus in PR theory building (Ferguson, 1984). However, finding a useful definition of relationships in PR is difficult. Academics assume readers know and agree on the meaning and measurement of relationship, but this is not supported by evidence.

2.2 Types of Public Relations Evaluation

According to Bissland (1990), there are three main ways to measure evaluation:

- (a) Communication output such as quantity of output, number of media contacts, quality and quantity of media placements;
- (b) Intermediate effect on key publics such as number of people who pay attention to the messages or participate in an event, audience feedback, and behavioural science measurements on awareness, attitude, understanding, behaviour; and
- (c) Organisational goal achievement such as numbers of products sold, number of new members recruited, funds raised, legislation passed or defeated.

The most frequently used evaluation measures were output and intermediate effects, and the least were measures of organisational achievement (Bissland, 1990). According to Swinehart (1979), there are four levels of evaluation: process, quality, intermediate and ultimate objectives. Process evaluation is about measuring the preparation and dissemination of communication materials. Quality evaluation is about assessing the communication materials or programmes for accuracy, clarity, production values and audience suitability. Evaluating intermediate objectives looks at precursors like media placement, while assessing ultimate objectives involves investigating the effects of the communication on the target public’s knowledge, attitudes or behaviour. Similarly, Lindenmann’s (1991) yardstick for evaluating PR effectiveness includes basic, intermediate, and advanced levels. Basic involves measuring outputs (media placements, impressions, and targeted audiences) and intermediate evaluates PR impact (reception, awareness, comprehension, and retention among target publics). Advanced evaluation measures PR outcomes (opinion, attitude, and behaviour change).

Meanwhile, Dozier (1984) surveyed PR practitioners and discovered three types of evaluation. The most formal is scientific impact evaluation which assesses public reaction to the organisation and PR programmes before, during and after implementation. Next is

seat-of-the-pants that uses informal techniques like feedback from media contacts to review programme impact, while scientific dissemination systematically measures the message distribution. Dozier (1984) correlated types of evaluation and practitioner roles, and found that technicians were unlikely to use any evaluation, while managers use seat-of-the-pants to supplement scientific impact (Dozier, 1985; 1990).

Baines *et al.* (2004) similarly found three main evaluation methods – by observation and experience; by feedback and its assessment; and by research. Observation and experience is the easiest and most inexpensive, but there is insufficient empirical evidence to claim the results were due to PR activity or campaign. Feedback and assessment such as complaints, ideas, suggestions, reports and recommendations provide better evaluation. It can consist of press cuttings, monitored broadcast materials and independent survey reports (Baines *et al.*, 2004). Although the Association of Media Evaluation Companies believes that the “systematic appraisal of a company’s reputation, products or services can be measured by media presence, critics doubt its validity due to its formulaic nature” (Theaker, 2001: p. 257). However, Hunt and Grunig (1994) feel that if the objective of press relations is about establishing the right message on the media agenda, then press clippings are useful to show the frequency and context of the organisation on the media agenda.

Jefkins (1994) suggests five ways to evaluate media coverage: media monitoring; readership assessment; picture usage assessment; voice share and readers responses. Media monitoring is about keeping track of papers, magazines or programmes that feature a story about the organisation. Other than quantity (such as size or volume of coverage), quality of coverage is also important, for example, the tone of the news report (positive or negative). Readership assessment is about the potential readership or audience, measured by readership or audience figures. As pictures speak a thousand words, picture usage can also indicate the support of each publication towards the organisation. Share voice refers to the number of publications and broadcast media that covered the story. It is often used as a comparison to the company’s competitive rivals. Response is when the public replies to a listed phone number or email address (Baines *et al.*, 2004).

Juan and Berger (2010) conducted two research projects to investigate how top business organisations measure the return on investment (ROI) of organisational internal communication efforts. They found that PR research methods consist basically of surveys, communication audit, desktop analysis and media coverage. Other than traditional media, PR practitioners have also included the Internet when investigating particular issues or finding out how online audiences perceive their organisation (Jeffries-Fox, 2004). External commercial services are usually hired to observe and analyse Internet media content of a particular organisation. The quantitative relationship between three audience metrics such as hits, unique visitors and page views are measured over hundreds of websites (Jeffries-Fox, 2004).

Lerbinger’s (1977) analysis of corporate use of research found four areas of evaluation research: environmental monitoring as well as PR, communication, and social audits. Environmental monitoring is used to gauge public opinion as well as social and political events that can impact the company. The most common was the PR audit, which assesses relevant publics and their perception of the organisation. It also looks at the issues that concern the publics and their power to influence the issues. A communications audit

evaluates the effectiveness of the communication products on internal and external publics such as readability studies and content analysis of publications. Lerbinger (1977) also found that organisations use social audits to assess their performance as corporate citizens, although there was little agreement about the type of evaluation method used.

2.3 Extent of Evaluation Research

Barlow's (1993) assessment of PR evaluation showed that scholars and PR practitioners believe meaningful measurement is hindered by the lack of research sophistication. Although measurement tools do exist, the respondents in Barlow's study felt that a macro level measurement of PR value is confusing. Some also felt that developing macro measurement tools such as a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis may not be worth it, as additional time and cost is needed. Barlow (1993) also examined the status of expenditures for communication research. Those facing cuts were most likely due to recession and downsizing, but overall, the majority of the PR practitioners felt that the top management generally supports expenditure on research (p. 45).

Watson's (1994) study was similar to Barlow (1993) – that PR evaluation in the United Kingdom is hampered by a lack of research knowledge. PR practitioners were also reluctant to have objective performance measures to their programmes, while clients and employers were also not willing to allocate resources to evaluation research. Watson (1995) later did an international check with 30 practitioners from 25 countries, and found that limitations to evaluation worldwide were similar to that in the United Kingdom, such as lack of time, personnel, knowledge and/or budget. Other issues included evaluation costs, doubts about its usefulness, and general aversion to scientific methodology. Baerns (1993) found similar issues in Germany such as a lack of time, staff, budget as well as doubts about the importance of evaluation. Lindenmann (1990) felt that practitioners were “not thoroughly aware” of research techniques. Also, about half of his respondents said that they spend 3% or less of their annual budget on evaluation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed intensive interview as its qualitative research method. Qualitative research methods have certain advantages because they allow the researchers to gather in-depth data of the phenomenon under investigation. It seeks to understand a given research problem from the perspectives of the selected samples. The data provides detailed descriptions of how people experience a given research issue; and also allows the researcher to pursue new areas of interest (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). An intensive interview uses smaller samples but enables the researchers to elicit sufficient details about the perception of Malaysian PR practitioners on importance and practice of evaluation research.

This study used non-probability sampling, namely, a volunteer sample. Face-to-face structured interviews were conducted with five PR practitioners in various Malaysian public-listed companies. They were contacted via e-mail and interview appointments were set at their time and location convenience. The interview sessions lasted 30 to 45 minutes and were recorded using an audio recorder and later transcribed for analysis. Due to the need for confidentiality, the identity of the respondents' companies could not be revealed, and they were identified via the industry in which they operated.

The respondents were asked 14 open-ended questions which touched on their perception of the importance of evaluation in PR, as well as the purpose and frequency of such activities. They were also asked on the budget and techniques of data collection as well as the use and analysis of the findings. Other questions touched on whether these PR practitioners had the support and cooperation of the top management on the issue of evaluation, and whether they faced difficulties and barriers when carrying out evaluation activities.

The interview data were analysed by manually summarising and categorising the raw data into a number of codes and themes. The researchers then developed patterns from the codes and themes by making comparisons between the respondents' responses. They then directly interpreted the data according to the research questions set in this study. Quotes were used to illustrate the key research findings.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 *Importance of Evaluation*

Firstly, the respondents were asked their perception on the importance of evaluation in PR practice. All agreed that evaluation is important. According to the bank respondent, PR and corporate communications is not a profit-making centre; instead it is more like a "cost centre", from the management's perspective. Thus evaluation is important for budgeting purposes. She said that evaluation is important because every year, she has to justify to the management the amount she needs to spend on PR activities. This is the same situation faced by the corporate communications manager in property development. She said that evaluation reports support the department in securing big-ticket projects, which ultimately benefits the company. She also noted that the communications department is not a profit but a cost centre, and such evaluation reports are a progress check to prove to management.

Other than budgeting, evaluation is also important in assessing a campaign, its process and whether the methodology used is producing results. The bank respondent said that the objective of evaluation is to see whether the campaign has been successful and is of benefit to the company in terms of exposure. The oil and gas respondent said that evaluation is an ongoing process, particularly in a long-term PR campaign. As such, it is critical to constantly review all specific elements. Evaluation helps the PR practitioner to review how well the campaign met the company's objectives, and to look at the elements that helped meet the objectives. In her opinion, evaluation helps to discover the successful and unsuccessful parts of the campaign, and to determine the current situation at the end of the PR activity. This view was echoed by the respondent from the car manufacturing company. He said that evaluation is useful to ensure that PR activities effectively meet organisational objectives, especially if it is something new that is being tried out for the first time. Evaluation can help him to decide how he would conduct future PR activities.

4.2 *Evaluation as Education*

In an environment where corporate communications may be new to an organisation or a competitive industry like property development, evaluation is useful, said the respondent from property development. In Malaysia, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are

growing larger and becoming public-listed companies. When they reach that level, corporate communications is useful, she said. Evaluation helps PR practitioners to 'educate' business owners, chief executive officers (CEOs) or managing directors (MDs) who might not be savvy with the media. Evaluation also educates management on the importance of empowering and listening to PR practitioners. The airline respondent said that while evaluation is important, a formal structure is not necessary. He said that evaluation is useful in finding out news coverage of the airline in the local and regional media, and assessing public perception, which helps the company brand its message to the public. The researchers in this study found that evaluation was useful to one PR practitioner who used it to educate the less media-savvy management on the importance of PR. One respondent found that evaluation research empowers PR practitioners because it enables them to speak to the management with authority, based on facts and figures.

4.3 Evaluation Techniques and Methodology

The evaluation research technique that the PR practitioners used was content analysis through media monitoring reports that were outsourced to external PR agencies.

Other than their own informal in-house/internal monitoring, the bank has an external agency that does the daily media monitoring in Malaysia. The bank also operates in three other Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, where there are external agencies to monitor news coverage in the respective countries. In the bank, the media monitoring reports are very detailed. The reports analyse and compare news coverage of the bank to that of its competitors, using pie charts and graphs. Sometimes, the report focuses more narrowly on specific banking sectors, for example, Islamic or retail banking or the group strategy as a whole. The report can also be product-specific, for example, credit cards and home or car loans. In other situations, the report focuses on specific publications, for example, print news daily *Berita Harian*, *The Business Times* or Astro, the cable television provider in Malaysia. Such information is useful for the bank to build good relations with the reporters.

The bank respondent added that such evaluation data helps her plan her PR outreach programme. For example, the quarterly report will show which aspects of the bank's business have been highlighted in the media. It will also indicate which spokespersons have been quoted, for example, the CEO of Islamic banking, group CEO, treasurer or head of derivatives. Based on the report, the communications head is then aware of who is over-exposed, and will ensure that others also get their fair share of exposure. Such evaluation helps in planning because, at group level, all requests for press releases or launches are channelled to her. Being in charge of the calendar of events, she needs to be aware of who has been in the media so that she can balance the amount of exposure each person gets. For example, if X has been in the media three times this week, she will probably allow Y to speak next week, and postpone X's event till next month. Thus, the evaluation report is very useful in helping to plan her calendar of events.

In terms of informal evaluation, the bank respondent verbally reports to her boss, often adding her views on the pros and cons. She will also inform her boss about information that is not evident, for example, feedback from a reporter during lunch.

The property development company also uses media monitoring reports – sound bites and any media output in terms of print, offline and online. The respondent said that she engages an external company to conduct the media monitoring as it is cheaper than doing it in-house. She added that tonality reports or sentiment analysis are useful in assessing the positivity or negativity impact of the news reports, although the company has yet to purchase it. The return-on-investment (ROI) of the news coverage is usually assessed in terms of PR and advertising value. In terms of post-mortem of an event, there is usually a checklist of items. At the end of the event, they will match what was done against the checklist – informally for smaller events and formally for larger events.

The airline company also subscribes to a daily media monitoring service conducted by an external agency that covers print and broadcast news reports both locally and regionally amongst ASEAN countries, but the report is less extensive. According to the head of communications, the report does not have any analysis – just a collection of news articles about the company and the publication in which it appeared in. Other than that, the airline company also relies on informal research. The communications head and his staff check and monitor blogs on a daily basis. The airline chairman himself also checks on Facebook, Twitter as well as his own personal blog. They also use Google alerts as it is fast and cheap. He added that their feedback comes mainly from informal social media channels rather than formal media. The company actively uses social media such as blogs, Facebook, email and Twitter to monitor and respond to the public. Because it is instantaneous, they can give feedback immediately, and it is the immediacy of the interaction that sets the company apart from its competitors. The company's Guest Relations Department, which includes the Complaints Department, handles feedback from online guests and manages to resolve 80% of the issues immediately. It will liaise with other departments when there are issues that cannot be resolved. Meanwhile, the oil and gas respondent said the company uses survey as the research technique for PR evaluation.

4.4 Use of Outcome of Evaluation Research

The respondents were asked how they use the results and outcome of the evaluation research. The bank, property-development and car manufacturing company use evaluation for budgeting purposes, as well as to assess if the activities achieve organisational goals.

In the car manufacturing company, evaluation results are usually shared with the management as well as the respective front-line division heads who might find the information useful. Other than that, evaluation results are essential for budget planning, and sometimes used to request for additional budget during the mid-year budget review. In fact, the respondent said that if evaluation data is properly studied and taken into account, the company generally has a higher overall success rate. In his opinion, if there is no evaluation data, it will be impossible to gauge the situation and plan for the future. Evaluation allows the management to have a clearer view on decisions relating to the role of PR in the company as well as its future.

The airline company holds that evaluation is useful for branding purposes. Based on feedback, the company decided to hold competitions for guests, with the winners receiving free tickets. It also uses social media to reach out to guests and customers. Other than

compliments, the company also receives complaints. Resolving the issues and meeting customers' expectations, also give the company some form of evaluation of its services.

In the bank, the evaluation reports are usually fed back to the management. In the respondent's opinion, the results of a good PR activity can go a long way in terms of getting the management to buy into the ideas for the next year. She gave the example of her previous organisation which conducted a road show for a five-day property event in Dubai. They brought a scale model of their property and the managing director gave lots of interviews at the event hall. They also brought the Malaysian media to Dubai to introduce them to the company and its partners. The company spent almost RM200,000 but that effort generated a PR value of more than RM1 million in terms of exposure on local and international print and broadcast media like CNBC, Forbes and Fortune. The management was very impressed with the outcome as the evaluation report showed the output of their investment. Thus, they were more amenable to replicating the same approach the following year. The bank respondent believes that PR activities have helped the company to achieve its goal to be an international bank in South-East Asia through its press releases and media coverage, although she is unable to put a value to it. Also, if the evaluation is positive, it is not an issue. But if it is negative or bordering on negative, then the bank's management is more interested to know how to minimise and contain the damage.

4.5 Frequency and Timing of Evaluation

When asked how often they evaluate their PR activities, the companies that have a more structured form of evaluation do so at regular intervals – quarterly or bi-annually. The bank gets its evaluation reports quarterly, but if it is a very big event, it might get a separate report on a case-by-case basis, produced by the same or a different agency. In the bank respondent's opinion, it is sufficient to conduct evaluation at the end as the PR activity does not last very long – a week at most. The agency has about two to three days to submit the ad-hoc reports for specific events, and seven weeks for the quarterly report.

The respondent from property development said that the company has two official bi-annual reviews for all employees, and the managers have to do a quarterly review report. The respondent claimed that when there are projects, there is also evaluation done via post-mortem analysis. And on a monthly basis, she has an informal lunch discussion with her staff on their work progress.

As for the car manufacturing company, its external agency monitors media coverage throughout the financial year, and submits reports at pre-arranged times. It also conducts evaluation on every major activity involving the company's image, and only in certain situations does the company require evaluation data immediately.

The oil and gas company similarly has on-going evaluation which is conducted throughout the campaign, the purpose of which is to find the elements that are not working as effectively as discussed during the planning stage. If so, they can be fine-tuned and improvised to work better. At the end of the event, there will also be a review whereby the final results will be compared against the campaign objectives.

The airline company has no specific time frame for evaluation as the set-up is rather informal. While there is media monitoring on a daily basis by the outsourced agency, the

communications head, the chairman and internal staff also monitor 'Internet chatter' daily on their own – in blogs, Facebook, email and Twitter. Most companies spend minimal time evaluating PR activities as the work is usually outsourced to an external agency. If there is any event, they will evaluate after it is over.

4.6 Budget

On the issue of budget allocation, most of the companies spend on engaging external agencies to conduct media monitoring. The property development company pays about RM2,500 monthly on a retainer basis to the external PR agency. The bank pays RM3,000 monthly for media monitoring, and RM6,000 to 7,000 if it is on quarterly basis. Of the five respondents, the car manufacturing company spends the most on evaluation – 25% of the PR budget. For the oil and gas company respondent, it is about 10% of the PR budget.

4.7 Collection and Storage of Data

The respondents were asked how they usually collected and stored data. Interestingly, the airline company does not have any storage or filing system, while the car manufacturing company relies on the external agency to keep and manage it. But if a new agency is appointed in the future, the data is to be returned by the outgoing agency.

The bank, has a comprehensive filing system so that one can refer to it. The external agency sends a hard copy of the report together with the CD-ROM to the company and the company would file it. Similarly, the property development company is currently setting up a library cataloging system, and follows the ISO standards in terms of data storage. Although the property development company does not have a standard operating procedure (SOP) on this, the respondent said she keeps the data for at least seven years. She reasons that there is no point throwing out the report after spending so much effort doing it, adding that it is good to keep the data as one might need to track back what was done previously. She recalled the difficulty she faced when she just joined the company. Although there was a marketing communication department previously, no records were kept and it affected her work. This is why she started a library system for annual reports so that she does not have to hunt around to look for a copy when she needs it.

4.8 Difficulties Faced during Evaluation

The respondents were asked about the difficulties they faced when carrying out the evaluation. According to the car manufacturing respondent, the data in PR evaluation reports are highly subjective and he faces the issue of how best to utilise them. There is also the challenge of trying to convince others on the importance of the data. One of the main difficulties of PR evaluation research is that different people have different perceptions and interpretation of the research data, which makes it difficult for the PR practitioner to use the report to convince the management of strategies that need to be put in place.

The bank respondent also felt that there is lack of evaluation tools in PR. The tools currently used are archaic, and may be on loan from advertising. For example, the number of people seeing an advertisement gives it its advertising value. Media coverage enables PR managers to quantify the financial return-on-investment (ROI) value of the PR activities

through the use of PR value or advertising value concept, whereby the PR value is three times that of the advertising value.

However, if the article is negative, does it mean that the PR value is minus three of the advertising value? Tonality reports, for example, can be positive or negative but the PR value does not reflect that as it is just a number. Also, she says it is rather hard to actually take into consideration the hidden meaning behind an article and put a financial value or percentage on a negative article's detrimental effects on a company. Articles on credit card fraud, for instance, have a negative impact on the credit card business, but there is no clear method on how to measure or gauge their effects on stakeholders as well as the brand value of the credit cards and the company. She feels that current evaluation methods and results are questionable but because PR practitioners lack proper tools to gauge PR value, they just have to settle with what they have now.

Findings show that PR practitioners are not very pleased with this measurement tool – media coverage analysis – as it only shows the value of the media coverage but not the impact – whether positive or negative. In this situation, tonality reports or sentiment analysis is useful to assess the impact of the news – but Malaysian organisations loathe investing in such reports that cost more than the usual media monitoring reports.

In addition, the bank respondent admitted that in Malaysia, the management has not come to the level of realisation of how much PR contributes towards the company. Nevertheless, she feels that the bank's management and CEO are more aware of how important PR is – whether negative or positive. While the management does not see PR as contributing towards the bottom-line, they realise it strengthens the company's brand value. The bank respondent believes that the PR industry has not come to a point where it can measure its contribution in terms of dollars and cents. For example, if there is a PR campaign, practitioners do not have the capacity to calculate how much the campaign has helped to increase sales. Another problem she faced is the slowness in getting evaluation reports, especially the detailed quarterly report which needs to several requirements.

With the airline company, its media monitoring report only provides data on news coverage in various publications, and there is a lack of proper analysis on its impact. Quantifying media coverage is not sufficient, and there is a need for tangible measurements, the respondent added. He questioned how would someone monitor the value of a million guests or visitors at a website? The respondent is of the view that what is important is public perception of the company's brand and message.

The respondent from the property development company said that the problem was getting financial support from the management to conduct evaluation. It took her six to seven months to convince the management to approve the budget for media monitoring. She is not sure they would agree to a tonality report as her management is rather concerned about cost. She is also keen to do a media audit on the company, at the very least a dipstick survey, but she is not sure whether the company is willing to cover the cost.

4.9 Encouragement for Evaluation

Lastly, the respondents were asked for their comments or suggestions in encouraging PR practitioners to conduct evaluation. All of them agreed that evaluation should be done. The

car manufacturing company said that as PR is a very ‘subjective science’, evaluation provides hard data to justify PR activities and makes a difference in future planning. Wastage is reduced and spending is more efficient.

For the airline company, evaluation helps in planning marketing strategies. The oil and gas company said that evaluation adds value to PR activities by measuring the results and effectiveness of campaigns. The property development company said while evaluation is important, PR or advertising values are not a ‘biblical must-do’. Companies should be flexible as evaluation is about monitoring and PR is about creating conversations. PR practitioners provide strategic counsel and have to be flexible about evaluation.

Table 1: Summary of Findings

Respondents/ Themes	Bank	Oil & Gas	Car manufacturer	Property Development	Airline
Perception on importance of evaluation research	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
Objective of evaluation research	Budgeting and assessing campaign’s success	Ongoing evaluation useful for successful campaign execution	Ensure PR activities meet organisational objectives	Support budget claims for big- ticket projects Educate management on importance of PR	Finding out news coverage & assessing public perception of brand Helps in planning marketing strategies
Evaluation techniques	Content analysis through media monitoring reports, outsourced to external media monitoring companies Also conduct internal informal monitoring	Content analysis through media monitoring reports, outsourced to external media monitoring companies Conduct formal surveys	Content analysis through media monitoring reports, outsourced to external media monitoring companies	Content analysis through media monitoring reports, outsourced to external media monitoring companies	Content analysis through media monitoring reports, outsourced to external media monitoring companies Also conduct internal informal monitoring, including social media

Continued

Table 1. Continued

Use of outcome of evaluation research	Budgeting; Assess achievement of organisational goals; Feedback to management	No comment	Budgeting; Assess achievement of organisational goals; Feedback to management	Budgeting; Assess achievement of organisational goals	Branding
Frequency and timing of evaluation	Quarterly; case-by-case basis	On-going	On-going; after every major activity	Bi-annually	On-going; daily monitoring of social media
Budget allocation	RM3,000-7,000	10% of PR budget	25% of PR budget	RM2,500	No comment
Collection and storage of data	Filing system with hard copy and CD-ROM	No comment	Kept and managed by external agency	Library cataloguing system following ISO standards	No storage or filing system
Difficulties faced during evaluation	Lack of proper evaluation tools in PR; Management unable to acknowledge PR's financial contribution to organisation	No comment	Evaluation reports highly subjective, problem of utilisation – difficult to convince management	Lack of proper evaluation tools in PR; Getting financial support from management to conduct evaluation research	Lack of proper analysis on its impact
Encouragement for evaluation research	Evaluation research should be done	Evaluation research should be done	Evaluation research should be done	Evaluation research should be done	Evaluation research should be done

5. DISCUSSION

The first research question addresses the perception of the importance of evaluation research. All interviewees agreed that evaluation is important. This finding corresponds to White and Blamphin's (1994) study that the most important topic in PR practice and research is that of evaluation. The literature also shows evaluation is important because today's tough business environment pressures PR practitioners to be accountable to the management. To justify their existence and budget, PR practitioners have to prove via evaluation research that its PR programmes and activities have benefitted the organisation (Grunig and Grunig, 2001; Grunig and Hunt, 1984; White, 1991). It is clear that evaluation research can be used

to assess whether the PR campaign has met the company's objectives. If the evaluation data is properly studied and utilised, the company usually has a better overall future success rate. This research similarly shows that Malaysian PR managers face the same pressures as their overseas counterparts. Management perceives PR departments as cost rather than profit centres. Thus, evaluation research enables practitioners to convince the management that PR activities and programmes are beneficial so that the same, if not a higher budget can be obtained next year.

The second research question addresses the extent to which evaluation research has been conducted in corporations. Three respondents (oil and gas, car manufacturing and airline) said that they conduct on-going evaluations of their PR activities, while the other two respondents do so quarterly. Three of the respondents (bank, car manufacturing and property development) use evaluation for budgeting purposes as well as to assess if the activities achieve organisational goals. The airline respondent said that evaluation is useful for branding purposes. According to McDavid and Hawthorn (2006), assessing programme effectiveness is the most common reason why PR practitioners conduct evaluation. Michaelson (2009) also stated that PR evaluation and research enable practitioners and management to discover valuable best practices for the organisation. Besides, evaluation can be used to discover news coverage and public perception of the organisation so that steps can be taken to brand its message to the public. This is similar to the case study approach by Grass (1977) who examined the evolution of DuPont's television advertising, and O'Neill, (1984) who said that research on corporate reputation is important as organisations need to be responsive to the public. In our opinion, the extent to which evaluation research is done is minimal for all the respondents. The respondents only engage external agencies that conduct media monitoring on a quarterly basis to be presented to the management. Even if they do on-going evaluation, it is done informally. This is due to lack of funds to conduct formal research as well as lack of management support.

The final research question addresses the evaluation methods used by Malaysian PR practitioners in measuring PR activities. All the respondents used external media monitoring agencies to conduct content analysis of their media coverage. Only two respondents from the airline and bank use in-house informal monitoring. The reason why these companies outsource this evaluation function is because of its limited budget. One of the respondents indicated that it is most cost-effective to engage an external agency to do this evaluation rather than employ another staff to do the same function.

Although Bissland (1990) found three main ways to measure evaluation – communication output, intermediate effect on publics, and organisational goal achievement – it would seem that the first is the most popular in Malaysia. Malaysian PR practitioners prefer to engage an external agency to conduct media monitoring as it is more cost-effective. The reports analyse media coverage of the organisation – off and online. The findings often reveal aspects of the organisation which are over-or under-exposed so that the practitioner can plan the calendar of events in response. The findings enable the PR manager to build good media relations as it can indicate which media channel gives a more favourable coverage. Very few practitioners actually conduct evaluation research to assess the impact on the publics or to see if the organisational goals have been met.

The researchers notice that Malaysian PR practitioners have superficial PR evaluation research. Dozier (1984) found three types of evaluation – scientific impact, ‘seat-of-the-pants’ and scientific dissemination. Dozier (1985) added that PR practitioners tend to confuse communication products with end results, that is, they tend to measure output like media coverage rather than impact of the PR activity. In this situation, Malaysia PR practitioners are similar in that they focus their evaluation based on media coverage and hardly on impact. Most local practitioners use ‘seat-of-the pants’ informal techniques such as in-house ad-hoc media monitoring whereby PR practitioners would scan various media outlets on a daily basis when they have the time. Interestingly, one of the respondents used informal evaluation extensively. All the staff, including the chairman and his management team, actively monitor online chatter on blogs, e-mail and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. They also use Google alert which gives them the most updated online news about the organisation. Because the information is instantaneous, they can give feedback immediately.

This is similar to the findings by Jeffries-Fox (2004) who found that other than traditional media, PR practitioners are using the Internet when investigating particular issues or evaluating online audience perception. Not surprisingly, this corresponds to Lindenman’s 1988 survey (Lindenmann, 1990) whereby 70% of the respondents felt that PR research is still “casual and informal rather than scientific and precise” (p. 15). PR practitioners overseas have attempted research to measure indicators in a PR relationship (Hon, 1998; Ferguson, 1984) but not so in Malaysia.

According to Juan and Berger (2010), PR research methods consist basically of communication audits, survey and media coverage, while Lerbinger (1977) found four areas of evaluation research: environmental monitoring as well as PR, communication, and social audits. In this study, the researchers found that Malaysian PR practitioners only use media monitoring and informal evaluation. None used PR or communication audits, probably because of the cost factor. This is not surprising as cost is a deterrent to evaluation (Baerns, 1993; Watson 1995).

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while Malaysian PR practitioners do conduct evaluation research in PR, it still has not reached the level of sophistication and development as their overseas counterparts. Apart from formal media monitoring, other evaluation research tends to be informal. This corresponds to Barlow’s (1993) assessment that meaningful measurement is hampered by lack of research sophistication, leading to different interpretation of data. The respondents in Barlow’s study also felt that measurement tools are often confusing. Malaysian PR practitioners are frustrated by the lack of proper evaluation tools. Nevertheless, they realise that evaluation is important as it enables them to justify their budgetary requirements.

This study reveals that PR practitioners are aware of the importance of evaluation research, but their concerns are not shared by the upper management. Thus, they find it hard to get sufficient budget and support to carry out the evaluation research, which hampers their ability to examine the effectiveness of their PR programmes and activities to

see if their objectives and goals have been achieved. This is not surprising as even organisations overseas dislike spending too much on evaluation. Also, organisations feel it may not be worth the money and time to start developing PR measurement tools such as a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis.

7. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is limited by the number of respondents chosen, and also the interview duration and availability of the respondents. This means that the findings cannot be generalised to the entire population of PR practitioners. E-mail interviews also did not allow researchers to probe further on certain aspects. The researchers suggest that other areas of research in PR evaluation can be probed to discover patterns of evaluations and its impacts on communication outcomes. Quantitative methods such as surveys may be able to produce a greater consensus among PR practitioners.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

1. How do you perceive the importance of evaluation in PR?
2. What are your purposes in conducting evaluation?
3. How frequently do you evaluate your activities/efforts?
4. When do you usually conduct evaluation?
5. How much time do you spend evaluating a particular PR activity?
6. What is the budget allocated for evaluation research?
7. What research techniques do you use for PR evaluation?
8. Who is responsible for carrying out the evaluation research?
9. How do you collect & store your data?
10. How do you use the research findings?
11. Do the evaluation findings achieve organisational goals?
12. How does your organisation/management support your evaluation activity?
13. What are the difficulties/problems/barriers faced when carrying out the evaluation?
14. What are your comments/suggestions in encouraging PR practitioners to conduct evaluation of PR activities?