

A view on the future of PR and measurement

Yogi Berra, the American sportsman (not the cartoon character) once said: "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future." But everyone wants to know the future; more than facts about the present or data about the past, people want clairvoyance.

So in the spirit of year beginnings it feels appropriate to offer up a few thoughts on the future of PR and evaluation. There are some reflections on 2006 but we will concentrate on predictions for 2007 and beyond. In the spirit of blogging, to which this article is allied (<http://mediaevaluation.blogspot.com/>) I will post accordingly any comments or criticism you might care to send.

But first a prediction for 2008

Just before Christmas I was involved in a discussion on online media at the Chartered Institute of Public Relations at which Larry Weber, now of Racepoint but formally of Weber Shandwick, talked about a tipping-point which is going to have massive implications for PR.

Much has been said about the decline in newspaper circulation and he predicted that in about 18 month's time online will be the dominant media by which people receive their news.

Controversially he said we should forget the idea of dealing with online media as an extension of the traditional media. Online is a community of commentators, many ill-informed and with a various levels of credibility. It takes time to understand who has influence and to build relationships with the new network of stakeholders.

Such is the gravity of this change that the majority of our predictions will focus on the shift of media online.

Could this be the end of AVE's and OTS?

The traditional way PR has been measured has often used advertising value equivalent and opportunity-to-see figures. Gaining comparable data for online media is proving a very testing problem. The analogy goes, if you were featured in a page on the BBC's website can you claim the entire readership of the site, even though it is made up of many thousands of individual webpages?

In many respects this is a shame because there is genuine value in being able to report results using the same the metrics across different media. The harsh reality is that PR needs to understand that online media is different and convey these implications to their dominant coalition.

Although there are some things you can't do, there are other things you can do with measuring online media, but more on that later.

Over the next year it would be great to see a discussion on how measurement can be best undertaken of online coverage.

My thoughts are:

- Automated favourability and message checking systems don't work and should not be used
- Online media measurement can more accurately track public opinion as it can show media out-take (what people are actually looking at)
- Online is all about influence - what is your community saying about you and has your story appeared in any blogs?

The evidence is that there are a number of diverging strategies and methodologies being employed to measure online coverage. Undoubtedly PR and research would be stronger if a more unified currency of online measurement methodology could be formulated.

Automated content analysis – 'a chimera'

I think it likely that 2007 will see entry into the market of a number of automated media favourability and message usage systems. I strongly agree with this quote above and caution users to be alert to the limitations of these programs.

Leading contemporary researcher into content analysis Kimberly Neuendorf used this phrase in her 2002 book *'Guide to Media Content'*. Most of the research community agree that their capacity to pick up on the subtlety of language is limited, as is their ability to 'learn' the ways that humans interpret communications.

The risk of evaluation fatigue

Undoubtedly the challenge of online measurement is great, although there are also opportunities to do the job a lot better. The concern is that this fragmentation will put people off. Often it is said that people don't evaluate because of cost and time. I don't support the notion of cost as there are lots

of free tools to help, like Google Trends and the BBC Most Popular News Now.

Time is always an issue and the first time around it will take longer. However, without a scheme of measurement what's to say things went well? There has to be something better than gut feeling! Undertaking effective evaluation is not a quick post-mortem. PR will lose credibility if it does not build it in from the start – setting measurable objectives, pre-testing, message refining, etc.

2007 will be an interesting year for PR. To many practitioners new media will be exactly that - media which will require a new kind of approach. Two massive points in favour are that PR is based on creativity and relationships – both exceedingly relevant to the new media market.

Differentiating output, out-take and outcome

Since Dr. Jim McNamara developed his Pyramid Model in 2002 for PR research he has argued that PR is too centred on media output, as opposed to public outcomes. He believes with this will only be solved through education of future PR practitioners. Having just completed the CIPR Diploma I am not so sure.

I would concur that professionalism is an issue and with up-to-date academic research, PR graduate training and CPD the industry would make great strides; but I also believe that greater understanding of what PR is about with the dominant coalition would be even more beneficial.

Blogging shows its darker side

Last year was perhaps the year that blogging came of age. Organisations started to realise the value of consumer generated marketing and that consumers are genuinely swayed by the views on products lodged on various retail and review sites like amazon.co.uk and peachorlemon.co.uk.

This is a real shame as I have used these opinions (from what I unquestionably believed was unbiased reviewers) as the basis for a number of purchases. After a number of incidents of 'ghosting' it now seems clear that the would-be purchaser needs to be a little more alert.

Such is the level of concern that PR may become sucked-in to his practice that the CIPR has issued a policy document on social media with a view offering practical guidelines. In tandem, it has indicated that serious infringements of its code of conduct could result in expulsion of members from the organisation.

Astroturf can give you more than burnt knees

The practice of astroturfing involves the creation of the impression of independent popular support by means of an orchestrated public relations campaign – in effect faking grassroots support.

Although astroturfing is not a new concept online media provides a wider selection of techniques which can be employed. Most obviously this can involve fake blogs and unofficial looking sites which are actually under the control of the brand.

We would welcome your views and criticisms on our predictions and these can be added to our blog (<http://mediaevaluation.blogspot.com/>).