



Measuring Your Communication Impact

Most of us understand the need to communicate about an issue, initiative, or project, but many of us are unsure of how to measure the effectiveness of that communication effort. In other words, how do we know if we're meeting our communication goals? Or when do we need to change course?

Before setting out to measure impact you should have an intentional communication plan with goals, strategies, and tactics. This is your roadmap for communication and what you will be evaluating. You measure your progress against your plan. If you need help developing your communication plan, check out ACS' other tools at advocacyandcommunication.org/tools-resources or contact us at info@advocacyandcommunication.org.

Use the steps below to create and execute a plan to evaluate your communication impact:

1. Revisit your communication goals.

Start by reviewing your goals, both internal and external, to make sure they're the right goals and objectives to work toward right now. Communication goals may be internal (within your organization), external (an audience not directly working with your organization or on your issue), or they could be specific to an issue or campaign (related to an organization or coalition more generally). Remember, ideal goals are SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, result-focused, and time-specific



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Strategy	Metrics	Milestone	Quantitative/ qualitative measures	Measurement techniques
Position your organization as a credible source of information on college and career readiness for young adults with key media outlets by the end of year two.	Baseline metric: knowledge levels among families have increased. Incremental performance metrics: the prevalence and nature of coverage of your issue in the media	Establish a relationship with journalists from key media outlets by the end of year one.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Requests for information by journalists indicate their increased interest ▶ Organization's spokesperson is quoted at least twice in key media outlets ▶ Organization's blog or website is referenced in at least one key media outlet 	Quantitative data tracking and analysis: track the number of touchpoints your staff has with journalists as well as media coverage of your organization.

2. Choose which communication strategies to evaluate.

Given limited resources, you may not be able to evaluate every element of your communication plan, or at least not at all once. Begin by choosing two or three strategies that are most important or require the most resources (time or financial) to implement. You may not have the time, funding, or technical capacity to measure all the variables in your communication effort. That's OK but keep in mind there may be other variables at play influencing your outcomes. See the box on page 4 about what you can say about the communication impact.

3. Establish baseline metrics.

Depending on how long you have been implementing your communication effort, you may or may not already have baseline metrics. Baseline metrics are important because they allow you to measure change over time. Whether your baseline metrics show big-picture impact or incremental changes for a particular tactic, they must be measurable.

4. Decide when, what, and how you are going to measure.

You'll want to establish milestones that help you see movement toward your goal, qualitative or quantitative measures, and techniques to use. The table on page 3 outlines some common techniques to help assess the measures.

ACS recommends

creating a table with goals, strategies, metrics, milestones, measures, and techniques to make it easier to track this information in one place. This will also help you identify where you may need external resources to obtain relevant information (i.e., public opinion survey data). Here is an example:

Goal:

In three years, increase awareness among high school students and their families in "X" county about college and career options.

Technique	Description	When to Use	Cost Implications
Interviews	Speaking directly with a small group of members of your target audience	When you want in-depth insights into specific aspects of your effort	Depends. This could require quite a bit of staff time, or you could hire a professional interviewer.
Focus groups	Small, facilitated conversations with a limited number of people in your target audience	When testing or deciding among specific messages, tactics, or approaches	Costly. It's ideal to bring in professionals who know how to plan, manage, and analyze focus groups.
Surveys	Online, phone, or in-person information-capture tool, often consisting of multiple-choice questions	Surveys are useful for a number of activities, but particularly for establishing baselines and changes over time.	Depends. You can use low-cost survey tools like Survey Monkey to design, field, and analyze your own survey, or you can hire professionals for any or all stages of the process. You can also pay to insert your questions in large existing surveys that go to thousands of people.
Observation	A trained observer monitors how a group or individual implements a program or responds to a program	Efforts that involve public or group discussions or debates	Depends. Likely staff time.
Quantitative data collection	Website metrics (visits, downloads), social media metrics (followers, shares), and media coverage fall into this category	To understand how and when people are engaging with your content/organization	Depends. Likely fairly intensive staff time, but you can purchase tools to support traditional and social media tracking (Cision, Sprout Social, Google Analytics).
Quantitative data analysis	Conducting statistical analysis of quantitative data	To begin to understand the relationship between your activities and external changes	Likely pricey. If you have an in-house statistician, staff time only, but otherwise you will need to enlist the help of an external expert.
Content analysis	Taking an in-depth look at the substance of content (such as media coverage)	To understand if and how messaging might be changing over time (e.g., is media coverage of your issue becoming more or less positive?)	Costly. Requires training in content analysis and is time-intensive.

Make changes to your communication plan based on what you learn. You are conducting an evaluation to understand if your activities are working and to what degree. If you find things aren't going as you hoped or they are not cost-effective, now is the time to make changes to your strategies and tactics. Arm yourself with the data, and reflect on what has been effective and what could be improved. Questions to consider include the following:

- ✓ Which tactics worked well?
- ✓ What other factors came into play that might have affected the communication outcomes?
- ✓ Did any tactics take more time and effort or financial resources than expected?
- ✓ Is your message reaching your intended audience? If not, why not?
- ✓ Are you using the best messengers for the intended audience?
- ✓ Does your message resonate with your audience?

5. Share what you learn!

This is an important and often overlooked step. Many organizations are accustomed to reporting evaluation data to funders, but it's great to share your findings more widely—think newsletters and even social media—so others in the community understand the impact you are having and why your work is important.

A Note about Correlation and Causation

It's tempting to claim ownership of your outcomes moving forward after you've worked hard to get your message out. For example, you notice that more people are reporting support for your issue after your campaign ads ran. That means you moved the dial on public support, right? Not necessarily. You're seeing a **correlation** between the ads running and a change in public support—a relationship does exist, but you don't know why or how.

Causation means that one thing happens *because of* another thing. While you *can* report that support for your issue increased after your ads ran, you cannot say it was BECAUSE of your ads. There are many other factors that may have influenced public support that were not related to your ads.

This is a nuanced distinction, but an important one. Even if you are not publishing the evaluation or presenting results, it will help you make future communication decisions if you recognize the multiple reasons for increased public support and then weigh the relative value of the ads (time and cost).

Learn More:

<https://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/arewethereyet.pdf>

<https://towardsdatascience.com/why-correlation-does-not-imply-causation-5b99790df07e>

<https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/structure/strategic-planning/create-objectives/main>