

PR Research & Strategies

PR Research Methods

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Public relations researchers use the same tools used by others in the communications field. Research serves many purposes. It can help practitioners and administrators learn about the issues concerning their organizations or the publics they serve.

Research helps groups and organizations plan their efforts, test their messages, analyze their effectiveness, and check their competitive strengths and weaknesses. And research can also help organizations sway opinion and even get publicity.

Research is at the core of public relations. All of the major PR models (e.g., RACE, ROPE, ROSIE, RPIE) begin with “Research” and end with “Evaluation,” stressing the importance of measuring the effectiveness of our efforts.

Formative research is done *before* you implement your communication campaign or activity to help you select the correct strategies and tactics. **Evaluative research**, on the other hand, is done during or after your campaign to measure whether you have achieved your goals. Sometimes, as a result of research, you will need to change directions, adjust strategies, target new publics, craft new messages, use different media and so on.

Sometimes organizations have staff specifically trained in research methodology or hire experts to handle research. But more than likely, you will be expected to access and analyze data yourself, either through contracted services (such as Factiva, Vocus or CustomScoop) or “free” services (such as Google Alerts, BlogPulse, SurveyMonkey or Twendz). This handout addresses some of the major issues related to PR research and some of the methods you might use.

PR Metrics

An important concept to understand is PR metrics. A “metric” is a unit of measurement. For years, PR practitioners resisted measuring the effectiveness of

their efforts, which often made it difficult to justify the expense of public relations relative to marketing and advertising.

In recent years, however, PR practitioners realize they must measure their effectiveness not only to prove what they are doing works but also to save their jobs. But what, exactly, is a PR metric? How do we use them to measure effectiveness? And how do we measure ROI (Return on Investment) for PR?

Horton (2002) lists several items that might be added into a publicity metrics formula to determine how effective our PR efforts are:

- CPR (cost per thousand impressions) or CPMC (cost per minute spent per contact)
- Credibility of the medium (e.g., The Wall Street Journal has more credibility with investors than does a local tabloid) – the credibility level is assigned a value
- Circulation
- Clip counting
- Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE)
- Content analysis and ranking
- Benchmarking results
- Time and expense dedicated to the PR effort
- Transparency – Horton says, “Reporting should depict the flow of activity from the beginning to the result.”

Each of these items (or others) is assigned a value and entered into a formula. The resulting number supposedly is a valid measure of the effectiveness of the total PR effort.

Calculating PR or publicity metrics on your own can be quite challenging. Many PR vendors will calculate the metric value of your efforts for you or they will sell you software that allows you to calculate metrics easily yourself (Wyckoff, 2002). PRtrak, for example, uses circulation and other data to calculate how much media coverage you have and how valuable that coverage is. Vocus uses

interactive press releases, among other things, to identify which audience members are most interested in your news. And MediaMap offers its clients the chance to measure such things as media opportunities and media coverage.

At the 2009 New Media Academic Summit, speakers addressed the importance of metrics to PR. David Liu, senior vice president/general manager for People Networks at AOL, said that AOL no longer used page views in favor of a more meaningful metric to measure engagement – Did people do what you wanted them to? Debbie Curtis-Magley, PR manager for UPS, emphasized the importance of listening to your customers. Good metrics, she said, include share of conversation, tonality and a positive shift in e-mail messages to the company. Alexandria Wheeler, director of Digital Strategy for Starbucks, said that brand perception and love of the company are soft metrics, while an example of a hard metric is the 1 million volunteer hours the company was able to muster through a PR campaign.

Important metrics are those that measure whether you achieved your campaign goals with a reasonable amount of inputs. Keep these metrics in mind when you do research.

Ethics in PR Research

Many people believe that if they read something in print or the Internet or hear/see it on TV, it must be true. The same can be said for research results: Many people believe that if “research shows” something to be true, then it must be. Therefore, it is especially important that you be ethical when doing research.

In research, we must be concerned with validity and reliability. **Internal validity** means that you are measuring what you say you are. For example, if you ask people if they “subscribe” to the newspaper, that doesn’t necessarily mean that they “read” the newspaper. Therefore, when reporting your results, you must be careful not to misrepresent what you have found.

External validity means that your results are generalizable to the population that you’re interested in. Before the rise of the women’s health movement in the 1970s, research on “adults” suggested protocols for avoiding heart attacks. The results were generalized to the entire

adult population, even though the “adults” studied were white males. Subsequent research showed that the findings did not necessarily apply to white females or to males or females of other racial and ethnic groups.

Reliability refers to whether your research instrument (such as a survey or focus group script) is applied the same way each time it is used. One way to estimate reliability is through the use of pretests and posttests. Another way is to ask multiple questions to measure the same concept; this is called “internal consistency.” For example, assume you ask respondents to rate the statements: “I almost always ride the bus to school” and “I almost never ride the bus to school.” If a respondent agrees with the first statement but disagrees with the second, then you have internal consistency, a form of reliability.

Another ethical issue is that participation in your research must be **voluntary** and you must make sure that **no harm** will be done to participants. This doesn’t mean only physical harm. For example, if you casually or unintentionally share personal information (such as household income or beliefs) about one of your respondents without his or her consent, you have breached **confidentiality**. Respondents might receive unwanted attention as a result. And the respondents likely will never participate in future studies.

Research Approaches

Research falls into two major categories: quantitative and qualitative. **Quantitative research** focuses on measurements and statistical analyses. Examples include questionnaires and experiments.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, relies on interpretation rather than measurement. Examples include focus groups, case studies, content analysis and observation. Qualitative research can stand on its own, providing you with valuable insights on trends, issues and concerns. You might use a qualitative method, such as a focus group, as a pretest or posttest to determine the validity of a questionnaire you send to a larger population. Qualitative research often provides “richer” data in that respondents can elaborate on the meaning of their answers.

Within these approaches, you might do **primary research** – i.e., conducting new research specific to

your client – such as focus groups, experiments or surveys. Or you might do **secondary research**, evaluating data, trends or research done by others.

1. **Primary research** – When doing primary research, don't just jump in and start asking questions. If you do, you might not get useful answers. Take the time to draft, pretest and then revise your measurement instrument (such as a survey). This is an important step. Sometimes you may think that you are asking the right questions or that your research design makes sense. But through a pretest – where you have a small group of “typical” respondents or a group similar to the one you eventually will be surveying – you often find problems that need fixing.

Other tasks include selecting participants, finalizing your research instrument, training data collectors (if your study is large), administering the instrument, collecting and processing the data, analyzing the results, and preparing and delivering the results to decision-makers and other important audiences.

2. **Secondary research** – Typically, you would do secondary research before you do primary research. This could save you time and money by finding relevant information that others have already found.

You might review relevant print, broadcast or Web-based literature such as newspapers, journals and magazines; TV and radio scripts; books; dissertations; organizational records such as annual reports or position papers; public records such as census data, directories of organizations and the media; and related surveys.

Many databases are available to help you in your search. Go to **OurFAMU**, which will connect you – through FAMU's Coleman Library – to many excellent sources.

Of course, the Internet is a wonderful source of information as well. Apply Boolean logic to narrow your findings when using search engines such as Google, Yahoo! and Bing:

- **OR:** Search for alternative terms (e.g., Wal-mart OR Walmart OR Wallmart)
- **AND:** Search for multiple terms appearing together (e.g., Wal-mart AND “global warming”) – Note: when searching for

terms of more than one word, put the term in quotation marks)

- **NOT:** Search for one term but exclude some that might be attached to it (e.g., Target NOT guns)

Use information from reliable sources with expertise in the area of your research. Wikipedia might be a good place to start your research so you can see what people are saying about your company or topic, but it certainly is not the only place you should check.

To improve the likelihood of getting valid information from your research, consider employing **triangulation** – or using several different research methods such as focus groups, observation and document analysis.

Categories of Research

The three major categories of research in public relations involve your **client**, its **problems and opportunities**, and its **publics**.

1. **Client research** – Even before you take a job at a new company or for a new client, you should start by doing research about that client. For example: How is it funded? Is it publicly held? How many employees does it have? How does management communicate with employees and other publics? Which laws apply to this client? What reputation does it have with its employees, customers, regulators and the media? And so on.

You can find this information many ways. You might review corporate documents such as annual reports, brochures, Web sites and so on. You could check with the Human Resources department to learn about employee characteristics and work history. You could review the quantity and quality of media coverage about your client. You could do a communication audit to determine how people inside and outside your organization get messages about your client. And so on.

2. **Problem/opportunity research** – An essential public relations skill is the ability to discover issues, trends, opportunities or problems related to your client or its publics. This is why you must scan the media (e.g., print, broadcast and online), plus ask questions and observe behavior on a regular basis. As a PR practitioner, one of your

roles is to serve as counselor. Your employers will rely on you to be aware of issues that potentially could affect your client's bottom line.

3. **Publics research** – Your client more than likely will have several publics. Your job will be to know the demographics and psycho-graphics of each of these publics so that you can address their needs. The Internet provides you with multiple opportunities to find out what your public thinks about your organization and then to quickly respond to the publics' needs and wants.

Whichever type of research you do, make sure you get buy-in from your administrators. Work with them to evaluate what you have found and the impact on your organization, which might involve changing the way you do business, expanding on "good things," joining with new partners, severing relations with old ones, and so on.

Goals & Objectives

Goals are intended outcomes. You might want to recruit more volunteers, become the #1 business in your field, or simply stay in business. Objectives, however, are measurable and help define which strategies and tactics you will use to meet your goals. Campaign objectives must address the following questions:

- To do WHAT
- To/for WHOM
- By HOW MUCH/HOW MANY
- By WHEN

For example, if you want to make sure you get enough city funding to continue your program, your campaign objective might be:

To persuade a majority [HOW MANY] of city commissioners [WHOM] to vote in favor of funding our organization [WHAT] at the April budget meeting [WHEN].

It's important to first understand your organization's goals and objectives so that you can select the appropriate research to meet your needs.

Research Questions

Before you actually begin your research, identify a few research questions to guide your work. Your

research questions should support your company's overall goals and your campaign objectives.

Research questions tend to be broad and help shape your strategies and tactics. Here are a few possible research questions for the case study of the organization that hopes to obtain city funding for its programs:

1. What do city commissioners know about our programs?
2. How do city commissioners feel about our programs?
3. How have city commissioners have voted in the past to support funding for our organization?
4. What other organizations are competing for the same funds we need?
5. What is likely to persuade city commissioners to vote to fund our programs?

After you have identified your research questions, then you must decide which primary and/or secondary research methods to employ. For primary research, craft questions that will help answer those research questions. For example, here are **survey questions** you might pose to city commissioners relative to the first research question (i.e., What do city commissioners know about our programs?):

1. Did you know that our organization offers after-school programs five days a week to K-12 children?
2. Did you know that more than 1,000 children enrolled in our after-school program last year?
3. Did you know that each dollar the city contributes to our program is matched by grant funds?

Hypotheses

Another approach to research is to formulate a **hypothesis**, which is a statement rather than a question. A hypothesis predicts the relationship between two or more variables that you will study. One variable must be **independent** (it's what you manipulate or control) and one must be **dependent** (it's what you measure). For example:

1. College students who view a video on the dangers posed by sexually transmitted diseases are less likely to have unprotected sex. (*The independent variable is watching a video on the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases.*)

The **dependent variable** is changes in the amount of unprotected sex.) You would have a control group of college students who did not view the video and a test group that did. Then you'd measure how many of each group reported having unprotected sex.

- As use of e-mail increases within our company, employee satisfaction increases. (The **independent variable** is use of e-mail. The **dependent variable** is changes in employee satisfaction.)

Communication Audit

A good place to start your research is through a communication audit. This means examining how your client communicates with its various internal and external publics. You might look at company newsletters, paycheck inserts, Web sites, blogs, intranet, e-mail, posters in the break room, annual reports, regulatory agency reports and so on.

You might also observe behavior, track conversations, interview company leaders, conduct focus groups, review employee surveys and so on.

Focus not only on the vehicles used to communicate but also on who communicates with whom (is it top-down only, or two-way communication?), who influences conversations and opinions, who has credibility within the organization, what do various publics need and want to know, how to publics feel about the organization, and so on.

Communication audits can help you identify problems within the organization that might be fixed through more transparency from upper administration. An audit can help you decide whether you need to change your current way of sharing information, perhaps saving time and energy along the way. By identifying and implementing ways to engage your publics in a dialogue, you can improve the work culture within your organization and the service culture with your customers.

SWOT Analysis

SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. This methodology arose in the 1960s when Fortune 500 companies were looking for ways to identify why corporate planning failed

(Humphrey, 2004). The methodology can be used to help companies analyze **internal** issues (strengths and weaknesses) and **external** issues (opportunities and threats). The methodology also can be used by individuals to analyze their personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The SWOT template is usually presented as a four-section grid:

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

Start by doing an inventory of your **internal** issues.

Strengths might include the following:

- What your company does well
- Unique selling points/branding
- Location
- Price/value/quality
- Available resources (money, staff)
- Special knowledge and skills
- Contacts
- Reputation
- Copyrights and patents
- Cultural, attitudinal, behavioral advantages

Weaknesses are the opposite of your strengths; every weakness is a possible strength – and vice versa. **Weaknesses** might include the following:

- What could be improved at your company
- Finances
- Cash flow
- Morale/commitment/leadership
- Deadlines and pressures
- Gaps in capabilities
- Lack of competitive strength
- Poor reputation/performance/reach
- Lack of accreditations/patents/copyrights

Next, evaluate **external** factors affecting you or your company. **Opportunities** include the following:

- What favorable situations you are facing
- Market developments

- Industry, social, lifestyle, economic trends
- Partnerships
- Competitor vulnerabilities
- Seasonal/weather/fashion events
- Information and research
- Strategies (e.g., media relations, sponsorship)
- Contracts or grants
- Niche markets
- Business and product development

Every threat is a potential opportunity. **Threats** include the following:

- Competition
- Changing legislation
- Changing technology
- Loss of key staff
- IT developments
- Environmental impacts
- Economic downturns
- Seasonal/weather/fashion events
- Strikes

“Some experts suggest that you first consider outlining the external opportunities and threats before the strengths and weaknesses” (Wilson, 2004). Whichever approach you take, be as honest as you can; put all of your worries and concerns on the table. You can start with information that you already know. However, supplement that knowledge with a **communications audit** (how do people communicate with one another and what do they know?) and **secondary research** (such as a survey of literature, media reports and Internet sources).

Once you have identified your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, use that information to help you select strategies and tactics to achieve your objectives.

Benchmarking

A common research technique used in public relations is benchmarking. It takes two general forms: comparing your company to itself over time or comparing your company to its competitors.

To measure the effectiveness of a new program or the impact of a change in the economy, you might benchmark what your company is doing now versus what it was doing six months ago. For example, you might measure energy use within a city before and

after you institute a new ad campaign on the benefits of turning off lights and turning down thermostats. Automakers benchmark their sales before and after economic downturns.

Another benchmarking approach is to measure your client against one of its competitors (or against a leader in another industry that your company would like to emulate). Honda might want to benchmark itself against Toyota to see how they both are doing in the following areas:

- a. Annual sales
- b. Annual profit
- c. Number of models
- c. Number of manufacturing plants
- d. Number of dealerships
- e. Number of employees
- f. Amount of positive/negative/neutral media coverage
- g. Share of conversation on blogs, discussion groups and other online sites

A third use for benchmarking is to determine whether a targeted public learned, understood, was persuaded by, or applied the lessons learned in a message or program. To do this, use pretests and posttests.

Content Analysis

Content analysis involves a systematic analysis of a group of words and pictures that are published, broadcast or spoken. You might do a content analysis of newspaper articles on AIDS, of the racial and gender breakdown of characters on Saturday morning cartoon shows, of teen magazine articles on anorexia and being thin, of speeches given by presidential candidates, and so on. You might want to do a content analysis of materials released by your competition to better understand what they are doing.

A 1965 study of Time magazine’s news coverage of three U.S. presidents – Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy – found that the majority of the magazine’s coverage of Eisenhower was positive, the majority of its coverage of Truman was negative, and its coverage of Kennedy was twice as likely to be positive than negative (Poindexter and McCombs, 2000).

Malcolm Gladwell (2002) reports of a 1984 study done by psychologists at Syracuse University who

found that news anchors Dan Rather of CBS and Tom Brokaw of NBC used neutral expressions when they spoke about presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. Peter Jennings of ABC had significantly more positive expressions when he spoke about Reagan.

In doing a content analysis, set up a “codebook” of coding categories with numerical values. This is an easy way for you to record what you see and hear. For example, if you were tracking the racial breakdown (variable #1, or V1) of characters on children’s cartoon shows, you might use:

- 1 = white/Caucasian
- 2 = black/African-American
- 3 = Latino/Hispanic
- 4 = Asian
- 5 = Native American
- 6 = unable to determine.

To track gender group membership (variable #2, or V2), you might use:

- 1 = male
- 2 = female
- 3 = unable to determine

Usually you might have two or three coders working on a content analysis. The coders must be trained so that they understand what to look for and how to categorize data. **Inter-coder reliability** refers to how consistent the coders are in coding content. If the coders were to review the same documents separately, your goal is to have them come up with the same analyses. Remind coders to be ethical and honest in their coding. They should not falsify nor skip any information just because they dislike or disagree with what they find.

Share of Discussion/Conversation Research

Share of discussion involves comparing and analyzing media content for two or more entities. A political party might wonder how many minutes of airtime its candidate gets in a week compared to candidates from other parties. Toyota might wonder how often its name is mentioned in articles about hybrid cars. And so on.

Previously, the major way to monitor share of conversation was to use a clipping service and then to painstakingly measure column inches and do a content analysis to determine how you client’s

name was being used, if at all. We could always hire a media monitoring service, such as Cision/Bacon’s, BurrellsLuce, Vocus or Reuters, to track your coverage in print or broadcast media. The evolution to tracking Web conversations was a natural. Now, there are many dozens of online monitoring sites available – some are free and some are not – dedicated to news and information on the different types of online media.

For example, you could search for references to your company on blogs by using such programs as Technorati or Google Blogsearch. Many applications have been developed for monitoring the microblog Twitter, such as Tweetconvo, Tweet Scan and Twenz. Monitor message boards with such programs a BoardReader and BoardTracker.

One particularly useful tool is Google Analytics. This program allows you to gather rich information about the traffic on your Web site – who uses it, where do they go on your site, how long do they stay there, what draws them in, what makes them become customers and so forth. Google Analytics, a free program, allows you to target your campaign geographically, see which keywords work for which markets, determine which AdWords work best, benchmark your progress, gather and share reports with others, and so on.

Many sites provide RSS feeds, which send you news and information as they appear or on a daily or weekly basis. Google Alerts is an easy-to-use, free service that monitors traditional and new media online. Other conversation-search tools include the Nielsen Buzzmetrics’ BlogPulse – especially its Trend Search and Conversation Tracker applications – and IceRocket. These tools monitor how often and when your company has been mentioned by bloggers. Another important application is BlogPulse Profiles, which measures how influential the bloggers are who mention your company.

Take advantage of these online applications to get a snapshot of your company’s image and standing in the digital media world.

Survey Research

Using surveys is the most popular public relations research method for learning more about large audiences or groups of customers. Surveys ask

questions to determine the respondents' background, opinions, attitudes and reported behavior.

One thing to remember is that the very act of studying a person or a group can sometimes change their behavior or responses. And sometimes respondents will tell you what they think you want to hear rather than what they actually believe.

Before you start, you must have a comprehensive, up-to-date list of potential respondents to make sure that your results are meaningful. You might consult lists of employees, stockholders, members, subscribers, volunteers, media outlets, vendors, industries, associations or clubs. You might check telephone directories, sales records, enrollment applications or Web page "hits." You might purchase mailing lists of people likely to be concerned about your issue or effort. Or you might contact people as they visit a location.

The major formats for surveys are e-mail/online, telephone, surface mail, or face-to-face surveys and exit polls.

1. **E-mail or online surveys** have become a fast way to gather survey information. Here are several free online survey-building sites:
 - a. www.coolsurveys.com
 - b. www.opinionpower.com
 - c. <http://info.zoomerang.com/>
 - d. www.surveymonkey.com
2. Some organizations use online surveys to ask members their opinions about a variety of issues. Responses can be obtained in a matter of hours or days. Television programs sometimes ask viewers to respond within minutes on what they think about a topic under discussion. While feedback may be speedy, the results must be considered carefully. Do the TV viewers have access to the Internet? Is their access speedy and inexpensive? Is the survey easy for viewers to find and answer? Are all viewers equally motivated to respond?
3. You can usually gather information from **telephone surveys** within 3 to 10 days. Telephone surveys can be expensive. Poindexter and McCombs (2000) reported that each phone interview might cost about \$27. Using such surveys may require a lot of time to train and monitor interviewers, to make the

calls, and to analyze the results. Usually the response rate for telephone surveys is good. However, your population is limited to people with listed phone numbers. This might eliminate the poorest and the richest members of your potential audience and everyone who only uses a cell phone.

4. **Surface-mail surveys** remain a popular method, especially if your budget and staff size are limited. One person can "do it all," if necessary. Mail surveys can take weeks or months to get results. Response rate typically is low, unless there is an incentive to respond.
5. **Face-to-face surveying** adds a personal touch to your efforts and usually results in a good response rate. However, face-to-face surveying may take several weeks or months to complete. And the expense of traveling to interview sites can be great.
6. Another type of face-to-face surveying is the **exit poll** or the "person-on-the-street" interview. Political parties regularly use exit polls in an attempt to determine whether their candidates have won an election. In 2004, exit polls indicated that John Kerry had won the presidential election; we know, however, that George W. Bush won instead. The thought is that perhaps fewer conservative Republicans were willing to respond to the exit poll, which biased the results. This analysis points out a potential flaw in doing research.

A similar type of surveying is used in such places as shopping malls, where merchants hire people to survey shoppers about their preferences and concerns. Such polls, while providing useful information on trends or issues, may not be valid. Consider the findings carefully.

Writing Good Survey Questions

Remember to follow ethical guidelines when drafting survey questions. Do not intentionally mislead respondents, include false information, or attempt to bias their answers. Try not to do it **unintentionally**, either. Here's an example of a biased question:

"Don't you think that Al Gore should have won the 2000 presidential election since he was the only candidate who truly spoke for Americans?"

The easiest type of question for researchers to tally is a **closed-ended question**, which provides a list of possible responses. For example, if you want to know which fast-food restaurants respondents eat at most often, provide them with a list of restaurants from which to choose.

When creating closed-ended questions, make sure the possible responses match the question. For example, here's a question with answers that don't match:

Have you eaten at McDonald's this week?
___0 ___1-2 ___3-5 ___6+

The correct options should have been "yes" or "no." If the question were phrased differently – *How many times have you eaten at McDonald's this week?* – then the answer options would work.

Open-ended questions (e.g., fill in the blank) allow respondents to answer however they want. Although these may be difficult to code, open-ended questions can be quite useful when you don't know possible responses in advance.

Responses for closed-ended questions must be mutually exclusive and exhaustive. A **mutually exclusive question** only addresses ONE topic at a time. Here is an example of a yes-no survey question that would be tough to answer because it is **not** mutually exclusive:

"Did you know that we have offices in 12 states, with our headquarters in Tallahassee?"
___Yes ___No

Respondents might know that you have offices in 12 states but they might not know that your headquarters is in Tallahassee.

Survey questions also must be **exhaustive**. That means you must provide as complete a list of possible responses as is reasonable. For example, if you want to know the majors of students in your journalism class, you might include these options: newspaper, broadcast, magazine, public relations and other. The "other" category is a catchall for those not majoring in our division.

Remember that your survey questions must be both **valid** (asking the "right" question to get answers that address what you are studying) and **reliable** (asking "consistent" questions).

Another important issue is how **precise** you want your responses to be. That depends on the purpose of the survey and the type of data needed. Here are three levels of **precision**:

1. **Nominal** – This is the lowest level of precision. Responses might be "yes" or "no," "Tallahassee resident" or "non-Tallahassee resident." Nominal responses are mutually exclusive and exhaustive.
2. **Ordinal** – Ordinal responses offer limited precision. Responses are placed in some type of order, such as "many," "some," "a few." A more precise ordinal measurement might include these options: "less than 1 minute," "1-5 minutes," "6-10 minutes" and "more than 10 minutes."
3. **Ratio** – Ratio intervals are the most precise. They include an absolute zero point. For example, if you asked respondents how long it took them to get to work, you would know that if someone answered "20 minutes," that would be twice as long as it would take someone who responded "10 minutes."

Likert Scales

Many surveys use **Likert scales** that allow respondents to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with a statement. For example, a five-part Likert scale question might offer these choices:

How would you rate the quality of this product? (5 = very good, 4 = good, 3 = average, 2 = poor, 1 = very poor)

Be careful when using a "middle" option; it may not mean the same thing to all respondents. It could mean "I feel neutral" or "I don't have an opinion" or "I don't know anything" about what you are asking me.

To avoid this problem, define what your middle option means (e.g., "neutral"). You may want to add an extra category outside of your scale that allows people to respond with "not applicable" or "no opinion":

My children love going to Disney World.

1	2	3	4	5	0
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Applicable

1. **Simple random sample** – Every person in the population (such as your stockholders or residents of a city) has an equal chance of being selected. For large groups, this may not be a practical approach.
2. **Systematic random sampling** – A more practical approach would be to use a computer to select a random number (N), and then to survey every Nth member of the group. For example, let's say you have 3,000 members of your company and you need a valid sample of 341. If the computer randomly selected the number 12, you would start with the 12th person in your group and then survey every 12th person on your list until you got your total of 341 respondents.
3. **Stratified random sample** – Sometimes it makes sense to subdivide a population into smaller, homogeneous groups. For example, if one-third of your employees have worked for more than 20 years, you could select one-third of your respondents from the pool of people who have worked 20+ years to make sure you get a representative sample of their opinions.

Nonrandom samples

PR practitioners often use nonrandom samples. This means not every member of the population has an equal and independent chance of being selected. ***Be careful when interpreting the results of non-random sample research.*** Your results ***may not*** be valid or reliable.

4. **Convenience sampling** – Most student surveys involve convenience samples of whoever is available, such as your classmates. This may be easy to do, but your results may not be valid. Other convenience samples are the “person-on-the-street” interview or a focus group. These informal surveys provide you with a limited interpretation of the world, which may or may not be valid and reliable.
5. **Quota sampling** – This type of research allows you to select subjects based on certain characteristics. For example, let's assume that you work for a state park and want to determine the attitudes of the different types of people who visit your park. First, you need to know your publics. Let's say that 50 percent of your visitors are women, 20 percent are black,

80 percent are white, 20 percent make less than \$30,000 a year, and 70 percent make between \$30,000 and \$80,000 a year. If your sample size were 100, then you would interview 50 women, 20 blacks, 80 whites, etc., until you reached your quota for each group. However, one respondent would fall into multiple categories (e.g., a black woman who makes \$70,000 a year falls into three categories. Once you have interviewed 50 women (in this example), you would only interview men.

6. **Volunteer sampling** – This type of research relies on people who volunteer to respond. An example is an Internet poll conducted during the course of a television program. Again, be careful when you interpret the results. Only those people motivated and able to respond will do so, which may not reflect the rest of your population.

For a random sample, you need a comprehensive list of potential respondents before you begin your survey. For nonrandom samples, do your best to find “typical” respondents. However, remember that your results may not be valid or reliable.

Random Sample Size

Statisticians have come up with formulas to determine how large your sample size must be for your results to be valid and reliable. If your sample is relatively small (e.g., 300), you might be better off surveying the entire population, if possible.

Two research terms you should be familiar with are ***error*** and ***confidence***. The larger your sample size, the smaller the likelihood of error in your findings. You often hear of results being accurate within “plus or minus X percent.”

Confidence refers to how confident you feel about your error level. If you were to conduct your survey multiple times, how often should you expect to get similar results? A good confidence level would be 95 percent. Therefore, if you had a 5 percent error level and 95 percent confidence level, your results would be within plus or minus 5 percent of “the correct response” 95 times out of 100.

Here's a chart from Fraser Seitel (2001, p. 110). In *The Practice of Public Relations* that indicates the sample size you must select to achieve results with

a 5 percent margin of error (this means your results should be valid within 5 percentage points above or below what your numbers show)

Population	Sample Size
1,000	278
2,000	322
3,000	341
5,000	355
10,000	370
50,000	381
100,000	383
500,000	383
Infinity	384

Focus Groups

One form of qualitative research is **the focus group**, or “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (Kitzinger, 1996). Focus groups can provide the researcher with immediate feedback. Focus groups are good for generating new ideas and getting feedback on current directions and practices. You might use a focus group to test out the questions you are considering using later in a survey. Or after you have completed a survey, you could use a focus group to “flesh out” or help you understand some of the findings from a quantitative survey.

Focus groups are a good opportunity to show something (such as a new product or a commercial) to participants and observe their reactions to it. The more “complete” and professional the item that you are showing, the more realistic the responses. For example, focus group members will respond differently to a picture of a new dress than they will to a dress that they can touch and see modeled.

Focus groups usually consist of about eight to 12 participants. Although it may seem that you choose survey respondents randomly, you recruit focus group members because they have the characteristics you are especially interested in. Make sure that each focus group is homogeneous – or consists of people with common characteristics and issues. A focus group is not the setting to handle debates.

For example, if you are interested in the attitudes of **teenage drivers** about the graduated driver’s

license, you would select teenagers between the ages of 15 and 18 who drive a vehicle.

To select the “best” participants for a focus group, ask each participant to complete a screening questionnaire ahead of time. This will allow you to profile the participants. A summary profile will help you place your results in perspective.

Participants should be compensated (with money, food, a gift, etc.) for their time. Indicate on the screening questionnaire what the compensation will be. Invite more people (up to twice as many) than you might actually wind up using to make sure you have an adequate size group. If more people show up than you need, thank them kindly and give them a parting gift that is worth their time. Create a **waiting-room survey** to help participants focus their thoughts while they wait for the session to begin. It also provides you with more background information on the participants.

Focus groups should be led by a trained moderator. This person is skilled in asking open-ended questions that can’t be answered with simple “yes” or “no” answers. The moderator will ask follow-up and probing questions as needed. A trained moderator is careful not to give nonverbal cues (such as a smile, head nod or frown) that might imply to the participants that he or she likes or dislikes a particular response.

Develop a **moderator guide**, which is a series of open-ended, probing questions. Also, identify and provide **stimuli** that will help guide the discussion. Stimuli might include a sample product, a brochure about the company or a videotaped message.

The focus group is recorded on audiotape, videotape or both – with the permission of the participants. You and your management team may want to watch the focus group, often from behind a two-way mirror, and take notes of your impressions of the discussion. After the focus group, the researcher will review the tapes and take notes on general themes and relevant quotes. Videotapes can capture the enthusiasm (or lack thereof) of participants.

Because focus groups can be more subjective than other types of research, it is imperative that you follow ethical guidelines. Do not dismiss or ignore comments that do not fit with your expectations.

In-depth Interviews

A final type of research can be very useful is a one-on-one interview with someone who can provide you with valuable information. This might be a person who has “inside information” about an issue or trend. It might be someone who can influence – positively or negatively – your efforts. The person might be an elected official, a leader of a group, a CEO, a civic leader or someone in the news. Before conducting an interview, make sure that you have explored relevant secondary documents (e.g., published or broadcast information) and primary documents (e.g., court records, government documents) first. This not only will prepare you for the interview, but it will also allow you to ask your source to clarify or interpret (or perhaps defend) what you have found in the other documents.

The most important skill you can bring to a one-on-one interview is the ability to listen attentively. You may want to draft closed-ended questions (those allowing for either a “yes” or “no” response). But be ready to follow up with open-ended questions.

Because in-depth interviews are a form of qualitative research, be sure to follow ethical guidelines. If the interviewee agrees, record the interview. But if you find that by taping the interview, the person is uncomfortable or unwilling to respond, you may want to shut off the recorder and simply take notes. When you report the results of your interviews, be sure to report the information in context.

AVEs and ROI

A common but controversial way to measure the effectiveness of your PR efforts is to use Advertising Value Equivalency, or AVE, to determine your Return on Investment, or ROI. K.D. Paine (2002), in “The Measurement Standard,” explains that AVE involves “counting column inches and comparing the cost of ‘placing’ those column inches to the cost of placing an equivalent-sized ad” in that same publication (www.themeasurementstandard.com/Issues/402/eng/paineave402.asp).

In other words, if a publication ran a 20-inch article about your company, some argue that the “value” of that article is equal to how much it would cost you to buy a 20-inch ad in that same publication. Paine (2002) adds that “there is no evidence anywhere

that indicates an editorial column inch is the equivalent of a column inch of advertising.”

Another misguided technique some practitioners use to measure the effectiveness of their efforts is to determine the circulation of a particular publication that has carried a story about their company and then to assume all subscribers have read that article.

For example, if Newspaper X, with a circulation of 100,000, and Newspaper Y, with a circulation of 200,000, run your story, that does not mean your story was “seen” by 300,000 people. As we know, sometimes more than one person in a household reads the newspaper. On the other hand, not everyone reads every article in every edition. If people read an article, they might not understand it or remember it. And the article might not reflect positively on your company.

It is invalid and unreliable to use AVE or circulation rates alone as measures of the effectiveness of your efforts. Some researchers (Paine, 2002), however, argue that AVEs can be useful as part of a more comprehensive measure, or metrics, of your effectiveness. Evidence exists that measuring your outputs does, in fact, correlate with the effectiveness of your outcomes (Jeffrey, 2005).

Experiments

Experiments can be a useful PR tool to determine what causes what or to determine preferences. While a questionnaire measures what people are willing to admit to, an experiment can measure someone’s actions. Experiments fit closely into a management-by-objectives (MBO) planning approach.

A good approach is to use a two-group, pretest-posttest experiment. You choose two groups, one of which receives a “treatment” and one (the control group) that does not. Your experiment is only as good as your ability to isolate the individual components that contribute to the final result.

For example, let’s say your boss complains because employees make too many grammatical mistakes when they write their annual accomplishment reports. She forwards these reports to government agencies and is embarrassed by the quality of the documents. She wants you to “fix the problem.”

After exploring the nature of the problem in more detail (e.g., reviewing annual accomplishment reports,

determining employees' major grammar challenges), you decide to offer a three-day grammar and writing course for 20 employees the month before the accomplishment reports are due. Your objective is to see a 25-percent decrease in the number of grammatical mistakes in annual accomplishment reports by employees who have completed your course.

You begin by evaluating the writing samples of those who will be taking your course and a comparable group of those who will not so that you can identify if

there are any differences between them. After the one group has completed the training, you evaluate the writing of both groups to determine if there has been any change. Now you should be able to determine whether participation in your workshop made a difference in employee performance. But be careful that there aren't other factors (such as your boss promising a raise to all employees who make fewer grammatical errors in their writing) that might influence your results

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