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Measurement of PR effectiveness during the era of social media

This article discusses the possible tendencies in the measurement issues of Public Relations campaigns, especially by using Social Media opportunities. Since many companies/institutions do PR campaigns spending their time, budget and efforts in order to gain favorable status in the society or to earn financial benefits, they certainly want to see to what extent their «drive» was successful or to learn the made mistakes, at least, to correct them in next stages and/or approaches.

Currently, lots of huge business companies, educational institutions, and government organizations are using social media. However, their participation in the web is explained that they join to such kinds of networks mostly in order to be recognized among the people. Each activity in business companies, where PR does not constitute an exception, has to justify its existence and prove its purposefulness in this intensive world. This certainly requires the efficiency of PR campaigns to be measured on visible figures

Through the messages, author tries to suggest some optimal methods of measure the efficiency of PR activities through the data given in social networks, which would be helpful for practitioners in this field, and the consumers.

Key words: Public Relations, PR effectiveness, PR measurement, Social Media, evaluation of PR, PR efficiency, Public Relations campaign.

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Әлеуметтік медиа дәуіріндегі PR тиімділігінің өлшемі

Бұл мақалада жұртшылықпен байланысты орнатуға арналған науқандарды бағалау мәселелері, соның ішінде әлеуметтік медиа мүмкіндіктері арқылы жүзеге асатын шаралар қарастырылған. Көптеген компаниялар немесе ұйымдар PR науқандар жүргізеді, осылайша өздерінің қаражатын, уақытын және күшін қоғамда жоғары статуска жету үшін немесе материалдық пайда табу үшін жұмсайды. Әрине, олар осы іс-шараларының қаншалықты сәтті болғандығын немесе ең болмаса жіберген қателіктерін біліп, оларды келесі кезеңдерде қайталамау үшін нәтижелерін көргілері келеді.

Қазіргі таңда көптеген ірі бизнес-компаниялар, білім беру ұйымдары және үкіметке қарасты мекемелер әлеуметтік медианы қолданады. Алайда, олар желілерді халық арасында танымал болу үшін қолданады. Бизнес-компаниядағы әрбір қызметтің түрі, соның ішінде PR да бар, өзін-өзі ақтап, заманның қарқынды ағымында мақсатқа жету талпыныстарын дәлелдеулері керек. Сондықтан көрнекті фигуралар арқылы бағаланатын PR тиімділігі қажет.

Автор әлеуметтік желілердегі мәліметтерге сүйене отырып, осы саладағы практиктер мен тұтынушыларға пайдалы болатын PR тиімділігін өлшеу тәсілдерін ұсынады.

Түйін сөздер: жұртшылықпен байланыс, PR тиімділігі, PR өлшемі, әлеуметтік медиа, PR бағалау, PR ұтымдылық, жұртшылықпен байланыс науқаны.

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Оценка эффективности PR в эпоху социальных медиа

В статье исследуются тенденции оценочных процессов кампаний по связям с общественностью, проводимых с помощью социальных медиа. Поскольку многие компании/учреждения проводят PR-кампании, затрачивая время, финансы и усилия для получения наиболее благоприятного статуса в обществе или получения коммерческой выгоды, они рассчитывают видеть, в какой

степени их «усилия» были успешным, а также оценить промахи или совершенные ошибки для их дальнейшего исправления на следующих этапах и/или подходах.

В настоящее время многие крупные бизнес-компании, образовательные учреждения и правительственные организации используют социальные медиа. Однако их участие в сети объясняется тем, что они присоединяются к таким видам сетей в основном для того, чтобы быть признанными в социуме. Каждый вид деятельности в бизнес-компаниях, где PR не составляют исключения, должен оправдать свое существование и доказать свою целеустремленность в этом интенсивном мире. Это, безусловно, требует эффективности PR-кампаний, которые будут оцениваться при помощи видимых фигур.

Автор пытается предложить некоторые оптимальные методы измерения эффективности PR-деятельности при помощи данных, приведенных в социальных сетях, которые будут полезны для практиков в этой области, а также потребителей.

Ключевые слова: связь с общественностью, эффективность PR, измерения PR, социальные медиа, оценка PR, действенность PR, кампания по связям с общественностью.

Modern PR requires accountability

Majority of Public Relations (PR) practitioners and marketers consider that a consumer satisfaction can serve as an indicator of a success in PR campaign. However, in the modern world, since people do PR campaigns spending their time, budget and efforts for the sake of authoritative and financial benefits, they certainly want to see to what extent their drive was successful or to learn the made mistakes, at least, to correct them in next stages and/or approaches. Moreover, each activity in business companies, where PR does not constitute an exception, has to justify its existence and prove its purposefulness. This certainly requires the efficiency of PR campaigns to be measured on visible figures.

PRWeek reported that a survey of corporate chief executive officers found 96% believing that «a good corporate reputation is important,» but less than 20% report having research mechanisms in place to evaluate and track their reputation. Moreover, American expert, Macnamara [1], states: «PR and corporate communication have met the growing requirements for measurement with a patchy track record and this is widely viewed as a major area for focus in future.» Despite this recognized importance of the subject, the results of a May 2011 survey across a broad cross section of PR professionals found that 42% of the respondents agreed that common terms and definitions for the measurement of PR «do not exist at all» with an additional 28% reporting they are neutral on the issue (most likely a reflection of an overall lack of information), and only 30% respondents disagree with that argument [2].

Technically, web technologies are improving so rapidly that correspondingly it is positively

affecting to the various ways of communication. According to the outcome of the study conducted by Human Capital Institute¹ and Saba² 66% of all government agencies currently use some form of social networking – from blogs and wikis to instant messaging and discussion boards. The study looked at the effectiveness of social networking in conducting government work, how agency type affects the use, and perception of social networking, and the future expectations and barriers for its use. They mention that 31% of those surveyed have embraced social media as a means of providing a more efficient customer feedback channel [3]. It can be seen that this number is only increasing.

It can be confidently stated that, sometimes, some social network platforms, such as Facebook, MySpace, Google+, Twitter, and others are as effective as their own official websites. Since users also prefer to try their social network pages where some unofficial feedbacks and discussions of people are found, which present clearer image of the company or organization. Seltzer and Mitrook investigated the online relationship building through a content analysis of fifty environmental weblogs [4]. They suggested that weblogs incorporate dialogic communication principles to a greater degree than traditional websites, potentially making them better suited for online relationship building.

Experts argue on importance of PR measurement

Many PR experts agree that there have been numerous studies on measuring the public relations

¹ HCI is the global association for talent management and new economy leadership, and a clearinghouse for best practices and new ideas

² Software company

effectiveness so far; however, there is no common, generally accepted, and universal measurement tool for this practice. Because of this, majority of practitioners mostly prefer to rely on their intuitive evaluation when assessing the effectiveness of PR. Grunig mentions: «Lately, I have begun to feel more and more like the fundamentalist minister railing against sin; the difference being that I have railed for evaluation. Just as everyone is against sin, so most public relations people I talk to are for evaluation. People keep on sinning, however, and PR people continue not to do evaluation research» [5].

As for the state of this field in Kazakhstan, where the current form of the PR appeared only after the collapse of USSR because of Soviet Union's blockade against western/foreign ideologies and principles until 1991. Even though, since then, it passed more than 20 years, PR industry still could not find its «proper seat» in the territory of former Soviet countries. Tukhvatullina argues: «Evaluation of PR effectiveness is still a difficult issue, because of absence of methodological and terminological basis. Additionally, PR is not accepted as a science in Russia and we do not have specially oriented institutions to this trend» [6]. However, in Russia, where this field has more or less gained progress comparing to its former «like-minded» states, some researches on measuring the PR effectiveness are appearing lately. So, considering this, it is not difficult to imagine about the condition of PR in Kazakhstan in terms of its maturity. Russian expert Elena Rybalova mentions that PR has not developed yet in the former Soviet states to the level as in developed countries, which requires the measurement of its effectiveness. However, it can be argued that the fast expansion of globalization process and latest communication technologies is impacting the practices of PR globally. From this view, all theories also apply to Kazakh PR, which means all main practices also concern our activities in this field as well.

Burke, who manages her own PR Consulting firm, states (2009): «As an industry, we need to start focusing on measurable objectives for PR programs that are tied to business bottom lines. Then, and only then, we will start being taken seriously.» The intangibility of outcome makes the task more complicated. Moreover, an interesting fact was revealed that according to a research, conducted among the members of PRSA, more than half of the specialists are «afraid of being assessed» [7].

Effectiveness of any action leads to the aim and it provides the quality of the carried task. It is obvious,

effective PR helps organizations make profit, develop and survive when they are in crunch. So, identifying the level of this indicator can be useful for any purpose. Measurement is accountability on what you are doing, especially important when it concerns financial and reputation issues. So, in PR, accountability implies to the outcome and the effectiveness of activities that require qualitative planning and realization. But, Rybakova declares: «Measuring the PR effectiveness absolutely is not the end target. It is only to identify how the things are working. Well known expert in PR, Katie Paine, suggests spending maximum of 5-10% of budget only to study why other 90% is not working» [8].

Normally, practitioners evaluate the effectiveness of PR just intuitively. When examining the effectiveness of public relations, Hon found that majority of interviewees believe that public relations activities directly contribute to the bottom line of their organizations [9]. Indeed, increased visibility will lead to more sales and success in communication. Moreover, it may salvage a company from bankruptcy, which can be caused by negative public attitude towards them. In general, effectiveness has more to do with how well the public relations department represents the whole organization and adapts it according to the needs of public. Since the market is getting rich, corporations, in order to be noticed, always should consider the demand of public, and act according to the common norms as they compete with each other.

Common stereotypes about public relations

Moreover, in the bottom line, the audiences/clients are definitely interested in the visible results. Macnamara says: «CEOs, marketing directors, financial controllers and other C-suite executives are generally not interested in how much work you have done; they want to know the outcomes – particularly outcomes related to key corporate or organizational objectives» [1]. As a result, public relations practitioners are increasingly facing the challenge of demonstrating that their programs make a value-added contribution to their organization. From this view, the quality of PR can be converted to the efficiency of activities and favorable influence on public behavior. Namely, the quality of product and service is being a key issue today almost in all areas. In this respect, more and more organizations are using PR as an instrument in order to gain a sustainable trust of public. For this reason, the expenditure on PR is growing year by

year [10]. Consequently, the more spending on PR campaigns, the more demand for PR evaluations is coming up.

Historically, the role of PR as a practice has had three major interpretations: controlling publics, responding to publics, and achieving mutually beneficial relationships among all publics. One might argue, relying on the performed practices of PR over the past years, it is clear that they make benefit to a company and/or society.

However, Campbell (1993) states, even though, most CEOs acknowledge the importance of PR, majority of them never explicitly relate it to effects on the organization, since they have difficulties on measuring the bottom-line impact of it [11]. But, in an organizational environment characterized by downsizing and zero-based budgeting, the function of public relations is justified without evidence of measurable results [12].

Additionally, so far, not all PR campaigns had been successful, i.e. not all worked as smooth as planned. This fact also prompts the practitioners, and particularly clients, to measure their activities on their way. And, evaluation would make such kinds of cases clear – how effective was the expenditure and what went wrong [13]. Even though PR campaigns were successful, the responsible bodies should try to record as much information as possible about the cases, which can be helpful to hold the next campaigns more successful.

It is said that the measuring the PR effectiveness is important uppermost for consumers [14]. However, measurement of this effectiveness not only allows clients to evaluate to what extent the program influenced on sale and status of their trademark in the market, but it also lets practitioners to convince their clients about the necessity of public relations activities showing pros and cons of a realized event and making some suggestions for the future.

Considering the above mentioned statements, the number of clients that want evidences for effectiveness is expected to grow further [15]. It can be argued that the outcome of efforts that were spent during a reasonable time is interesting for the practitioners too. However, Gorokhova argues that, normally, clients demand the evaluation of public relations effectiveness, although, they do not even understand how it can be done. PR practitioner is always asked why a particular activity was chosen and a client wants to see a proof to be sure on its success, even they do not know how it can be proved.

Usability of Social Networks on measuring the PR effectiveness

Studying public opinion is much easier in the social media compared to traditional methods. The reason for that all activities are usually logged in the pages of company/organization registered in a social network, where usually users leave their commentaries and opinions about particular cases. Certainly, those logs are quite valuable in defining the attitudes of them. Moreover, these kinds of activities of internet users also can be tracked using some online analytical services offered by major portals (Google Analytics, Yandex, etc.)

According to a recent survey (Mar. 2013) of Cambridge Psychometrics Centre, even Facebook preferences can provide surprisingly accurate estimates of the user's race, age, IQ, sexuality and other personal information. Even, a «Like» button may tell about person's psychology. A psychometrics researcher from Cambridge University and Microsoft Research, David Stillwell says «It's very easy to click the 'like' button, it's seductive. But you don't realize that years later all those likes are building up against you.»

Normally, a client assumes the deal with PR agency as a deal with direct media, and measures the effectiveness by the numbers of published materials [14]. Certainly this definition applies to former Soviet countries' consumers. This leads to misunderstanding, since the publication may not imply only positive discussion in the media, or, that may not reach its target audience properly. From this view, although it is stated that 98% of practitioners believed that number of positive stories in the media is paramount [15], a voice, only through print media, cannot be a decisive goal in public relations efficiency.

As mentioned above, Williams³ When you care about whether what you are doing is working or not. Every action based on some objectives, which can be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. They have a benchmark, target and timeframe. So, if someone wants to know whether he is making progress, he should do this.

When you know you need to change, you have to make data-driven decisions.

Modern accountability requires facts and data rather than intuition. There are times when the people you need demand numbers – qualitative or quantitative [16].

³ CEO of PR Consulting firm in the field of measurement/evaluation of Communications and Public Relations.

Additionally, there is one other reason that practitioners should measure public relations' effectiveness. It puts the organization on a firmer foundation. It informs their capabilities and enhances their credibility.

Presently, some measuring methods of PR campaigns are offered by several experts, which include: Press clipping, Media content analysis, Comparisons, Citations and mentions in media, and Key messages given in media, public speeches, etc. However, according to the researches, PR practitioners do not see much usability in current developed evaluation principles; besides, the latest technological changes also definitely affect the ways of measurement of communication.

It is said that PR consists of a bunch of tools to work with stereotypes: to learn, form, change or wipe them. In Kazakhstan PR is mostly perceived negatively because of (a) common illiteracy in this field, (b) so called «black PR» techniques, and (c) its mainly use in show business. Konstantin Trifonov, an editor of magazine «Top manager» states: «Hostility and distrust by the society towards to PR people demonstrate that nobody wants to be manipulated.» However, it can be said that those people even do not notice that they are already participating in public relations activities (e.g. election campaigns, events, surveys, etc.). The term «Negative» or «Dark Public Relations» exists for many years. Ordinary people connect this notion to above mentioned description about PR people. It is especially popular in former USSR countries as «Black PR», though this term is used in the US for some groups/services within African-Americans in this field (e.g. www.blackpr.com; www.blackprwire.com).

On the one hand, the relatively anonymity of the internet and social networking sites has given people, living in societies with restricted freedom of expression, an outlet to express forbidden views. Elson and et al (2012) state «Studying the posts that people in these societies place on social media can help policymakers and researchers gain insight into public opinion on topics that might otherwise have to be avoided. It also provides a way of doing so that is completely unobtrusive to those posting their views.»

On the other hand, the freedom of expression in virtual world has not been always advantageous. There are numbers of false messages and commentaries in that «field». There are lots of fake user profiles out there imitating some famous people and influential political bodies, which require intellectual filter from ordinary users. But, it can be argued that not everyone is capable to think in

the level of those swindlers. For instance, in 2008, Fouad Mourtada, a citizen of Morocco, was arrested for the alleged creation of a faked Facebook profile of Prince Moulay Rachid of Morocco. Really, if you search for the person on Facebook, let's say, Jim Kerry, an actor, several profiles come up for the same person. Likewise, Youtube was blocked in Turkey between March 2007 and October 2010 by the decisions of Turkish courts, because of videos insulting Mustafa Kemal Atatürk posted by some anonymous users.

How PR efficiency normally perceived

As for PR effectiveness, the society has different common stereotypes. For instance, majority of consumers of public relations services assume effectiveness as an immediate raise on sales/services.

According to the survey conducted by Gorokhova, PR agencies stated that more than half of clients ask an evaluation on the outcome of realized PR campaign. Some organizations use PR activities only as a part of their marketing campaigns, of which budget is covered within this scope. In this case, clients do not even count on solely public relations and, while finishing, sum up the results as overall. Gorokhova argues, some consumers continue working with PR agencies despite the previous unsuccessful efforts until they reach to a critical point [14]. However, some CEOs want to see positive tangible results during the process of PR campaigns, apparently, for their own personal satisfaction. Moreover, some customers decide to measure the public relations activities at the last phases of the process only. However, generally, consumers assume to evaluate the effectiveness of PR by the level of achievement/fail of the proposed object [16].

Additionally, since PR is considered as a new trend in Kazakhstan and in other former Soviet states, many people see it as same as advertising. They understand if something is being promoted or advised, it is being advertised. Advertising, generally, is not accepted positively; there have been times, when a particular product was over-advertised, people even thought that something was wrong with that product, otherwise it would not be advertised too much.

Another thing to be mentioned that some experts try to evaluate the PR efficiency with advertisement value equivalencies (AVEs), however, according to the Barcelona Declaration of Measurement Principles (2010) (AVEs) cannot be the value of PR.

Conclusion

Forming the positive public opinion about the PR activities also surely influence to the success of campaigns in this field. From this point of view, local PR practitioners have to also try build clearer real image of PR among the ordinary people. For instance, a productive campaign requires public's trust to companies who are working with them, public's interest to their service/product and so on.

So, this concept of PR effective requires much more research and development, in terms of creating an accessible formula to calculate the criteria of its success. Mostly, the little understanding among public relations practitioners is mentioned, on designing and implementing an effective system for evaluation, despite wide acknowledgment of importance of PR measurement [17].

Generally, it can be summarized that social media, particularly global ones like Facebook and Twitter, definitely can substitute other traditional

methods on learning public opinion and attitude. This especially can be handy for government organizations and agencies to track the reactions of population on conducted policies and reforms. Moreover, it would be effective in terms of variance of samples, cost, geography, and time on holding surveys among the public.

For now, as effectiveness and efficiency of the process, campaign and project, mainly, a comparative consequence is understood, which is converted from the expended costs to run the activity. Effect is an achieved result in tangible (numbers of PR products) and intangible (attitude change of people) meanings. These indicators are seen in awareness of people, favorable predisposition, market share (of visits and of spending), and brand reputation. Presently, one of the effective channels for measuring the attitudes and activities towards to specific organizations can be observed through the social networks, which is also subject to be developed for this purpose.

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