MEASURING THE SOCIAL WEB

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"Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted"

Albert Einstein

Measuring the Social Web

"The only man who behaves sensibly is my tailor; he takes my measurements anew every time he sees me, while all the rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them"

George Bernard Shaw

To begin by describing our times as a 'rapidly changing environment' has become something of a cliché in itself. However, it is salient in this instance because when looking at research, measurement and evaluation within the public relations function, the stability of the environment must be taken into account when setting the standards against which we might work - hence the relevance of George Bernard Shaw's tailor: as the thing to be measured changes, so we must measure anew and approach each operation with a fresh eye.

In the last decade, the social media environment has emerged, evolved and developed to a point where traditional media channels have either converged or are in collapse and the suite of disruptive technologies we have to hand facilitates unfiltered access to organisations , prompting fundamental changes in operation across the political, commercial and not-for-profit spectrums.

The need to develop measurement standards for the social media environment has been apparent for many years, yet public relations practitioners have been slow to move beyond the boundaries of 'hits' and 'search results'. Not only does this hamper effective reporting and programme management, it limits the role of the practitioner to technician rather than strategist. Practitioners run the risk of painting themselves into the corner of the social media environment, with their requirement diminished and their role obscured.

This paper seeks to suggest an approach to evaluating online activity and engagement as part of - not separate from - the total evaluation of campaigns, programmes and public relations function, which is, of course, concerned with building and sustaining the relationships necessary for an organisation to function. It attempts to bridge the gap between practitioner experience and developed theory - academics insist their measurement theories are practical, while practitioners insist the approaches only work in theory.

Research, planning and evaluation has been a topic long discussed by practitioners and studiously assessed by academics. Macnamara (2006) outlines some of the background to the discussion as part of his examination of communication theory and practice, going as far as saying:

"Notwithstanding several decades of urging, "measuring the effectiveness of PR has proved almost as elusive as finding the Holy Grail", John Pavlik (1987) commented – and studies show little has changed since his frustrated pronouncement (eg. Xavier, Patel & Johnston, 2004). Numerous studies show that, despite some heartening signs of a take-up of research for planning and measurement, there seems to be a roadblock. PR practitioners just don't seem to want to or be able to measure."

A propensity to measure only outputs still remains, with few practitioners looking at out-takes (defined as comprehension) or outcomes (the effectiveness of activity in achieving relationship, business or communication objectives). This tendency to measure what we have done as opposed to what we have achieved is one of the great obstacles to effective public relations measurement and evaluation and has been reflected as recently as June 2009 in the AMEC industry survey. (AMEC 2009).

There is a certain irony that those involved in the function of building relationships often fail to perceive the relationship between evaluating the work that has been done and understanding the changes in the relationships that have taken place so the future investment of time and other resources can be committed to sustaining long-term relationships with stakeholders.

EXISTING MEASURES AND APPROACHES

There is no single measure and approach to measurement and evaluation applied by the public relations profession, either globally or at a local level. As recession bites, the emphasis for practitioners and clients alike has been to look again at measurement and seek ways in which to demonstrate value and effectiveness of the function. (AMEC 2009, Global Alliance (2009). To date, practitioners have 'cherry picked' suggested approaches and applied or adapted them to suit their circumstances. Others have maintained a steadfast loyalty to 'media measurement' or simply avoided measurement and evaluation altogether.

Credible approaches developed in the last decade include Jim Macnamara's 'Pyramid for PR Research', (2002, 2005) which suggested a process and means by which research, measurement and evaluation of communication could be integrated into the communications function, but the introduction and adoption of social media channels as primary forms of unfiltered connection and engagement with stakeholders and communities indicates the pyramid model needs a new shape; while the general shape might appear the same, the configuration has in fact undergone a remarkable transformation.

Macnamara's Pyramid model provides key steps and stages in communication approaches more common to the late 20th century, with measurement methodologies focusing on what was then the dominant, traditional media (i.e. print, TV/radio broadcast, static web) as well as outcomes that focus on changed behaviour or changed attitudes among stakeholders. Grunig and Hon (1999) for the Institute for Public Relations (USA) produced a relationship scale that can be used and adapted for evaluating and measuring relationship change, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (then IPR) produced the PRE Toolkit nearly a decade ago and, most recently, KD Paine has added constructs to the measurement of social media in which she prioritises the engagement metric.

However, in a complex, converging and chaotic environment in which stakeholder theories first espoused by Freeman (1984) seemingly come to fruition, it is suggested that a more holistic approach to evaluation and measurement is required, even when the emphasis is on the social media space.

Additionally, our focus on the type and constituency of the outcomes required as a result of public relations activity needs to be adjusted given that changing behaviour and attitudes is not necessarily an acceptable outcome for online communities and stakeholders.

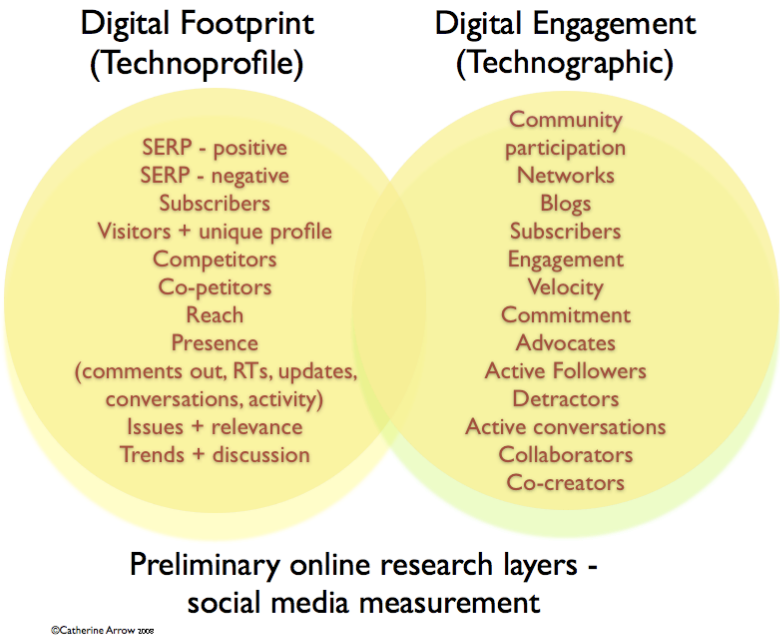
As public relations is defined as the function charged with building and sustaining stakeholder relationships, (CPRS 2009) it makes sense to ensure that primary evaluation is centred on this purpose - has the relationship changed for the better or worse? Have we made progress with the central purpose of the relationship or do we need to adjust our actions so that our established relationship outcomes are achieved?

Rather than adopt a siloed approach of outputs, (the things we have done), out-takes, (the things that people have heard and understood) and outcomes, (the things we have achieved as a result of the outputs and out-takes), it makes sense to look at the 'whole' via a system of layers, with each layer consisting of further layers which can be examined individually but when viewed together, creates a three-dimensional view of the relationship building process as opposed to a flat 'message in, message out' structure.

This approach allows us to monitor and include the proliferation of channels, both filtered and unfiltered, utilised as part of the communications process, with the 'layer cake' supported by three pillars, understanding, communication and action.

We can then examine - and press into action - some of the many tools available that can help us to construct the three pillars and then measure the whole.

"Any measurement must take into account the position of the observer. There is no such thing as measurement absolute, there is only measurement relative." **Jeanette Winterson**



DEVELOPING UNDERSTANDING - RESEARCH NEEDS

Figure 1 - Identifying the organisation's digital footprint and digital engagement levels

Effective relationship building begins with an understanding of organisational values, intent and purpose combined with the accurate identification of communities and stakeholders who will either affect or be affected by the organisation and their needs.

Formative research conducted online has become more powerful and more accessible with the advent of measurement tools that use the 'low-cost-no-cost' or 'freeware' social media business model. It is possible to undertake detailed environmental, stakeholder and audit scans with minimal impact on resources, which is good news for the increasing number of practitioners, clients and organisations who are focusing on measurement, social media and costs in the recession (AMEC, 2009, Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management 2009).

The research 'layer' provides the foundation for strategic digital engagement and should incorporate a number of different views and metrics as outlined in Fig. 1, with each explained in the table below. Most are quantitative with qualitative metrics utilising content analysis and psychographic analysis. Social media engagement should not be undertaken if this research has not been conducted. To be effective and meaningful, engagement in the environment must be founded on understanding and a willingness to participate and listen.

RESEARCH METRIC - FOOTPRINT	TRACKED BY:
Search Engine Page Results (SERP) - positive	Positive search engine results for the organisation (encompassing all search engines, not just Google, with positivity scorecard including return number, page rank, community priority
Search Engine Page Results (SERP) - negative	Negative search engine results for the organisation, with scorecard including return number, page rank, community priority (e.g. X Organisation stinks)
Subscribers	Number, profile and actions monitor of feed subscribers (example tool: Feedburner*)
Visitors + unique profile	Example tools: ISP site stats, Google Analytics dashboard, Quantcast or Compete run-through
Competitors	Example tools: ISP site stats, Google Analytics dashboard, Quantcast or Compete run-through
Co-petitors/suppliers	Example tools: ISP site stats, Google Analytics dashboard, Quantcast or Compete run-through
Reach	Examples: Blogtracker, Conversation Tracker, Technorati Twitteranalyser
Presence	Examples: Blogtracker, Conversation Tracker, Technorati Twitteranalyser
(comments out, RTs, updates, conversations, activity)	Analysis of all results, numerics and content analysis
Issues + relevance	Example tool: Google Trends, aggregation platforms - Digg, Newscred
Trends + discussion	Examples: Social bookmarking sites, conversation tracking, Twitter search, Twitteranalyser

TABLE 1

**It should be noted that these tools, while current at the time of writing are given as examples only and are subject to rapid change and development, thus another role for the practitioner is to stay abreast of new additions to the suite of technologies, understand their function and apply them accordingly.*

"True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain, hazardous, and conflicting information" Winston Churchill

Within the metrics obtained from the initial investigation, it is likely, based on practical experience, that there will be a proportion of conflicting information. For example, in mid-2008 it was possible to enter 'best airline in the world' and return Qantas in the top five search results. Using 'worst airline in the world' as the search term you could also return Qantas in the top five results. The practitioner's ability to discern, assess, evaluate and analyse such conflicts is of paramount importance. It is also essential that the practitioner uses at least three approaches to determine and check the accuracy of the information. For example, blog measurement using Feedjit, Google analytics and provider statistics will give a more accurate picture of activity metrics than one of these tools used in isolation, simply because of the known glitches and inconsistencies that can occur on individual platforms.

By determining the stakeholder/community profile at the outset, the information gathered can be set against the relative view of the participants. Online activity forges relationships within given settings, so information must be viewed in relation to the setting in which it is generated. Participants may be active in greater or smaller spheres, so for accuracy, the sphere or network influence should also be considered.

TABLE 2

RESEARCH METRIC - ENGAGEMENT	TRACKED BY:
Community participation	External comments, internal, conversation contributions
Networks	Participation, followers, friends (community validated only)
Blogs	Reach, subscribers, comments, exchanges
Subscribers	As previously - example tool Feedburner
Engagement	Duration and length of comment and conversation exchanges, returns, length of stay, point of exit
Velocity	Reach and speed of communication, rate of travel through channels
Commitment	Visitor/friend return, length of stay, rate of exchange, recorded actions
Advocates	Profile, influence, reach
Active Followers	Community/stakeholder relevance
Detractors	Community/stakeholder relevance
Active conversations	Tracking
Collaborators	Involvement + contribution
Co-creators	Involvement + contribution

As well as determining organisational footprint and engagement, this stage of the process will help the practitioner to identify the relevant communities/stakeholders as well as potential activists and advocates. Communities form online outside normal demographic principles and are fluid and nebulous in their construct. It can be likened to the lava lamps of the late 1960s. Without the heat of the lamp, the wax remains inert and inactive but once heated, the contents is transformed into individual spheres which will form random, seemingly unbreakable connections with other spheres yet a change in the temperature will alter the structure, create new spheres and destroy old ones. So too with online engagement. Interaction and participation acts as the 'heat', the connector between individuals who then form stakeholder or community groups which may intersect with the organisation. Identification of influencers and communicators within those groups is another task for the practitioner and is not measured by the number of 'followers' or 'friends' present in their network - nor is that a credible measure for an organisation to apply to itself. Like 'hits', the number of friends/followers can be manipulated so is generally a metric to be aware of, rather than include. More reliably, analyse the specific reach of individuals, their messages and updates along with the velocity, credibility and retention of the information /thinking they share with their group.

COMMUNICATION

"The measure of your quality as a public person, as a citizen, is the gap between what you do and what you say."
Ramsey Clark

A great deal is 'said' on line, some of it of value, some of it transient observation and comment, some of it leading to real-time off-line action. When developing online communication, organisations must be aware that it cannot be a 'top-down' information push using mass communication techniques. Although online interaction is open to millions of participants, all of whom may have something to say, good communication should be centred on the specific stakeholders and communities which intersect with the organisation itself.

The second stage in the online measurement process is to recheck and revalidate the measurable objectives against the research findings. Objectives should be closely aligned with the business, relationship and communication goals of the organisation - the same process the practitioner should undertake offline. Specific questions to be asked include:

- Who do we want to engage through our online participation? Why? To what end?
- Is online activity the best way to reach our stakeholders/communities? Are they digitally active? Partially or entirely?
- How will our web presence develop our organisational relationships? How will it help our stakeholders?
- How is our online participation going to add to our offline activity? Can we sustain our online participation?
- Are we prepared to listen when we engage and change our actions/behaviours accordingly?

The final point - the internal change process - is currently not included in academic recommendations or practice models for public relations measurement and evaluation yet it is the most probable outcome of online engagement for an organisation. If implemented correctly, an organisation operating in the social media environment will be faced with direct and challenging feedback from stakeholders, communities and activists. If the organisation fails to listen, act and adapt to the conversation outcomes (which can be categorised as social demands, financial penalty, operational challenge or organisational development), it will lose the trust of those it has succeeded in engaging. As trust is a key relationship component (Grunig & Hon, 1999), the will to preserve trust through action must be present before interaction begins.

Online communication must be viewed as a two-way process and sometimes even a 'one-way' process that heads back to the organisation, rather than the old 'transmitter to receiver' models of the past. The organisation will utilise the environment as a listening arena, monitoring and evaluating transmissions from stakeholders as a priority activity.

This approach, combined with the information obtained at the research stage, then allows the organisation to determine the extent and depth of its web presence. The proliferation of web channels is such that from a resource perspective it is unlikely that an organisation will be able to participate in all of them - nor should they want to. A focus on stakeholder identity, channel appropriateness and engagement potential should guide the practitioner. Although understanding all channels is a vital part of the practitioner's role, the organisation does not have to be present across them all and in many instances it would be detrimental to all parties were they to be so.

WEB PRESENCE

Organisations can choose the level of activity and web presence that best suits stakeholders/communities and matches the proposed outcomes; Organisations can limit their web presence to their own network or blog community as far as activity is concerned, or they may choose to resource activity and maintain a presence in all the channel layers or a combination somewhere between the two. Mashed applications make a multichannel approach more feasible, but appropriateness and suitability must still be assessed.

In determining levels of participation and activity, the organisation can then decide on the metrics which will be used to ascertain communication out-takes. It is questionable whether 'out-takes' is the right descriptor in this instance as it has been applied predominantly to mass communication channels which were harder to analyse because of the lack of direct feedback from the intended audience, stakeholder or community, In the digital environment, responses, conversations, comments, actions and engagements can be monitored and measured more readily. Stakeholders will tell you directly, and instantly, if you have been heard, understood, believed and trusted. Additionally, internal stakeholders - employees, shareholders, suppliers - will also have a view on the organisation which they share either openly - e.g. on a blog - or within a closed community - e.g. their Facebook updates. Such views are a key indicator as to the internal health and value structure of the organisation as well as the position of employees as advocates or activists

Tools for measuring activity and engagement are in constant development. Equally, new web platforms, channels and interfaces are being launched every day. At the time of writing, Google's Wave has been previewed and is a platform likely to alter social networks and web conferencing/conversation in the same way that Twitter altered blogging.

The development of the mobile web, particularly in western cultures, is likely to have an even greater impact on the way we interact and although the metrics already exist to monitor and evaluate activity in that environment, these are likely to be outstripped by other technologies in the near future.

In order to evaluate activity in the social media environment, sound research foundations are critical, as they are in all aspects of public relations. It should also be noted that research results concerning online activity should be correlated with other preliminary research and not viewed in isolation. While there may be specific online objectives set, again it is important to ensure that they are aligned with the organisational objectives and values.

Precise identification and understanding of the communities and stakeholders is the next requirement, using, where necessary, the public domain profiling tools, direct contact, listening and preliminary interaction. Precise identification will avoid wasted resources, damaged reputation through inappropriate engagement and lead to an understanding of the form and nature of the communication the community/stakeholder requires as dictated by the chosen channel.

Once activity has begun and is being sustained, realtime metrics can be generated to monitor and evaluate the interaction. Whether the relationship is exchange or community based, action and involvement metrics, conversation tracking and content analysis, direct requests and questions will assist in determining levels of mutuality, satisfaction, trust and commitment.

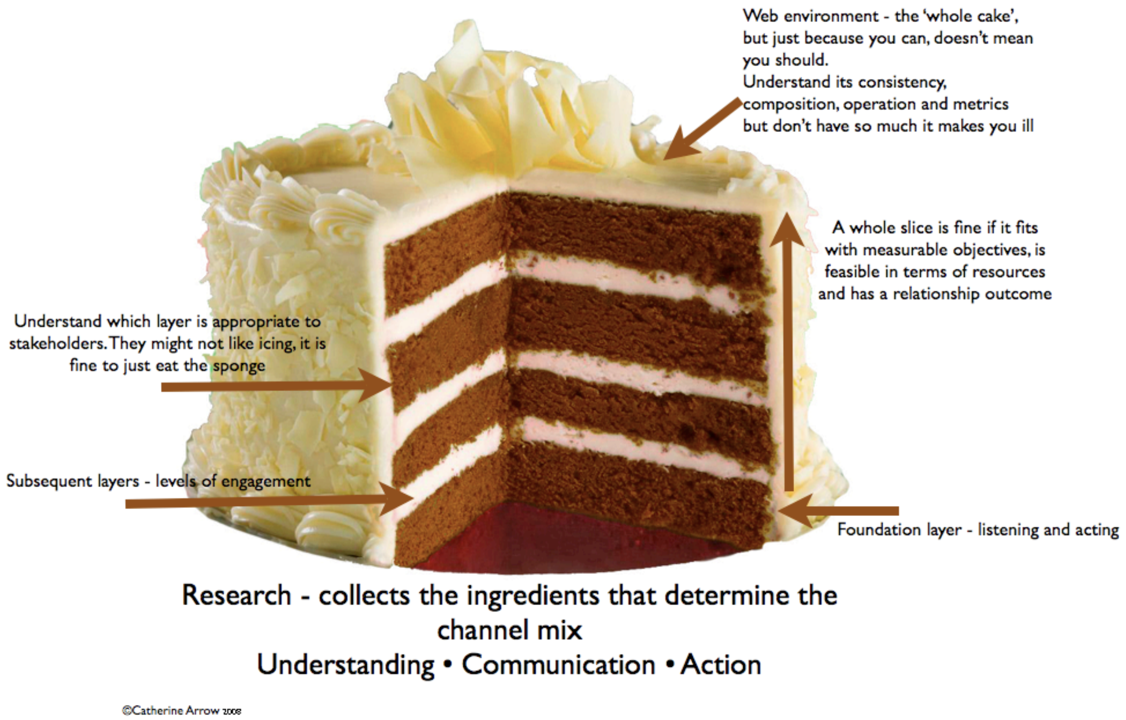


Fig 2: Divide web presence but understand the whole

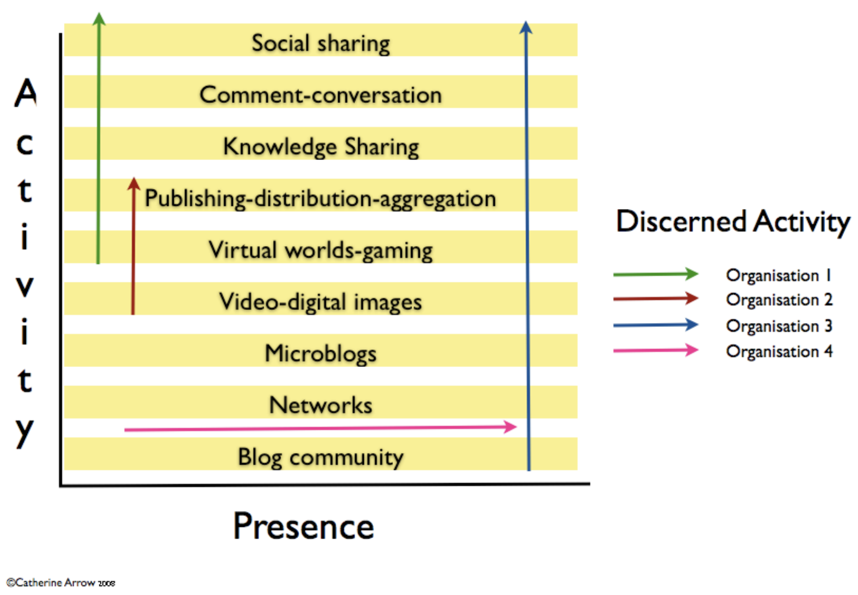


Fig 3: Choose channels and mashups appropriately. Do not be pressured into 'doing everything'

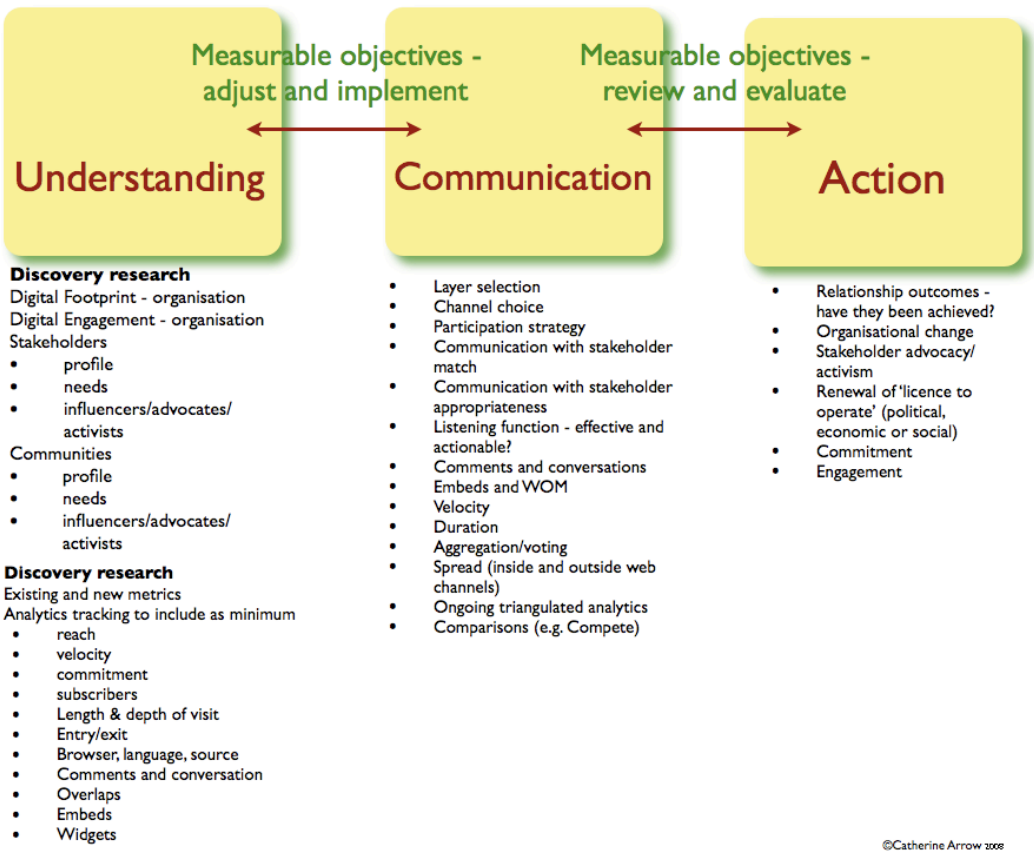
Along the road towards evaluating relationship outcomes, it is possible to track financial and sales outcomes using web analytics - e.g. number of donations/sales resulting from click-chain activity initiated by post or status update - and other numerics that will help the organisation assess its online activity. Targeting mechanisms embedded into networking sites like Facebook allow the organisation to buy message delivery to very precise communities based on key word searching against listed individual interests. This means that if an organisation wished it could, as an example, 'buy' message delivery to 100 ex-Otago University snow boarders who drink a particular beer and head for Vancouver every summer. While this is possible, it is unlikely to be effective in the long term as network communities are information selectors rather than information receivers and, as has been evidenced in the recent past, are likely to resist attempts to 'push' information through. Mapping techniques also facilitate a digital view of stakeholder engagement online, which is helpful for providing predictive context.

The importance of the relationship outcome is paramount because a good, operational or developing relationship between an organisation and its stakeholders will facilitate permission for engagement from the online community - without that permission, activity will be ignored, ridiculed or dismissed.

As the environment evolves to a greater degree, ongoing research and investigation into measurement and evaluation methods will be necessary, not simply to find the magic bullet which has eluded the profession for so long, but to understand the societal change that the suite of disruptive technologies has prompted.

One definite outcome from the initial evolutionary period is that practitioners no longer have any excuse for not measuring, evaluating and reporting on the effectiveness of their work. By following the simple stepped process in Fig 4 and utilising the many free analytics tools available to create an organisational dashboard, the process has never been easier, more accessible or more affordable.

Fig 4: Action path



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