<u>**Moving Communication Forward with Evaluation**</u>
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Speaker: Jim Macnamara (Professor of Public Communication at the University of Technology in Sydney and Chair of the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication Academic Advisory Group)

Moderator: Tom De Smedt (Communication Strategy with European Commission, DG Health and Food Safety)

Evaluation is a key part of the entire communications process. Being able to understand the motivation of the target audience, building benchmarks and defining measurable outcomes all have inbuilt evaluation features. In the end, measuring the impact of communications delivered is imperative to achieving continuous improvement. In this session, **Jim Macnamara** explained how best to approach evaluation in campaigns and why it is a crucial element of achieving better results.

The session was opened with a question whether it was true to say that most people in the audience struggled with evaluation at the level of outcomes and impacts. There was widespread agreement. In the view of Prof. Macnamara, the public communications sector generally does a good job of measuring outputs, but struggles when it comes to measuring outcomes. He outlined that he would introduce a number of evaluation frameworks, but that it was important to begin with the fundamentals, as many people still make mistakes with them.

A key fundamental that public communicators often overlook is having smart objectives. 'SMART' is also an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timed. 'Specific' means that the objectives should contain numbers, percentages and dates – 'raising awareness' is not measurable because it does not tell you how much, or by when. 'Measurable' means designing evaluation at the planning stage. It is very difficult to add on evaluation when a campaign has already been planned, because time and money has run out and there is often no suitable baseline data for comparison. 'Attainable' means being realistic, and recognising that evaluation is a series of steps. 'Relevant' means that the objectives are linked to organisational objectives and goals, while 'Timed' means that they should be achieved by a specific date.

From flicking through even a few models of evaluation, it is clear that the language varies hugely. AMEC (The International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication) analysed 2,000 articles and book chapters about evaluation from a variety of fields and mapped 12 of the most common models to try to identify the standard. They concluded that the most commonly used frameworks contain inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes. Outcomes can be sub-divided into outtakes (short-term), outcomes (medium-term) and impact (long-term). So what is the real justification underlying evaluation, especially at the last stages (outcome/impact)?

From a senior management perspective, the input, activities and output stages are all costs. It is only when you move on to the outcomes, outtakes and impact stages that value is added. It is common sense to say that management prefers things that add value to things that cost resources, so it is necessary to complete the full sequence of steps in order to provide evidence of the worth of the campaign. Prof. Macnamara noted that a common mistake is to measure the wrong thing at the wrong stage, e.g. measuring the volume of publicity and calling it an outcome, when in fact it is an output.

He then presented two more AMEC initiatives. The first was an online evaluation tool, where you can enter and save data in a 6-stage model. The second was an online taxonomy of metrics used across various industries to populate the six stages of evaluation. It also outlines methods, and provides measurements at different levels of difficulty and costliness. The idea is to help people put their metrics at the right stage, and also to suggest evaluation approaches for every project. Not every campaign needs a lot of evaluation – something that has been done before with apparent success needs far less evaluation than a risky, big-budget project being done for the first time.

Finally, he closed his presentation with 5 typical barriers and practical tips to overcome them and move evaluation forward.

1. Not accessing data that is available
2. Lack of data sharing
   Break down data silos and politics. For instance in the UK, the Department of Health replicated a study that the NHS (National Health Service) had already carried out.
3. Lack of data analysis tools and skills
   In public communications we are very good at surveys, but only 5% of the industry uses advanced qualitative methods.
4. Lack of resources and rigour
   If you do not know how to analyse data, you can explore academic partnerships or try to find interns with the right skillset.
5. The output to impact gap – how to bridge it?
   Build an evaluation bridge using a multi-stage framework or model.

Tom De Smedt then opened the floor to questions and discussion, beginning by asking how to combat the issue that in smaller organisations the person running the campaign is often also the one doing the evaluation, which can lead to bias in results and cast doubts on credibility. **Prof. Macnamara** answered that the ideal is to use independent evaluators, but acknowledged that this is not always possible. Beyond this, it is important to have a sound understanding of research methodology and to be transparent about the data, as bias normally comes into the interpretation of the data.

In reponse to further questions, Prof. Macnamara emphasised the importance of ensuring evaluation takes account of both societal and organisational objectives. In an EU context, this means not only running (for example) a successful anti-smoking campaign, but ensuring that this positive message is associated with the EU. He offered that it is better to do in-depth evaluation of a few key aspects rather than superficial evaluation of a few aspects, as this builds credibility and evidence. He finds that the digital era has made it easier, rather than harder, to evaluate communications, providing that the new metrics are used in the right stage (e.g. a follow is a metric of exposure, not of positive response). In terms of the interaction between policy and communications, he emphasised that communications planning (e.g. channel selection) can be very useful in the planning of a policy, so it was important to build a relationship and involve both aspects from an early stage in a project.

Internal communications follow much the same principles, as staff are a very important stakeholder group. He suggested that communicators could draw inspiration from other sectors such as current international development evaluation, which is very audience-centric. He also pointed to project management, which models out all the elements of a task like building a skyscraper and knows halfway through whether they are on track, whether they are likely to get the result they want or whether they will need to adjust. Communicators, in contrast, tend to exhaust themselves building a campaign, go home with their fingers crossed and then come back in a year's time to measure it. In relation to big data, Prof. Macnamara noted that the term tends to be associated with quantitative data but it can actually be qualitative too – so we do not need to become engineers or statisticians, we just need to improve our tools for analysing it.

Prof. Macnamara emphasised the importance of listening, but also as defining listening properly. Listening is recognition (who do we recognise as having a valid voice, and how do we reach out to those who don't often speak up?), but it is also analysis of the result and consideration of the implications. Finally, it is articulation of what you hear into policy and decision making. The response may be simply to say that something is not possible, but there should always be some form of response. When asked how to deal with a bad policy, he suggested that it should be evaluated thoroughly if possible, because otherwise the communicator tends to be blamed for the lack of success. Regarding benchmarks, he said it was best to build your own if possible (e.g. previous performance, analysing competitors), but to certainly make sure the data is reliable. This is especially pertinent in the case of surveys, as people often lie in surveys.

Finally, Tom De Smedt asked what everyone should do tomorrow morning, first thing. Prof. Macnamara responded that the most important thing is to continue the learning process, and to avoid getting caught in the trap that research is only numbers.