

Pick of the Literature

Primer of Public Relations Research, 2nd Edition

Don W. Stacks, New York: The Guilford Press, 2011

Don Stacks has, for decades, been the quintessential public relations researcher. He literally “wrote the book” on public relations research. And this is it.

Stacks reviews the importance of research and why most public relations practitioners fear it. The essence of modern-day public relations research, says the author, is

delivering evidence that the organization’s bottom line has been enhanced by public relations activities. Amen.

The book reviews all matter of public relations research, including an important section on the ethics of research, as well as case studies of qualitative and quantitative research and research reporting methods. An essential text.

Case Study

Researching a Position for Alan Louis General

The administrator at Alan Louis General Hospital confronted a problem that he hoped research could help solve. Alan Louis General, although a good hospital, was smaller and less well-known than most other hospitals in Corpus Christi, Texas. In its area alone, it competed with 10 other medical facilities. Alan Louis needed a “position” that it could call unique to attract patients to fill its beds.

For a long time, the Alan Louis administrator, Sven Rapcorn, had believed in the principle that truth will win out. Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door. Erect a better hospital, and your beds will always be 98% filled. Unfortunately, Rapcorn learned, the real world seldom recognizes truth at first blush.

In the real world, more often than not, perception will triumph. Because people act on perceptions, those perceptions become reality. Successful positioning, Rapcorn learned, is based on recognizing and dealing with people’s perceptions. And so, Rapcorn set out with research to build on existing perceptions about Alan Louis General.

He decided to conduct a communications audit to help form a differentiable “position” for Alan Louis General.

Interview Process

As a first step, Rapcorn talked to his own doctors and trustees to gather data about their perceptions not only of Alan Louis General but also of other hospitals in the community. He did this to get a clear and informed picture of where competing hospitals ranked in the minds of knowledgeable people.

For example, the University Health Center had something for everybody—exotic care, specialized care, and basic bread-and-butter care. CC General was a huge, well-respected hospital whose reputation was so good that only a major tragedy could shake its standing in the community. Mercy Hospital was known for its trauma center. And so on.

As for Alan Louis itself, doctors and trustees said that it was a great place to work, that excellent care was provided, and that the

nursing staff was particularly friendly and good. The one problem, everyone agreed, was that “nobody knows about us.”

Attribute Testing

The second step in Rapcorn’s research project was to test attributes important in health care. He did this to learn what factors community members felt were most important in assessing hospital care.

Respondents were asked to rank eight factors in order of importance and to tell Rapcorn and his staff how each of the surveyed hospitals rated on those factors. The research instrument used a semantic differential scale of 1 to 10, with 1 the worst and 10 the best possible score. Questionnaires were sent to two groups: 1,000 area residents and 500 former Alan Louis patients.

Results Tabulation

The third step in the research was to tabulate the results in order to determine community priorities.

Among area residents who responded, the eight attributes were ranked accordingly:

1. Surgical care—9.23
2. Medical equipment—9.20
3. Cardiac care—9.16
4. Emergency services—8.96
5. Range of medical services—8.63
6. Friendly nurses—8.62
7. Moderate costs—8.59
8. Location—7.94

After the attributes were ranked, the hospitals in the survey were ranked for each attribute. On advanced surgical care, the most important feature to area residents, Laredo General ranked first, with University Health Center a close second. Alan Louis was far down on the list. The same was true of virtually every

other attribute. Indeed, on nursing care, an area in which its staff thought Alan Louis excelled, the hospital came in last in the minds of area residents. Rapcorn was not surprised. The largest hospitals in town scored well on most attributes; Alan Louis trailed the pack.

However, the ranking of hospital scores according to former Alan Louis patients revealed an entirely different story. On surgical care, for example, although Laredo General still ranked first, Alan Louis came in a close second. Its scores improved similarly on all other attributes. In fact, in nursing care, where Alan Louis came in last on the survey of area residents, among former patients its score was higher than that of any other hospital. It also ranked first in terms of convenient location and second in terms of costs, range of services, and emergency care.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The fourth step in Rapcorn's research project was to draw some conclusions to determine what the data had revealed.

He reached three conclusions:

1. CC General was still number one in terms of area hospitals.
2. Alan Louis ranked at or near the top on most attributes, according to those who actually experienced care there.

3. Former Alan Louis patients rated the hospital significantly better than did the general public.

In other words, thought Rapcorn, most of those who try Alan Louis like it. The great need was to convince more people to try the hospital.

Rapcorn was confident that the data he had gathered from the research project were all he needed to come up with a winning idea. He then set out to propose his recommendations.

Questions

1. What kind of communications program would you launch to accomplish Rapcorn's objectives?
2. What would be the cornerstone—the theme—of your communications program?
3. What would be the specific elements of your program?
4. In launching the program, what specific steps would you follow—both inside and outside the hospital—to build support?
5. How could you use the Internet to conduct more research about area hospitals and residents' perceptions of the care at these hospitals? How could you use the Internet to research the effectiveness of the communications program you implement?

From the Top

An Interview with Sandra Bauman



Dr. Sandra L. Bauman is founder and principal of Bauman Research & Consulting, LLC, a woman-owned enterprise. During her two decades in research, Dr. Bauman has designed and managed hundreds of studies for corporate and non-profit clients in the areas of corporate image and brand positioning, employee communications and commitment, strategic mar-

keting, publicity and public affairs, and customer satisfaction and loyalty. She is expert in quantitative methodologies, including telephone, Internet and mail surveys, and her analysis skills include multivariate techniques such as segmentation and conjoint analysis. She is also adept at qualitative research; she is a trained and experienced focus group moderator and facilitator for brainstorming, ideation, and strategic planning sessions with executives.

How important is research in public relations?

Research is a means of discovery and exploration, which becomes an important tool in strategic public relations planning. There are different ways research can help in public relations: it can be used to formulate strategy, better define your target or competitors, test reactions to messages and understand the current "environment" impacting your issue or client. Research can also be used effectively for "ink"—publicity—when publicly released data from a survey serves as a "source" that is newsworthy or interesting.

What is the state of research among most public relations professionals?

I think there is a deep appreciation for research in the public relations community. Some large agencies have entire departments that support their research needs. Others use outside research companies or consultants for support. Just peruse the program of any PR conference, articles in PR journals or on the websites of PRSA or the Institute for Public Relations and you'll see how much research is a part of the profession.

Is it possible to measure public relations success?

This has been a topic of debate in the PR profession for a long time, and one that is constantly being studied, tested and refined. The short answer is yes, of course, but it can be challenging because of the complexity of environment in which PR is operating (often with factors that you can't control for, measure or even identify). First you need to set your objectives and what will determine success. Both need to be measurable. Then, there are generally three types of evaluation: outputs, outtakes and outcomes. Outputs are the easiest to measure and they occur in the short-term—how much press coverage was achieved, how many whitepapers were downloaded, number of tweets, blog posts, etc. Outtakes are more challenging and are longer-term—they involve the "reach" of the program. In order to determine who you reached and how they are affected (perceptions, attitudes, messages, awareness), you need to benchmark the "before" and measure the "after" to determine