- Evaluation models critique -

Evaluation is one of the most debated topics among PR practitioners and academics as there is no consensus about best practice. Therefore it is often argued that evaluation of PR programs is not carried out in a valid way, if done at all. This literature review will consider four of the most well-known PR evaluation models that are the PII Model of Evaluation, the PR Effectiveness Yardstick, the Continuing Model of Evaluation and the Unified Model of Evaluation.

The PII Model of Evaluation was developed by Cutlip, Center and Broom and first appeared in the sixth edition of Effective Public Relations in 1985 (Broom, 2009). It divides evaluation processes into three stages: Preparation, Implementation and Impact (See Appendix 1). It is useful to separate the stages of Implementation and Impact as it prevents, what Broom (2009) calls, the ‘substitution games’. Namely, the model ensures that Implementation results, such as the number of press releases issued, is not used to evaluate the Impact phase. Thus it separates outputs and outcomes. It is the latter that can provide a clear view of how successfully the objectives was achieved. However, using outputs to evaluate the effectiveness, or Impact, of a PR program is still widespread in the industry. This raises questions about the practicability of the model. The Impact stage of the model sets out to research all knowledge gain, opinion change, attitude change, behaviour change, repeated behaviour and social and cultural change. Researching all these outcomes requires enormous amount of money, time and social science research skills, the lack of which are cited as the most common barriers to PR evaluation (Baskin et al., 2010). Besides, the PII Model of Evaluation presupposes a linear process of evaluation,
The lack of possibility for adjustments prevents practitioners to continuously monitor whether the programme is heading towards success or some factors should be changed. Sticking with the original but not working tactics, in turn, could lead to a less successful programme.

In contrast, the PR Effectiveness Yardstick Model developed by Lindenmann (1993) suggests evaluation based on three sophistication levels - Basic, Intermediate, Advanced - instead of a chronological approach (See Appendix 2). He argues that effective evaluation needs two steps: setting objectives before the programme and determining on what level to measure PR effectiveness against those objectives post-programme, according to client or employer needs. Concerning practicability, it is useful to separate the possibility of evaluating output, outcome and impact as the level of sophistication can be picked based on budget, available time or client/employer needs. However, the model supposes that the basic level of evaluation can be carried out against all the objectives that is impossible unless the objectives were poorly set, without an insightful impact in mind. Besides, the PR Effectiveness Yardstick is a summative evaluation form and fails to pinpoint the importance of research before and during the program, which, as was argued above, can cost the success of the PR program.

The Continuing Model for Evaluation, introduced by Watson in 1995 (Watson, 1997), contains an iterative loop taking the effects into account and offering feedback on how each element of the communication process should be adjusted in the light of effects and changing circumstances (See Appendix 3). This model addresses the problem with the previously considered models emphasizing continuous evaluation throughout with the
possibility of altering previous stages if necessary in order to achieve success. However, the different elements highlighted are not evaluation stages but stages in campaign development. Therefore the model offers little help for practitioners of what exactly and how should be measured in each phase, let alone what should be changed in previous stages in the light of evaluation results.

Finally, the Unified Model of Evaluation developed by Watson and Noble (2007) identifies five stages in the evaluation process that continuously refer back to each other: the Input, Output, Impact, Effect and Result stage (See Appendix 4). The significant advantage of this model is that it divides outcomes into three groups, which allows practitioners to set different objectives for each stage. Thus evaluation can take place appropriate to each stage. On the other hand, no practical advice is given on how each stage should be approached in the evaluation process. They acknowledge the lack of methodologies listed on the basis that it is impossible to set up a universal methodological framework for evaluation as each PR programme has different aspects and thus evaluation requirements. However, this makes it difficult for PR practitioners to translate the model into practice. This is especially true as it is a complex model where Impact, Effect and Result might be difficult to identify in all communications programmes. Therefore, the practicability of the model is highly questionable.

The above analysis shows that how evaluation models fail to satisfy all the requirements to be a best practice guide. A common pattern emerges that all models discussed above score little in practicability which might be the reason why evaluation is a problematic issue of the PR profession. The models either refer to social science research methodologies or fail to refer to any. This means they suppose that PR practitioners
possess extensive skills in such research methodologies and thus they are able to identify as well as properly use the most appropriate evaluation tools, which indubitably is not the case in the industry. This raises the question that why there are no evaluation models developed that build on the existing skills of PR professionals or, if evaluation is impossible with those skills, why it is expected from PR professionals to carry out tasks which does not belong to the realm of their profession.

An argument rises, therefore, that it would be worth to acknowledge that PR programmes are impossible to be evaluated, or at least with the methodologies belonging to other disciplines, such as sociology or marketing. Therefore forcing PR practitioners to use the evaluation methodologies of other disciplines, or evaluation models that might be useful in other disciplines but not in PR, is pointless and will never lead to a break-through PR evaluation model. This argument can be a useful jumping-off point for a dissertation that could investigate what is in the background of the push for borrowing methodologies from other disciplines, namely who and why exactly expect this from PR professionals – employers, clients, who are often cited as barriers to evaluation (Baskin et al., 2010), trade bodies in the dedicated quest for professionalism or, in fact, PR practitioners themselves.
References


Appendices

Appendix 1 – The PII Model of Evaluation (Source: Macnemara, nd)
Appendix 2 – The PR Effectiveness Yardstick (Source: Lindenmann, 1993)