University of Reading

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE
MEASURING AND EVALUATING YOUR COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITY

Measuring and evaluating communications activities requires a systematic approach that combines data collection with thoughtful analysis. Considering in a structured way what has worked, what hasn't worked and how much each activity cost (in terms of time and resources) will help you to assess impact, refine strategies and show value to stakeholders. Key performance indicators (KPIs) are therefore an important tool for accountability.

But remember, **measurement** is not the goal itself but a tool for improving communication and maximising research impact through **regular evaluation** and continuous improvement.

1) Set clear objectives

To be able to measure the success of your communications activity, you must be clear about your objectives – what you are trying to achieve. Ask yourself what success looks like and consider which metrics will tell you whether your objectives have been met.

- Your communications objectives should not simply restate your research aims but should align with them, whether it's increasing awareness, engaging specific communities, influencing policy, developing sustainable partnerships or creating behaviour change.
- Communications objectives should be SMART - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timely. An example would be 'To reach 80% of student nurses and nurse trainers across the Thames Valley by September to promote our toolkit for nurse practitioners.'
- Evaluation should be considered at all stages of planning and communicating about your research. The best way to do this is to write a communications plan [see our best practice guide on communications planning].

2) Identify Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Before you can evaluate your communication outputs and activity, you need to define what you want to measure and how you will do that. Your evaluation criteria should directly relate to your communication objectives set out in your communications plan. For example, if your objective is to increase awareness of your research among a specific target audience, you might use indicators such as the number of views, shares or comments on your communication channels. You should also establish a baseline and target for each indicator, as well as a timeline and a frequency for collecting and analysing the data.

There are many different metrics and methods that you can use, both quantitative and qualitative. Select the methods that are most appropriate and practical for your communication plan and that allow you to measure progress against your objectives. But remember to keep things simple: **focus only on measuring progress in a few key areas and be realistic about can and can't be measured.**

Quantitative data – to measure the reach, frequency or impact of your communications

- Event participation: registrations, attendance (live or online)
- Website traffic: unique visitors, views or downloads, time spent on page (an indicator of interest)
- Social media analytics: impressions, likes, shares, engagement
- Media mentions and reach and potential audience exposure
- Citations or Altmetric scores for publications
- Email open rates and click-through rates

Qualitative data – to measure the satisfaction, perception or attitudes of your audiences

- Feedback from stakeholders, partners, focus groups, audiences gained from interviews or surveys
- Comments (positive or negative) left on a feedback board, via a feedback survey, via email or social media
- Case studies or policy documents that reference your work
- Depth of, or ethnographic observation of, engagement
- Relationship development
- Knowledge retention

Don't forget to follow ethical practice, such as requesting consent from participant and anonymising qualitative data.

Mixed-Methods Approaches

You can also combine quantitative and qualitative methods for comprehensive evaluation:

- Use qualitative insights to explain quantitative trends
- Develop rich case studies with supporting metrics
- Create narrative frameworks supported by data

Remember to focus on **outcomes**, not just outputs. Don't just count social media posts or website hits - evaluate whether communications led to increased knowledge, behaviour change, partnerships or policy discussions.

3) Evaluation tools to use

- Altmetric automatically calculates a weighted score of all the attention a research output has received online. The University has an account which means you can find and use view your Altmetric scores and download the 'doughnut' diagram.
- Web of Science and Scopus: for citation tracking
- Google Analytics: for website or blog performance
- Social media analytics platforms or advanced analytics platforms such as Hootsuite for social media management
- Media monitoring services: paid for services or free alerts via Google Alerts
- SurveyMonkey, Google Forms or Microsoft Forms for feedback collection
- Mailchimp for email analytics
- Tableau or Power BI for data visualization
- ResearchGate and Academia.edu for academic networking metrics
- ORCID for researcher identification and impact tracking
- Institutional repositories for download statistics

4) Review and learn from your results

Effective communications evaluation requires ongoing commitment and adaptation, emphasising continuous improvement and learning from both successes and challenges.

- Gather feedback regularly to track the impact of your communications over time.
- Once you have collected your data, compare your findings with your KPIs.
- Summarise and communicate your findings in a clear, concise and relevant way, using charts, graphs, tables or narratives.
- Review progress against your KPIs on a regular basis and adjust your communications activities accordingly.
- Document lessons learned by keeping a log of what strategies worked or didn't and share findings with your team or institutional comms office for collective learning.