Designing and Implementing Your Communication's Dashboard: Lessons Learned

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Somewhere between TQM and Six Sigma, a new term began to make its way through corporate America "the Dashboard". With all the data and statistics being tossed around by corporate information systems, CEOs realized that they needed to figure out what data they should be paying attention to, and what they could safely ignore. The idea was that when you are in a car driving down the road you have five or six gauges that help you determine where you're going, how fast you're making progress toward your destination and if you have sufficient fuel (resource) to get to where you want to go.

Initially dashboards were seen mostly in corporate board rooms with metrics on them like "sales wins relative to goal" "revenue per employee" or "administrative costs per member per month." The idea is that harried CEOs wouldn't have time to actually study the numbers themselves, but they would have a series of gauges that would tell them whether they were on or off track. What dashboards forced managers to do were set parameters to define excellent progress vs. what constituted warning signs vs. real problems. Soon dashboards were making their way out of the CEOs office and down into the organization, landing on the desks of sales, manufacturing and eventually marketing and communications.

Over the past three years we've designed nearly a hundred such dashboards for communications professionals. This work has involved developing and testing questions that help communications professionals articulate their definitions of excellence. Furthermore, we have persuaded them to look beyond the easy measures of clips and hits and get them to design metrics that are tied to business performance and organizational mission. The purpose of this paper is to outline the techniques we use to help define their priorities as well as to discuss specific examples of how it has worked for different organizations, including non-profits, governmental agencies as well as corporations and PR firms.

STEP ONE: GET EVERYONE IN THE SAME ROOM, ON THE SAME PAGE

The very first step in any Dashboard development project is to get all the "players" in a room together. This may mean the entire external communications team or the entire marketing team. You need to make sure that everyone who will be using the dashboard, as well as anyone who will be measured by it , plus anyone who will be making decisions based on it, are all included in the conversation.

We learned this lesson early at Habitat for Humanity when the initial response to our question of "how are you currently measuring success?" was answered immediately by the direct mail manager who said "we know exactly what we get for our investments – for every $1 we spend in outreach, we get back $2.10 in contributions. (All numbers are fictitious). This statement was met with a howl of outrage from the PR department who said "Yes, but if no one knew who Habitat was, or what it did, they would never be responding to your mail."

Our question was more fundamental. "Is the mission of the marketing organization to raise money?" With one voice the team answered, "No." Habitat's

mission is very clearly articulated that they wanted to build houses for people in need. So why not just raise a bunch of money to hire contractors to build houses.

That wasn't the point, we were told. The point was that there were volunteers, and the involvement of the volunteers was necessary to the success of the mission.

So we now had several new dashboard metrics:

1. Reputation/awareness of Habitat
2. Number of volunteers, and the relationship with those volunteers
3. Number of houses built

Without the participation of everyone we would never have been able to identify the correct elements in their measures of success.

Another example, from a large government contracting firm, showed how important it was to involve management at the highest level. The PR person was interested in defining dashboard metrics that would work within a broader dashboard defined by the CEO. To develop this dashboard, we met with the CEO's designated "Dashboard Guru" plus the head of advertising as well as the public relations departments. We were expecting a difficult planning process that would somehow tie the earned media results into the hard numbers that the CEO was looking for – numbers such as "contract wins" and "revenue per employee."

Instead it was made very clear that the CEO would look at this dashboard as a way of understanding how effective the communications team was in building the company's reputation and getting its messages out. We therefore designed a dashboard that would measure the extent to which its messages were communicated in earned media and compare that to the messaging being tracked on the paid media side. We also included PR questions in the brand tracking study, so we would know not just if the messages were getting out there, but if they were, in fact, being heard and believed. Without the inclusion of the CEO's Dashboard Guru we could have spent hours designing a dashboard that would have had no credibility.

STEP 2: SETTING YOUR MEASUREMENT PRIORITIES

No matter how large or how small your organization, you will no doubt have a long list of potential target audiences you are trying to reach – and presumably maintain a relationship with. The real estate of a dashboard is limited and you need to figure out which metrics deserve space, and therefore which communications and which publics deserve to be measured. In order to try to prioritize the audiences, you need to determine how each audience ranks in importance to the organization's goals and how a good relationship with each audience impacts your mission or business.

Make a list of all the various influencers, audiences and groups with which you communicate and/or maintain a relationship – consider the media – business vs. trade vs. consumer –as an "audience" as well. Then list the benefits that having a good relationship with that audience bring to your organization.

For example:

Audience	Benefit
Business press	Boosts stock price, encourages new investors, supports existing investors
Local government officials	Fewer barriers to expansion, lower legal costs
Local NGOs	Less bad press, lower legal costs
Customers	Revenues
Employees	Lower recruitment costs, higher customer satisfaction levels, higher profitability

Revenues are always good, but if your mission of the moment is to get a new building expansion underway, local government officials may take a higher priority just now. Force rank the audiences based on the benefits they bring and their importance to organizational outcomes, No ties allowed. The best way to do this is to get everyone involved together in a room, and get them to vote. We like using colored dots, with each dot being the equivalent of a $1 million. we then tell them to spend their dots against the audiences that are most important. The audiences can then be prioritized based on how many dots each one gets.

STEP 3: HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUCCESS?

Now that you know which audiences are important and what types of communications you'll be measuring, you need to focus in on the measures of success you'll assign to each audience or function. People say that they want to know where they get the most "bang" for the buck, or the most "return" on investment, but it's amazing how their definitions of "bang" and "return" will change depending on which department they're in, the type of organization or the whim of the management.

So it is vital that everyone agree on what those terms really mean. We recently worked with a company that defined "return" as revenue from web site traffic minus the cost of the program. That's a perfect, clear and easy to obtain number. They know how much they sold off their web site, they know what the profit is on those sales and they know what the budget was for the program. Unfortunately it rarely works out that easily. Look to web traffic reports, attendance figures, and other hard numbers that may well be buried within your organization to help quantify "return".

A good example of how difficult it can be to get to those success measures is the dashboard we created for a major cosmetics company. After five years of work, countless trials and endless tests we decided that the key drivers for success in their media efforts were: brand mentions, mentions of brand benefits, presence of brand photographs and brand recommendations. The definition of those elements was based in part on our experience in analyzing media content for those elements, and on how customers responded to those elements. From research done for their advertising department, they knew that those elements were most likely to drive customer purchase, so the brands "share" of those elements, relative to the competition became the key metrics that they tracked.

Another example is a major financial services firm for which we designed an internal communications dashboard for employee communication. After an extensive Six Sigma process it was determined that there was a huge amount of wasted resources in excess email and excess internal communications. We developed a dashboard that gauged the effectiveness email and other forms of internal communications relative to the usefulness to the employees and their jobs.

STEP 4: DETERMINE WHAT YOU'RE COMPARING YOURSELF TO

Dashboards are only good if they're useful to a wide variety of people who make decisions based on them. One of the key elements of any decision making process is determining what worked and what didn't work. Before you can answer that question, you need to answer the question – relative to what? The easy route is to look at progress over time, and that can frequently be a good place to start. Most senior management will want to know how they're doing relative to the competition or whatever threats are breathing down their necks.

Defining the comparables is always a little trickier when you're dealing with non-profits and government agencies since "competition" is generally not part of their normal vocabulary. However, it is important to remember that no matter who you are, you will always need some sort of a goal or benchmark by which to compare your results.

For example, when we worked with Media Logic to develop the "dashboard" for their client Rensselaer County in upstate New York, the initial thinking was that we would do a pre/post study of attitudes among thought leaders to determine how far Media Logic had moved the needle in getting people to feel more favorable towards development in the county, and also to see the extent to which they had improved Rensselaer County's reputation among those people who might want to develop business in the county.

The problem is that pre/post surveys are just that – you do one BEFORE the project begins, and then another about a year later and in between, there's really no way of knowing how you're doing. So we recommended an ongoing media content analysis that would look at the positioning of Rensselaer County in the media every quarter. Specifically, they wanted to make sure than Rensselaer was positioned as a good place to do business, a good place to live and work, business friendly, etc. But unless they had some other entity to which to compare results, they really wouldn't know how well they were doing. So we recommended choosing another similarly sized county in New York State and they selected Saratoga County. Although better known for its tourism attributes, Saratoga was making efforts to attract business, and it faced similar controversies.

What we were able to learn from the comparison was not just how well Rensselaer was doing relative to Saratoga in number of clips, but more importantly, how Saratoga handled crises and controversy, how they got their news, and who was typically driving the good news – all lessons that proved valuable for the client and agency as well.

STEP 5: PICK YOUR TOOLS

Only after you've followed steps 1 thru 4 should you be even talking about what tools you will be using to develop your dashboard. There are a ton of tools out now ranging in price from $20 on-line survey research tools to $50 per month do it yourself media monitoring systems to $200,000 a year automated analysis systems. Which one works best for your dashboard depends on what kinds of communications you're measuring, what your benchmark is, and most importantly what your goals are.

Any good dashboards require some level of integration between different tools. Seldom does looking at media coverage alone provide a good sense of your success. Nor does knowing that your audience doesn't understand your messages do you any good if you don't know if those messages have ever appeared in front of your target audience. Furthermore, if your goal is to drive traffic to a web site, or get your audience to download information, you need to be integrating those outcomes with your media analysis and/or survey research.

So be prepared to look in a variety of places for the tools that will gather the data that does on your dashboard. Frequently we've found that the data already exists within your organization and it's no further away than a trip down the hall to your customer service, web master or market research department.

For example, we were working with a major medical research institution to develop a dashboard for their external relations department. As it turns out, one of the key elements by which the institution measures its success is incoming referrals, comments and phone calls – all of which are logged and the records are meticulously kept. By reviewing the frequency of inquiries about particular programs, they could easily see how much public response their promotional programs were generating.

Similarly we advised a major transportation company about developing a dashboard for its events. One of its key metrics was web traffic and inquiries to specific branded web sites. As it turns out, they actually had a measurement guru that could easily provide all the data (and more) all we needed to do was integrate media coverage metrics with web outcomes.

STEP 6: START TALKING SENSE: WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

The most important characteristic of any dashboard is its usefulness. If you can't use it to make decisions, it's a waste of time effort and energy. So start with a front page that makes it very clear what's working and what's not working. If your CEO already has a dashboard or cockpit design in use, by all means make yours look just like the one top management uses. If not, use gauges, thumbs up or thumbs down indicators. Something that makes it very clear what's worked and what's not. DO NOT USE LOTS OF WORDS.

The whole idea with a Dashboard is that it is something that once you've taken a second or two to look at it, you know immediately what you need to focus on, whether you're headed in the right direction, whether you have enough gas (resources) to get where you're going, and what you need to do to get there on time

and on budget. Pictures are better than words, and numbers are even better. No one wants to or has time to spend an hour reading a report any more. You should be able to say everything you need in a page or two. That means adding insight, not verbiage. Only discuss those elements over which you have influence. Look at what decisions you need to make, what feedback you need, and highlight those numbers that will help you make those decisions better or faster.

STEP 7: MAKE COURSE CORRECTIONS AND DO IT AGAIN

One of the most important lessons we've learned is the importance of showing how useful a dashboard can be. The way to demonstrate that usefulness is to make any recommended course corrections and then shows the improvements in the next report. When the agency for Rensselaer makes a recommendation for a program, you can almost always see the results in the following quarter, with improved visibility, as well as improved positioning on key issues. There should always be something to improve, so don't ever just say that things are fine.

CONCLUSION

So to get your Dashboard up and running, remember:

➲ Make sure you're including those metrics that impact your organizational outcomes. If it doesn't impact the mission of your organization, it shouldn't be on there
➲ Set priorities for measurement based on what matters to the business
➲ Make sure you've got a relevant benchmark
➲ Make it actionable
➲ Keep it clear and simple

After two years of developing and implementing dashboards for all kinds and sizes of companies the most valuable lesson we've learned is just how easy the process can be. All you need is consensus, and a willing team to make it happen.