

Evaluating Risk Communication

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What This Tutorial Covers

- What evaluation entails
- Stages of evaluation
- Different types of evaluation
- Formative measures of evaluation
- Summative measures of evaluation
- Types of data obtained through evaluation

What Is Evaluation?

- Evaluation measures the effectiveness and impacts of risk communication efforts.
- It can highlight success as well as areas needing improvement.
 - For example...
 - Evaluation can help risk communicators know whether their messages reached targeted audiences *and* whether the targeted audiences understood the messages.

Stages of Evaluation

- There are five stages of evaluation (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), which resemble stages in any formal research project:
 - Specify objectives
 - Determine methods of measurement
 - Collect and analyze data
 - Report results to decision makers
 - Apply results to decisions

Different Types of Evaluation

- Evaluation is commonly categorized as *formative* or *summative*.
 - Formative evaluation is conducted before and during a program.
 - It assists with the planning of the program.
 - It helps to determine whether any mid-course corrections are needed in the implementation of the program.
 - Summative evaluation is conducted at the end of a program.
 - It assesses whether the program was worthwhile according to various indicators of success (e.g., knowledge of the program, attitude change among participants, and so forth).

Formative Measures

- When planning or implementing a risk communication program, formative evaluation can help you determine current knowledge about the problem, the current situation, and the constraints and the opportunities.
 - For example...
 - Conduct a literature review to determine what the relevant issues are related to your topic.
 - Review recent media coverage of your topic to see what prominent themes or topics are evident.
 - Conduct some form of audience research (e.g., public opinion poll, focus group) to determine what people currently know and believe about your topic.

Summative Measures

- Some summative measures focus on more “short term” or immediate indicators of success or failure.
 - For example...
 - Media coverage: Did a press release get placed in a newspaper? How many column inches did a topic receive?
 - Attendance: How many people came to the public meeting? Was there good attendance?
 - Implementation: Was the event well-organized? Were there enough handouts? Was the room large enough? Did the event start and end on time?
 - These variables are somewhat easy to measure. Some have called them “process” variables (Chess & Purcell, 1999) or “output” variables (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Additional Summative Measures

- Another possibility is to examine “outcome” variables, which examine the impacts of risk communication on attitudes and behaviors (e.g., see Chess & Purcell).
 - For example...
 - Did the risk information reach the targeted audience?
 - Did the targeted audience understand it?
 - Did it improve their knowledge of the topic?
 - Did people take protective actions or change their behaviors after receiving the information?
 - These types of variables are typically more difficult to measure than process variables; *however, they may also provide more valuable information to the risk communicator.*

Types of Data

- Quantitative Data: Provides numerical indicators related to success or failure of program.
 - Common methods include:
 - Surveys, Economic Indicators, Media Content Analyses, Experiments, “Hits” on Web Site, Calls to Customer Service or Hotline
- Qualitative Data: Goes beyond the numbers to investigate underlying motivations and reasons for program’s success or failure.
 - Common methods include:
 - Focus groups, personal interviews, field observations

References

- Chess, C., & Purcell, K. (1999). Public participation and the environment: Do we know what works? *Environmental Science & Technology*, 33, 2685-2692.
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- Hon, L. C., & Grunig, J. E. (1999) *Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations*. Gainesville, FL: Institute for Public Relations, Commission on PR Measurement and Evaluation.