

Effectively Evaluating Communication

Evaluation is essential

How does one know if communication is successful? One word: evaluation. Without assessing the entire process and measuring the final outcome, it's anyone's guess whether a message hit the target and led to the desired result. Evaluation tells us if the audience was aware, if they understood, and if the message made a difference in their knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors.

Inform creation with evaluation

Evaluating communication consists of more than counting attendees or administering post-tests. It begins with gathering information that guides message and program development from the conception of the initial idea through implementation and delivery. Formative evaluation engages the audience and ensures communication is effectively tailored to meet their needs.

Assess fidelity, dose, and reach

Process evaluation assesses the effectiveness of communication delivery. Three dimensions commonly measured are fidelity, dose, and reach. Was the communication delivered as planned? That's fidelity. How much was delivered? That's dose. What proportion of the target audience received the communication? That's reach. Evaluation identifies barriers to success.

Think qualitative and quantitative

Which evaluation methods should be employed? There are many options – metrics, surveys, focus groups, interviews, observations – each with pros and cons. Consider audience factors and available resources. Consider qualitative as well as quantitative methods to collect more than numerical data, and to gain explanations and deeper understanding.

Evaluate and validate your method.

Determine outcomes and future directions

Ultimately, outcome or summative evaluation assesses the degree to which desired outcomes were achieved. The end result is rarely a surprise when formative and process evaluation occurred along the way, helping explain why goals or objectives were or were not met. Problem-solving continues as outcome evaluation serves to direct future communication efforts.