THE ONLY PR MEASUREMENT THAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

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Untold dollars and hours — not to mention tons of enamel from gnashed teeth — are spent each year trying to answer one of our profession’s questions of the ages: How do you measure return on investment for public relations and strategic communications?

Is it clips? Is it hits? Is it engagement? How do we know they mattered? How do we know if our campaign is moving the needle?

Actually, the answer is a lot simpler than those in the cottage industry of creating complicated metrics to measure success would have you believe. If you’re not sure of your ROI, then you’re not measuring the right thing.

At the most fundamental level, all strategic communications is — or should be — a means to an end. Too often, we get in the habit of treating PR as an end in and of itself.

Doing so by its very nature puts us in a defensive position when a boss or a colleague or a board member pointedly asks, “So what?”

Whether you’re working in-house or as a consultant, what we should be benchmarking against is not what’s in the communications plan, but rather what’s in our organization’s broader strategic plan, be it formal or informal; engraved on a stone tablet or a living document on the Google Drive.

Take our sibling profession, marketing. While we may scowl at the “four Ps” and roll our eyes at the day-long packaging summits, you’ll notice that very rarely is anyone asking about the ROI. That’s because of what they measure.

During my time as marketing and media relations manager for a sports and entertainment arena in Texas (think Disney On Ice, WWE, Harlem Globetrotters and, yes, championship bull riding), from the front office to the ticket counter, only one thing mattered: butts in seats.

So if I ran a great publicity campaign, with a pile of clips to show for the effort, there was still only one thing the promoter cared about at the end of the night: Did you make me money?

If the show made the numbers, the campaign was a success. If it didn’t, the promoter would say something like, “Great. I can use those clips to feed my family until I get to work with someone who knows what they’re doing.” (Promoters can be really harsh, if a bit dramatic.)

And while lucre is not the end game for all or even most types of organizations, something is, and that something needs to be spelled out clearly in the organization’s strategic plan (if it’s not, that’s a whole big other mess that you need to clean up first).

Which makes ROI straightforward: If the organization achieved its something — the clear goal laid out in the strategic plan — then the campaign worked. If the goal wasn’t met, the campaign didn’t come through.

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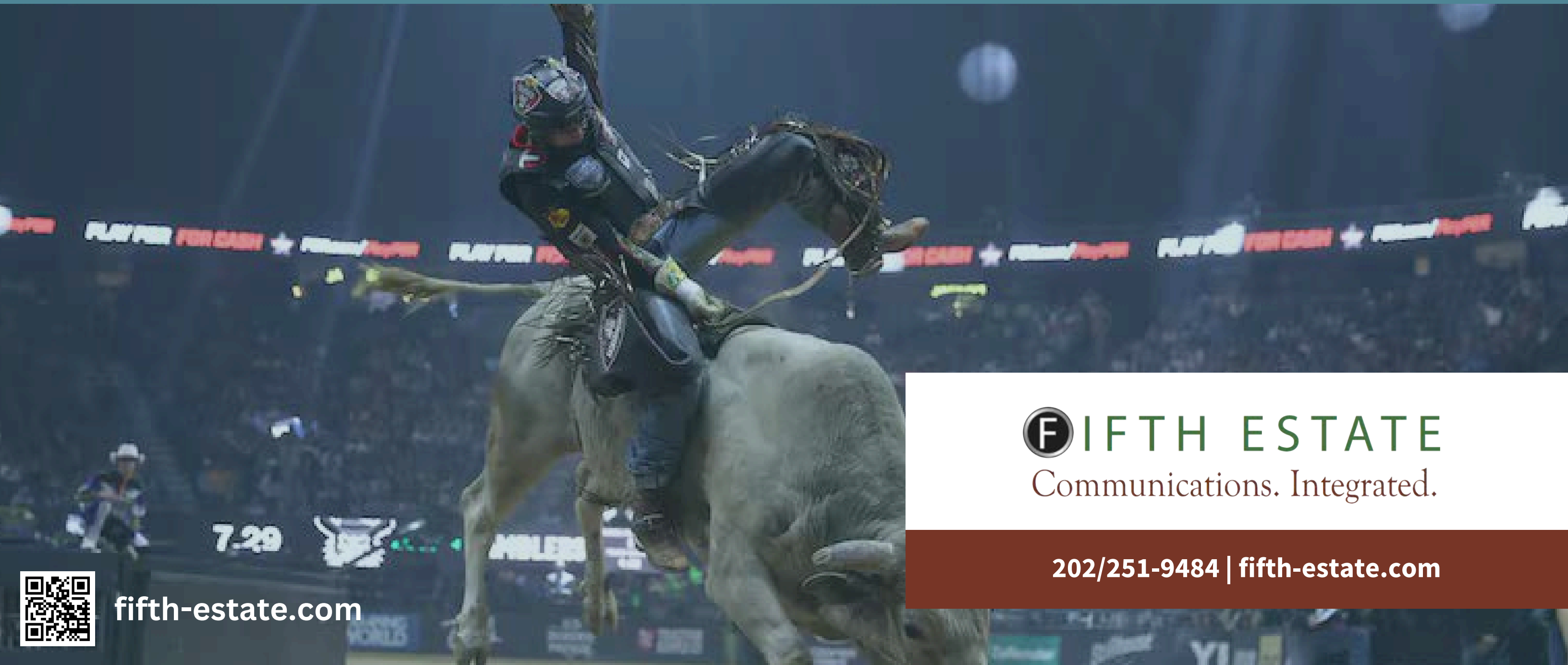
An example of this might be passing a piece of legislation, which has a lot of moving parts and requires that a number of different disciplines work together. Communications tactics might include a district-by-district op-ed campaign.

No matter how many we place, at the end of the day, the legislation passes or it doesn't, and we're part of the greater whole of succeeding or not.

Of course, saying this and putting it into practice are two very different things. It takes a sometimes seismic shift in organizational culture to get there:

- Start with who's talking to whom. Is the communications team at the organizational decision-making table from the start? If not, that needs to change. To be accountable to metrics, you have to have a hand in shaping them.
- Next, make the clear and compelling case for your theory of impact. There are numerous ways to do this, but a good place to start is the question "why?" If someone says the goal should be a million likes, ask why. Is that really going to make something happen? Could the resources we spend on trying to achieve that be more effectively directed somewhere else?
- Finally, it's time for the trust falls. This approach requires that everyone take ownership of the entire organizational pie, not just their own slice. If we didn't get where we wanted to go, maybe there was a fundamental flaw in execution. Maybe the goal was unrealistic. Either way, we shouldn't try to hide behind a mountain of social media engagement, and the boss has to come halfway and own the management challenges.

The good news for PR people is that we have the ace in the hole. Trust begins with dialogue, and dialogue is our bread and butter.



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