

THE STATE AND FUTURE OF EVALUATION IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: AN OVERVIEW

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Measurement and evaluation (M&E) is central to demonstrating how corporate communication creates value for organizations. Despite decades of professional and academic efforts to establish standards and frameworks, studies suggest that practitioners continue to apply these inconsistently. This overview outlines key evaluation frameworks, highlights common pitfalls in implementation, and examines how contemporary developments such as digitalization and AI are changing the field. We make the case that evaluation should be a management practice that supports learning, adaptation, and more informed decision-making.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION

Research consistently shows that communication affects value creation through key intangible assets such as reputation, legitimacy, and stakeholder relationships. The objective of M&E is to systematically assess such value creation through communication, which means moving beyond simple outputs to measure effects on knowledge, attitudes, behavioral intentions, and, ultimately, organizational-level impact. Specifically, M&E helps to prove the value of communication by tracking how specific activities contribute to an organization's strategic goals and value dimensions. By measuring communication effects using established

performance indicators and recognized evaluation models, professionals can demonstrate how communication outcomes translate into tangible and intangible assets that create value for the organization.

However, consistently proving the impact of communication using M&E in real-life practice remains challenging (Link et al., 2025), especially since recent years have brought significant changes: audience fragmentation, new digital platforms, GenAI, and data governance concerns – to name a few important markers of this change.

MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

The need for goal setting in M&E

M&E is not an isolated activity conducted after communication has taken place. It is an integral part of an iterative management cycle, starting with a situation analysis from which goals for communication activities are derived, implemented through planned actions, and then evaluated based on their contribution to predefined objectives.

The cycle implies that evaluation is only meaningful if communication goals are clearly defined in advance. Accordingly, communication objectives must be formulated so that they allow a systematic assessment, following SMART criteria: They should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

Furthermore, three different forms of evaluation can be distinguished:

- **Formative evaluation** is a baseline for strategic decision-making, provided through organizational listening and environmental scanning, for example, using surveys, focus groups, or media content analysis to identify stakeholder attitudes or channel preferences.
- **Process evaluation** (sometimes: monitoring) tracks ongoing activities during strategy implementation and gathers – often in real time – insights on immediate message distribution and reach, audience attention and engagement, or shifts in stakeholder attitudes.

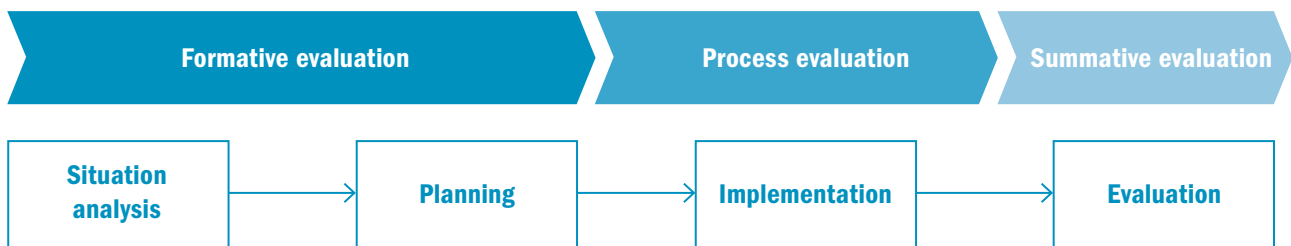
- **Summative evaluation** determines results, looking at how communication activities have met their objectives and contributed to communication and organizational strategy. It supports both accountability and learning.

However, due to increasingly direct and real-time methods of gathering and analyzing data, the three types of evaluation are becoming increasingly intertwined in practice – as seen, for example, in brand-reputation tracking: Formative evaluation (sometimes: formative research) comprises elements of situation analysis and strategic planning and provides intelligence and insight for strategizing.

In practice, various industry standards for M&E have been put forward by professional associations, with AMEC's Barcelona Principles (BPs) being the most widely known. Since their inception in 2010, the BPs have provided a basic best practice compass for practitioners, evaluation vendors and consultants, researchers, and students to guide the evolving communication practice on how to measure and evaluate its work in a meaningful, transparent, and outcome-driven manner. The BPs offer a “helicopter view” providing general guidance, but they need concrete application within a systematic M&E framework.

Measurement and evaluation delivers the greatest value when it is embedded from the outset rather than treated as an afterthought.

The basic management cycle and types of evaluation



The Barcelona Principles 4.0

In their latest iteration, the Barcelona Principles 4.0 (published in June 2025) call upon M&E practitioners to:

1. Set clear, measurable objectives as the foundation of M&E;
2. Define and understand all stakeholder audiences;
3. Measure all relevant communication channels to understand and influence audience stakeholders;
4. Use both qualitative and quantitative methods;
5. Reject invalid metrics such as the Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE);
6. Report outputs, outcomes, and organizational impact; and
7. Adhere to ethics, governance, and transparency in data, methods, and technology.

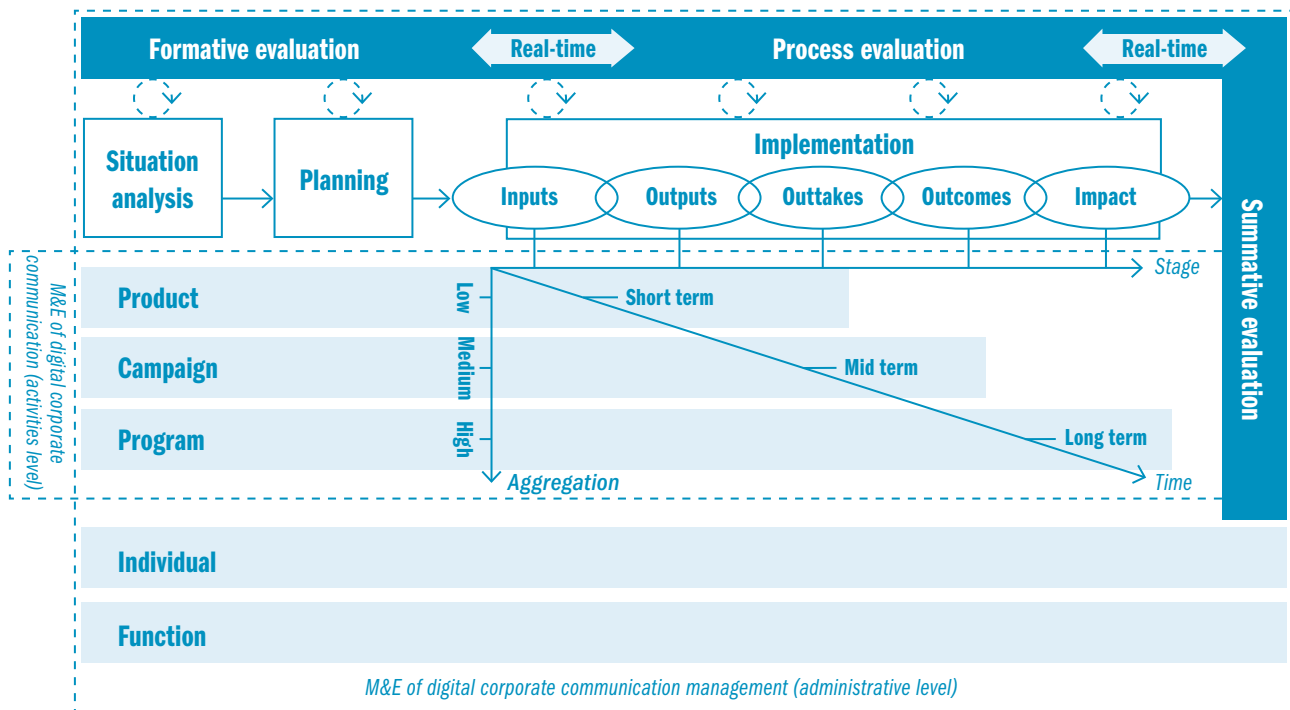
Models of evaluation

Various frameworks exist to guide practice toward implementation (Buhmann & Volk, 2022). All of these assist by defining different stages, establishing causal logic between activities and results, and applying rigorous research designs (e.g., mixed methods merging qualitative and quantitative approaches) to trace and show impact.

Major examples include the *Integrated Evaluation Framework* (IEF) developed by the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC; exists in more than 20 languages), the British Government Communication Service's *GCS Evaluation Cycle* (updated in 2024), and the German *DPRG/ICV model*.

The academic and practice literature that has developed and discussed these M&E frameworks can be summarized in an integrative model structured along four core dimensions (see figure below).

A unified model of communication M&E



Source: Volk & Buhmann, 2023

1. The basic management cycle that is at the core of any evaluation, which constitutes its inherent link with situational analysis, planning, and implementation.
2. The basic (and nowadays often overlapping) types or phases of evaluation (formative, process, summative) ordered alongside this cycle.
3. The units or levels of analysis that constitute the object of evaluation efforts (namely: product, project, program, organization, society, individual practitioner, function).
4. The different stages of evaluation during implementation, chosen to structure selected evaluation milestones, measures, and methods, such as:
 - › **Inputs:** What resources, planning, research, and content creation you put in.
 - › **Outputs:** What reaches or is delivered to the audience – reach, exposure, distribution, impressions, or media coverage.
 - › **Outtakes** (sometimes called “short-term” or “direct” outcomes): How the audience receives it – what they think, feel, or intend to do (perceptions, attitudes, awareness, understanding).
 - › **Outcomes** (sometimes called “long-term” or “indirect” outcomes): Whether audience behavior changes (e.g., actions, adoption of behaviors, registrations)
 - › **Impacts:** The actual contribution to broader and long-term organizational, policy, or societal objectives (e.g., tangible or intangible assets, social outcomes).

The feedback provided by evaluations ideally feed back into planning future communication (continuous improvement), which can take two possible forms: (a) reporting and performance review or, more generally, (b) strategic insights and learning.

Measurement and evaluation is central to demonstrating how corporate communication creates value for organizations.

Barriers to better M&E adoption

Regardless of numerous standardization initiatives driven by researchers and professional associations, most proposed industry standards have not gained significant adoption in practice. The barriers to better M&E adoption have been researched intensively, and several common pitfalls can be identified:

1. Over-reliance on invalid “vanity” metrics (especially AVE).
2. Measuring outputs (e.g., reach, coverage) instead of outcomes (e.g., attitudinal change) and impact (e.g., reputation value).
3. Poor objective-setting and missing baselines (e.g., lack of SMART and evidence-based objectives).
4. Methodological weaknesses and lack of transparency (e.g., unclear metric definitions).
5. Over-dependence on quantitative metrics (e.g., counts, likes, shares) without qualitative insight (e.g., content analysis, interviews).
6. Attribution and causal-inference problems – many evaluations do not use designs that allow plausible attribution.
7. Platform and data quality, opacity, and measurement fragmentation (e.g., inconsistent metric definition).
8. Skills, resourcing, and organizational constraints (e.g., lack of skills, time, or budget).
9. Short time horizons and lack of longitudinal measurement.
10. Ethics, privacy, and governance blind spots.

M&E in a digital environment

While M&E has always been essential to demonstrating the value of communication, the conditions under which it operates have shifted due to digitalization, AI, and audience fragmentation, among others. Accordingly, best practice M&E will need to adapt to these shifts, for example, by:

- Moving from campaign-based M&E to continuous and iterative evaluation. Evaluation needs to be understood as processual, not just summative, allowing for learning, adaptation, and continuous improvement along the way (and not just at select points in time);
- Treating stakeholders not as “audiences” (or passive “endpoints” of communication) but as active participants and co-creators of communication. Listening, feedback, and long-term relationship building are not just ways of communicating – they need to be backed by respective dynamic evaluation and communication management structures that can truly enable these more engaged ways of interacting with stakeholders;
- Recognizing the full complexity of the modern media ecosystem. M&E approaches need to be broadened to account for fragmented attention, new platforms, and technological shifts; and
- Building internal awareness about ethics, data governance, transparency, and methodological integrity, especially where AI is involved in evaluations and data privacy concerns may exist.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL M&E IMPLEMENTATION

Research has shown that sophisticated evaluation capabilities and practices are a key characteristic of mature and excellent communication departments. M&E delivers the greatest value when it is used as an integrated part of the communication plan from the outset, rather than treated as an afterthought.

Bringing the BPs and the common ways of conceptualizing M&E frameworks together leads to the following eight main conclusions for facilitating M&E in practice.

1. **Embed evaluation from the start:** Set a budget for evaluation, and plan evaluation goals and designs.
2. **Define SMART objectives and KPIs:** Set a baseline and challenging but realistic communication goals, and align objectives with organizational goals. Define KPIs upfront.
3. **Be flexible and adaptive rather than one-size-fits-all:** Apply the stages and metrics that fit the specific communication activity, and adapt to context, audience, objectives, and resources.
4. **Prioritize inclusivity and audience segmentation:** Consider different audience groups (including hard-to-reach or underserved groups) and ensure communication resonates with different needs and potential barriers.
5. **Use evaluation for real-time learning and optimization:** Monitor and optimize communications while the campaign is still ongoing to make course corrections quickly.
6. **Tie evaluation to corporate objectives and demonstrate value:** Show the value and impact of communications and justify investment and resource allocation.
7. **Make reflection and innovation key goals of evaluation:** Reflect on what worked and what did not – to refine future communication plans and build institutional learning and improvement (including of the M&E approach itself).
8. **Apply a comprehensive evaluation framework:** Measure inputs ➤ outputs ➤ outtakes ➤ outcomes ➤ impacts, combining different quantitative and qualitative methods and KPIs (e.g., methods and KPIs by key stage, see the table below).

Methods and possible categories of KPIs at key evaluation stages

Level	Methods	Digital KPIs
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Observation, netnography (e.g., online events) › Online media content analysis › Social media tracking › Website tracking 	<p><i>Primary outputs</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Number of activities (e.g., social media posts, digital campaigns, digital press conferences, etc.) <p><i>Secondary outputs</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Online media coverage volume › Online media share of voice › Social media reach › Click-through rate, open rate › Virtual event attendance › Website visits, impressions
Outtakes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Sentiment analysis › Social media tracking and analysis › Surveys › Website tracking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Attention › Awareness › Downloads › Online tonality, sentiment › Recall (aided/unaided) › Recognition › Mentions (tags, brand, organization) › Engagement (e.g., likes, shares, comments)
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Focus groups, interviews › Observation, netnography › Online surveys (e.g., customers), public opinion polls › Social media analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Attitude (e.g., trust, acceptance) › Behavior/conversion rate (e.g., buying, donating) › Intention (to buy, to recommend) › Knowledge › Learning › Preference (e.g., brands)

Source: Volk & Buhmann, 2023

OUTLOOK

Artificial intelligence in M&E

AI is not only fundamentally changing communication practice but also the conditions under which M&E operates. While the underlying logic of the frameworks and standards remains stable, AI-based technologies, methods, and tools can significantly advance how M&E is conducted in practice (Zerfass et al., 2024).

At the level of data collection, the growing ecosystem of MarTech and CommTech solutions has expanded the range of available metrics, data sources, and data collection tools (Brinker, 2022; Arthur, 2021). AI-based applications (e.g., AI-powered sentiment analysis, media monitoring) enable organizations to capture outputs, stakeholder interactions, and outcomes across digital platforms in real time and in a

cost- and time-efficient manner (Weiner, 2021). At the level of data analysis, advances in AI technologies for analyzing large volumes of data have created new opportunities for real-time analysis and visualization. At the level of data use, the availability of real-time and automated data streams enables organizations to derive strategic insights and implement them in real time. While AI offers many opportunities for M&E, a significant challenge lies in applying M&E to AI applications themselves (e.g., tracking AI's efficiency, quality improvements, or time savings).

As corporate communication continues to evolve and the technological possibilities expand, the relevance of both M&E with AI and M&E of AI will only increase. The central challenge for practitioners is therefore not simply to measure more, but to measure correctly and efficiently.

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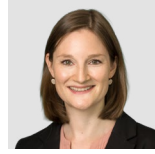
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MORE INFORMATION

This article is based on the handbook chapter Volk & Buhmann (2023), as listed above.