Benchmarking Communication Performance

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1.0 Benchmarking: An Introduction
As a management tool, benchmarking has increased in prominence in recent years. Benchmarking is a systematic process of comparing the work processes and/or organizational characteristics of a company with those of others in search of potential best practices. The central focus of the benchmarking process is one of measurement. It attempts to take corporate activities and organizational attributes and translate them into elements that can be meaningfully measured and compared. On balance, benchmarking has tended to focus upon those corporate activities that easily lend themselves to measurement and comparative assessment. Business measurements such as production volumes, sales, spending on R&D, and various financial and operating ratios have tended to be the focus of most corporate benchmarking. However, recent experience suggests that benchmarking is equally as important in other areas of corporate activity, including corporate communication. As corporations struggle with the challenge of reputation management on an increasingly global basis, benchmarking is emerging as a salient management tool to help measure performance, identify new strategies, and enhance organizational effectiveness.

2.0 Benefits of Communication Benchmarking
Communication Benchmarking is a tool that can help a number of organizations, including:

- A Communication department within a company
- A Communications department within a major not-for-profit organization
- A Communication Branch within a government department or agency
- Communication consulting firm

Provide Key Input for Communication Planning
Benchmarking provides valuable input from a peer group that will prove instructive in your organization/client’s planning process. We have found that benchmarking data offers useful intelligence on a number of fronts that helps fuel the creative thinking process that takes place during strategic communication planning.
Offer the Basis of a Program Performance Assessment Process
Benchmarking is both a tangible and symbolic expression of an organization’s commitment to continuous improvement and program evaluation. One of the key elements of benchmarking is the development of methods of measurement or metrics. A good benchmarking project will identify the tools that will help develop an effective program evaluation process.

Helps Communication Staff to Think Outside the Box
One of the key benefits of the benchmarking process is that it offers organizations the opportunity to learn first hand how others respond to communication challenges and how they are structured to do so. To this end, a communication benchmarking provides communication staff with insights from other organizations that may help foster their collective capacity to think outside the box.

3.0 Types of Benchmarking
The term “benchmarking” is invariably linked to the concept of best practices. Organizations are intuitively attracted to benchmarking because of the opportunity that it offers them to improve performance through adoption of best practices. However, it is important to note that how best practices are identified in a benchmarking process depends upon the type of benchmarking that is undertaken.

Best Practice Benchmarking involves the searching out of specific organizations that are recognized to excel in a particular area and then attempting to compare an organization’s key processes and attributes with those of the best practice organization. This type of benchmarking entails significant up-front research to determine those organizations that are believed to represent a best practice; typically, this can involve researching dozens, or even up to hundreds, of organizations.

Comparative Benchmarking involves the identification of a Reference Group of organizations that share fundamental characteristics, which shape key work processes and how they are organized to do carry those processes out, and then comparing your organization with the Reference Group. To the extent that best practices are identified, they emerge from the comparison. The challenge with this type of benchmarking is that the range of best practices that can be identified is limited by the range of organizations that agree to be part of the Reference Group.
4.0 The Benchmarking Process
The communication benchmarking process consists of six key stages:

1. Establish the Benchmark Team
A Benchmark Team needs to be established to help guide the benchmarking process internally. The Benchmark Team helps secure the required human and financial resources to undertake the benchmarking process and served as its internal champion.

2. Define Benchmark Categories
Choosing to undertake a benchmarking project requires that the Benchmarking Team come to terms with a very basic, yet fundamental question: “What is it that you want to benchmark?” For example, it means little to identify “media relations” as a benchmarking category. The process of benchmarking requires an organization to focus in on specific elements of a functional area they want to see benchmarked. For organizational purposes, it is useful to distinguish between two types of communication benchmarking categories: (1) Strategies & Tactics and (2) Organizational Planning and Structure. This differentiation between strategic versus structural benchmarking categories is a useful way to document the manner in which organizations communicate and how they are organized to do so.

Strategies/Tactics
- Media Relations
- Crisis Communication Preparedness
- Investor Relations
- Stakeholder and NGO Relations
- Employee Communications
- Government Relations
- Electronic / Internet Communications

Organizational Planning and Structure
In addition to the kinds of strategies & tactics that are undertaken, benchmarking can also explore a number of organizational issues dealing with the manner in which organizations are structured to respond to communication challenges and the work processes they employ in the management of the function. These include:
- Communication Planning Process
- Use of Opinion Research
- Program Evaluation Process
- Staff Resources and Functional Alignment
- Importance of the Communications Function
- Role of Communications Department in Organization-Wide Communications
3. Developing Performance Metrics
The identification of those areas to be benchmarked must be followed by an effort to sub-divide these areas into measurable activities and/or traits. We refer to these activities/traits as comparison metrics. The translation of benchmarking categories into comparison metrics must balance the need to focus on measurable elements of the communication function with what is fundamentally important to an organization. The challenge for any benchmarking exercise is to ensure that the pursuit of meaningful measurement does not lose sight of what is important to learn.

4. Select and Recruit Reference Group
The selection and recruitment of a Peer Group is a critical element of the benchmarking process. Identifying a benchmark Reference Group is a balancing act. On a general level, the need to identify organizations that represent best practices is an obvious consideration. At the same time, the willingness of potential Reference Group members to participate must also be taken into account. We consider the following factors:
- Common Work Processes
- Shared Organizational & Operational Characteristics
- Recognized as a Potential Best Practice
- Willingness to Share Information

5. Undertake Research and Data Gathering
There are three stages to the research and data gathering process. First, a detailed questionnaire is prepared and circulated to all benchmark participants. This is followed up with a request for all relevant background information on the organization. The third stage of the data gathering process is an in-depth interview. In some cases, you may be required to do follow-up interviews to fill in information gaps.

6. Analysis and Report Preparation
The results of the research and data gathering are analyzed and prepared in the form of a benchmarking report. The good report goes beyond measurement and comparison and offers specific recommendations where opportunities for improvement and/or best practice adoption are identified during the benchmarking process.

7. Prepare for Implementation
Once a benchmarking report has been prepared and circulated within an organization, the challenge is to ensure that the results get implemented in a meaningful way. Perhaps one of the best ways is to coordinate the timing of a communication benchmarking exercise to coincide with the strategic communication planning process.

5.0 Conclusions: Summing Up Benchmarking
We have found that benchmarking provides powerful comparative evidence that can be used to bring about change in the communication process. It is a tool that can benefit communication consultant and practitioner alike. It should serve as a key starting point to any communication planning process.

For the communication consultant, a benchmarking process is an insightful diagnostic tool that can be used to demonstrate to clients both the need for change and the direction that such change ought to take. From a business development vantage point, it becomes another service that can be offered to clients. In some cases, a benchmarking exercise might demonstrate the need for a client to devote considerably more resources to communication!

Communication practitioners will find that a good benchmarking report can be a critical ally in building organizational support for convincing management of the need to undertake new strategies or change how the department is structured. This could mean the need to increase resources or convince an intransigent boss on the need to communicate differently.