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Gloves Off: Is it finally time to say goodbye to the term 'media impressions?'

Added 9 hours ago by Andrew Cross, Walker Sands; Samara Farber Mormar, Hunter Public Relations, Be the first to comment

"Media impressions" is a long-outdated term. Or is it?

Opinion



HUNTER:

YES

By Andrew Cross,

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As a profession, it's in our collective best interest to move beyond vanity metrics and tie our impact to business objectives.

By relying on media impressions to prove the value of PR, we are planting both feet firmly in the vanity camp. We're also selling our abilities woefully short in terms of the impact PR can have in driving business performance.

It's time to ditch media impressions. Here are four reasons why.

Impressions fail to tell a clear story. At best, they are a proxy for audience reach. At worst, they can drastically misrepresent. SimilarWeb shows Forbes.com receives about 115 million unique visits per month, but the Forbes article I just read has received 496 views since January. The vast majority of sites don't disclose views on a per-page basis like Forbes does, so it's easy to see why impressions are a less-than-reliable measurement.

Impressions are not an actionable metric. If I tell a client's CMO that a PR campaign earned 20 million impressions, what conclusions would she draw from that number? Would that conclusion change if the campaign earned 200 million impressions? Impressions don't hold value outside our own PR circles, so we can't rely on them to convey meaningful results to the CMO, CEO, or other stakeholders.

Impressions aren't keeping pace as tools improve. Google Analytics and marketing automation platforms display activity at a granular level, and PR professionals are becoming increasingly well-versed in these tools. In my world of b-to-b tech, account-based marketing strategies make KPIs like media impressions seem quaint. Social networks, where impressions are arguably more valid, continue to improve their native analytics capabilities, showing views and actions on a per-post level.

The alternatives are better. PR measurement needs to map to business goals. Whether it's share of voice in a specific industry category, key message penetration, website traffic, or conversion attribution, there are plenty of options that paint a more complete picture of results.

And isn't that what we're after? If we can articulate the impact of PR, not just in terms PR understands, but in terms the entire business understands, we can capture a larger piece of the budget.

PR isn't advertising. Let's spare media impressions the slow, painful death that befell AVEs. It's time to pull the plug. As an industry, we can do better.

NO

Samara Farber Mormar

EVP of business development, Hunter Public Relations

Leads Hunter's approach to insights and analytics and helps transition new clients into the agency

Impressions seem to have become public enemy number one over the last year. But let's not throw this baby out with that bath water quite yet. While we agree at Hunter that measurement in the PR industry needs to evolve beyond the output of our efforts to measure desired consumer impact and outcomes, I don't think we should get rid of impressions any more than I think we should stop factoring in the temperature when getting dressed in the morning.

Like impressions, the temperature is just one data point of many to take into consideration. It provides a benchmark against which fluctuations can be measured (is it hotter or colder than yesterday?), and is a universal metric that helps us quantify something that can otherwise be somewhat subjective (what's cold to me may be hot to you). Still, without knowing the humidity, wind chill factor, precipitation, and cloud cover, you don't have enough information to make a well informed decision about what to wear. Likewise, we need to use a variety of data points to inform our decision when measuring campaign success. While we should not say goodbye to the term, we should use impressions as one of many key indicators rather than the headline.

Impressions are important because they help us measure how many people we potentially reached with our message, and reach is the first step in driving awareness and influencing change or conversion. Impressions are also a universal metric across marketing disciplines and help feed into the marketing mix and attribution models as well as other important KPIs such as CPM and engagement rate. As an industry, it will be a step back for us if we stop tracking these.

Data is rightly being employed to inform business decisions more rigorously than ever before, and impressions have a role to play. But we can't just add up the numbers and call it a day. There is a lot to be learned from fluctuations in those numbers and how that correlates to other impact metrics, such as consumer opinion, website traffic, social conversation, and sales.

This is a conversation Hunter is actively having with our clients as we work to evolve our approach to measurement to focus on not just outputs but impact and outcomes, and ensure PR's rightful place in the marketing mix.

PRWeek's View: Impressions are part of a healthy media measurement diet, but agencies and clients shouldn't binge on them.