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The several premature autopsies of AVE

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ABSTRACT

This commentary discusses how advertising value equivalence (AVE) has been a measure of public relations that refuses to go away. The 2010 Barcelona Declaration of Research Principles is put forward as a potential guide away from AVE towards a more scientifically valid set of measures. The author illustrates his points with anecdotes from his professional experiences throughout his career.

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I started working at a research agency in 1992 and spent a few years completing survey projects on farmers' choice of herbicide and the appropriate price to charge for various consumer goods. It wasn't until 1995 that I first started looking at communications research as a palatable future for my research skills. I was trained in content analysis and started working with our company's team that evaluated public relations activity through the analysis of what has been printed in the media. It was at this time that I was exposed to advertising value equivalency (AVE).

AVE is a measure of the supposed "quality" of news coverage by equating the number of column inches that the coverage occupies in a publication, to the cost of purchasing the same amount of advertising space in the same publication. At the time, enterprising public relations practitioners were also multiplying the resultant dollar total by a factor of three, seven, or even ten, since under their view, public relations content was perceived as being more reliable and credible than paid advertising spots. In 1995 this was an alluring number for public relations consultants since no matter how bad your coverage was, as long as your campaign received coverage, you would be able to show a relatively significant dollar value gain for your client.

Something did not sit right with me when I was shown how we were incorporating this into our reports on the quality of coverage. Several factors may have contributed to my uncertainty: (i) it may have been a lack of measures proving that a “credibility multiplier” could be used; (ii) the fact that the choice of multiplier seemed arbitrary; (iii) an unconvincing analysis that showed our client gaining an equivalent dollar value of a significant dollar amount for an article that discussed their share value dropping; or (iv) my years of research training telling me that this was not the way to go. Regardless of the approach, I was not impressed with the direction we were taking as a company and I advised our staff to talk to their accounts and discuss the reasons why they should move away from this form of measurement. “All done – no more AVE!” or so I thought.

My account staff came back to me with messages of dire anxiety from our clients. Our clients *must* have this measure because it is how they evaluate themselves from one period to the next and for some, bonuses are paid based on these scores. Round two in the death of AVE was upon me. We carefully cultivated our clients attitudes toward AVE through discussions of appropriate research tools and gradually moved everyone to measures that looked at message pick up, tone, and the quality of article. We had some setbacks, like the client who substituted impression numbers for their AVE. Just because the paper goes to 100,000 people doesn’t mean that the projected client image is getting across.

However, by the start of the millennium, most of our clients were discussing research measures that I was prouder to discuss in public: awareness, credibility, message retention, target audience reached. These measures represented good solid forms of research.

Yes, we occasionally had a few potential clients call for AVE measures – we converted some of these and the others were left to their own deliberations and computations. For the latter part of the first decade we saw no resurrections of the AVE research tool. All was good in the world of communications research. We even started to see some pretest-posttest evaluation programs being employed to show the benefit of campaigns. Great times.

AVE never actually went away, though. In 2009, A *PR Week UK* article (Wallace, 2009) debated the merits of AVE and while both pros and cons of the issue were discussed, the article certainly did not suggest the continued death of AVE as a valid measure. Perhaps the most promising point in the article was one of the concluding comments to the effect that, due to the recession, AVE values had fallen and were not as attractive a measure, given the lower values. If this ends with fewer people using AVE, then we can all rejoice, but, sadly, it will be the right result for the wrong reasons. Falling advertising values shouldn’t make AVE an unattractive metric, rather, the cause should be its dubious scientific value.

At long last, in 2010, the Barcelona Declaration of Research Principles (www.amecorg.com, www.instituteforpr.org) put what I thought was the final nail in the coffin when they published their seven principles for Public Relations Measurement at the 2nd European Summit for Measurement. One of the principles was that AVE should not be used to establish the value of public relations activity. According to the Institute for Public Relations, 92% of summit members voted for this declaration, but “the group was split on what other measures to use” (Grupp, 2010).

This statement by the summit members is the ongoing issue, I believe, when it comes to AVE. When AVE goes away, it leaves a return on investment vacuum for many people in the industry. Many academic institutions are now teaching appropriate public relations methods to the talented young future stars of public relations. Forums for discussion – such as the publication you are reading – are demonstrating appropriate research techniques. Nonetheless, some practitioners are still passing down skills and tools that are alluring in their simplicity, alluring in that they appear to answer all our problems, alluring for their low cost, or, finally, just plain alluring.

We must be vigilant. Just as we protect our children from strangers and other dangers in the world, let’s make sure we are protecting our new generation of public relations stars. We have the tools and it is only a matter of time before they realize that by embracing proper research tools they will rise higher than any other invalid research tool will take them. Let’s make sure we are always showing them the way. Let’s write the last epitaph for AVE measures, adopt the Barcelona Principles and then move on.

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