

## **PR MEASUREMENT CASE STUDY**

### **Content Analysis**

#### **Spotlight on ‘Public Health’ A Benchmark Content Analysis of Press Coverage For The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**

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##### **Situation**

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is a philanthropic organization whose mission is to improve the health and health care of all Americans. One way it does this is by providing support and assistance to those in the “public health” arena (federal, state and local public health agencies), as they disseminate news and information about relevant “public health” issues . . . through the media . . . to key constituent groups, including legislators, government policymakers, medical groups and health insurance providers.

As part of its mission to better educate and inform Americans about relevant “public health” issues, RWJF asked the Ketchum Research and Measurement Department to design and carry out an in-depth evaluative research study to determine, as precisely as possible, what “public health” issues the print media cover. how these issues get covered . . . who are the spokespersons quoted what language is used . . . and how deep and extensive is media coverage of relevant health issues.

##### **Objective**

Through this research, the RWJF wanted to understand how the press sees and portrays “public health” issues, so that it would be able to better identify what and how the public health community might be communicating to its stakeholders.

##### **Audiences**

The public health community at large, as well as recipients of RWJF grants, were the ultimate target audiences of this research report.

##### **Research Strategy**

Traditionally, when one carries out media measurement or publicity tracking research like this, the researchers . . . in conjunction with the client . . . come up with some “key words” or “phrases,” and then instruct a press clipping organization to monitor and track press coverage relating to those key words or phrases. For this particular project, RWJF staff members and Ketchum researchers were convinced that the subject area, “public health,” is so broad and difficult to define, that if the study were narrowed down to searching for articles that focused on selected “key words” or “phrases,” lots of truly pertinent information would be missed.

Thus, an approach completely different from the typical media monitoring and tracking procedure was utilized. A decision was made to thoroughly review and analyze the complete contents of two national and five regional newspapers for any and all articles relating in some way to “public health” issues that might have appeared during an extended period of time.

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Because press coverage of “public health” issues is often seasonal, three different seasons were targeted: the Spring the Summer and the Fall of 1998.

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### **Research Procedure**

A total of 201 newspaper editions of the seven newspapers were read, reviewed and analyzed during the three seasons. For 10 consecutive days during each season, Ketchum researchers methodically scanned, page by page, each one of the 201 newspaper editions in its entirety – including all sections and inserts. The periodicals examined were: *The New York Times*... *USA TODAY*... *The Arizona Republic*...the *Chicago Tribune*... *The (New Orleans) Times-Picayune*... *The (Portland) Oregonian*...and the *Richmond (Virginia) Times-Dispatch*. Eventually, 861 relevant stories in all were reviewed and analyzed.

### **Obstacles/Challenges**

Because public health is so broad – the RWJF defines it as covering four major areas: the prevention of disease; the effective organization, financing and delivery of health services; the reduction of personal risk behavior; and the assurance of a healthy environment – the biggest challenge was to develop a tally sheet that was detailed enough to address every possible public health issue, but at the same time that was general enough to apply to many items at once.

Indeed, researchers had to develop “message points” that would gauge the level of depth with which public health issues are covered in the press. However, finding common denominators for items relating, for instance, to a new diabetes drug, an ozone warning, and managed care services, was a challenge. The researchers ended up defining nine general “message points” that could be applied to practically every single item, and that were evaluated on a 1-5 rating scale.

Examples of such “message points” included:

whether the item described the public health problem – whether it identified the populations affected – the populations at risk – or the risks that are incurred.

### **Result**

Some of the most compelling findings were the following:

- Diseases, conditions and treatments were discussed most often (73.8%), followed by the reduction of personal risk behavior (43.0%), then followed by the assurance of a safe environment (33.0%), and health services (**31.5%**).
- In general, the items we reviewed were relatively thorough when describing public health issues, particularly when describing the public health situation, and when providing preventive and “after-the-fact” solutions. However, items were less thorough when it came to describing populations that are affected by a particular public health issue, populations that are at risk, behaviors that are potentially harmful to one’s health, and the chances one has of being affected by a particular
- that discussed public health matters were rarely positioned as *public health* pieces. In fact, the terms *public health* appeared in only 3.5% of items.
- In conclusion, we found that the press regularly writes about public health issues, but mostly, it seems, because of the newsworthiness of these issues, rather than because of their educational or purely informational aspects.

In 1999, this particular research project received the CIPRA Award for Technical Excellence in Evaluation Research, given by the publishers of *Inside PR*. Further information about this case may be obtained by contacting Ketchum’s recently retired director of research, Dr. Walter K.

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