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## ***PR Magazine* Interview with Bob Pickard**

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Although public relations (PR) is widely recognized by companies and society, a majority of people is still unaware of how to quantify the value of PR and how to effectively utilize communication programs. Recently, Bob Pickard, President & CEO of Burson-Marsteller Asia Pacific, shared his opinions on Evidence-Based Communications with *PR Magazine*.

**PR Magazine:** How would you describe evidence-based communications? In terms of the planning, execution and evaluation of communication projects, how is evidence-based communications different from other communication methodologies?

**Pickard:** Evidence-based communications supports the planning, execution and evaluation of communication projects by listening to data, facts and insights. The core of evidence-based communications is to quantify and demonstrate the value of PR by using data and charts. Our clients on many occasions have asked me: “What is the value of PR?” “How do you measure return on investment (ROI)?” “How does PR help companies win clients and make profits?” Our clients believe more in data than in words, and the data-oriented methodology makes the value of PR readily visible to them. B-M institutionalized the evidence-based methodology globally. At the beginning of communication projects, we use these tools to conduct relevant background research, such as perception audits and other quantitative and qualitative research. In the middle of a campaign, we conduct effective monitoring and make timely modifications to our tactics. We measure the effectiveness of the programs at the end to see if communication outcomes match the initial objectives.

I think the advantage of evidence-based communications is that it demonstrates the value and results of PR to clients. We have many clients trying to gain internal respect for PR and its value for organizational development. PR is very flexible, and digitalization enables us to have better cost-benefits compared with advertising. Advertising utilizes a one-to-many communication method. PR uses a network, communicating with purpose on a one-to-one basis.

**PR Magazine:** How is B-M providing service for clients using evidence-based communications? Are there any particular examples you would like to share with us?

**Pickard:** We developed an integrated communication plan targeting key stakeholders for a major global energy company. In this project, we utilized multiple tools and methodologies based on evidence-based communications. The research and plan development took six months of solid work. Rigorous research ranged from desktop research, including macro-environment and competitor analysis; a perception audit, including in-depth research on key government officials, industry associations and NOCs (national oil companies); quantitative research with industry insiders; and field trips to the company’s eight offices and operating sites. By doing this,



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we attained a massive amount of data, which provided a solid foundation for the tailored communication plan.

Also, we developed a comprehensive media coverage evaluation report for a world-leading IT company. This report utilized a 17-matrix measurement to evaluate marketing and communications outcomes. What impressed me most was that a new product that was launched via digital communications platforms became the number one 'hot topic' for one hour on *Sina Microblog*. These data and facts are solid proof of the value of PR. Different from traditional PR, B-M stresses the importance of listening to our clients, considering the macro-environment and micro-details, utilizing 3-D methods, and analyzing all attainable data and facts. In this way, we can ensure our communication programs contain precise information, target a valuable audience and utilize effective communication methods. B-M endeavors to paint a complete and real picture for clients by providing them with as many information resources as possible and integrating abundant data.

**PR Magazine:** What opportunities and challenges does the new (digital) media environment present for evidence-based communications? In this environment, how can evidence-based communication be better leveraged?

**Pickard:** This is a very important point. Previously, PR practitioners worked with journalists and told them the stories. However, with the advent of new media, we work with data and use the Internet as the major platform for storytelling. This gives us more room and freedom. These days, every company can be a media company, because they all can tell their stories to stakeholders via new media, such as blogs, Internet videos, microblogs, etc. Every one of us can be a media content generator, not just a participant. In short, evidence-based communications enhances our communications power by enabling us to better take advantage of digitalization, new media and their impact on people's daily lives.

Besides, digitalization makes it convenient for us to collect data and measure the effectiveness of communication programs. For instance, website click rates enable us to understand what audiences' interests are. This to a large extent enhances our ability to quantify the effectiveness and value of communication programs.