

REPORT · MAY 2026

The PR Data Structure Problem

Consistency, comparability and AI readiness in modern PR measurement.

Drawing on a six-month investigation including a survey of 160 senior PR leaders, expert interviews with AMEC board members, and a senior roundtable in London.

PRODUCED BY

CoverageBook

FEATURING

Paul Hender &
Steph Bridgman

WIDER RESEARCH

~160 PR & Comms
Professionals · UK & US

ROUNDTABLE

London, UK
May 2026

A Six-Month Deep Dive into PR Data

Over the past six months, we've been looking closely at how PR teams handle their coverage data, specifically, what gets in the way of turning it into something genuinely useful for decision-making.

This report brings together what we found across three phases of research:

1

Industry-Wide Survey

We surveyed **160 senior PR and communications professionals** across the UK and US, a mix of agency leaders and in-house communications directors, asking them directly about how they manage, structure, and report on their coverage data.

2

Expert Interviews

Through the **PR Resolution Podcast**, we spoke with leading measurement experts including **Paul Hender** (AMEC Board Member & Diploma Course Lead) and **Steph Bridgman** (AMEC Board Member). We also had one-to-one conversations with PR budget holders, strategy leads, and data leads to get a ground-level view of how measurement is really working in practice.

3

Senior Roundtable

We brought together **10 senior industry figures** in London for a focused discussion. The group was deliberately mixed, in-house comms leads, measurement consultants, and agency strategy and data leads, so we could hear the same challenges from different angles.

What came back was consistent: there's a real gap between the demand for data-led decision-making and how most PR data is actually organised. The pages that follow set out the problem, what the industry told us, and a practical way forward.

Survey Results Overview

The complete data from our survey of 160 PR leaders

While these statistics are woven throughout the report to support key arguments, this page serves as a complete reference of our findings regarding decision-making, AI readiness, and data taxonomy.

160 senior PR leaders · UK & US · Agencies & In-house teams · May 2026

DECISION-MAKING & STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

68%

of PR pros agree that PR budget decisions made without **structured coverage analysis** is essentially guesswork

75%

agree it's **difficult to lead a PR team strategically** without structured coverage insights

DATA QUALITY & AI READINESS

63%

don't have a formal way to assess the quality of coverage, it's **personal judgement-based**

50%

Half of PR leaders are **not confident** that their data structure would be **reliable for AI analysis**

45%

are **not yet using AI tools** to analyse coverage data

PROCESS, TAXONOMY & TEAM

56.5%

find "**explaining what their coverage results mean**" the hardest part of presenting results

45%

said **setting up a taxonomy** was the biggest challenge when attempting to tag coverage

34%

said their biggest challenge was **coverage tagging logic living in one team member's head**

>50%

If a key team member left tomorrow, **over half of PR leaders are NOT confident** their measurement system could be followed easily by someone else.

The Reality of PR Reporting Today

In the fast-paced world of public relations, we often find ourselves trapped in a cycle of retrospective reporting. Ask yourself honestly: how many of us report monthly? How many report at the end of a campaign? And crucially, how many of us use that report to actively change what we are doing next week?

The uncomfortable truth is that most PR reporting is descriptive. It closes the loop after the moment has passed. Campaign wrap-ups, monthly summaries, and volume-and-reach metrics dominate our outputs. But this approach leaves us perpetually looking in the rear-view mirror while other marketing disciplines are navigating by GPS.

Paid media teams optimise weekly. Sales teams track their pipeline daily. PR is often the only function that says, "Here's what we did," instead of, "Here's what we're learning, and here's what we're changing."

Retrospective Reporting	Strategic Measurement
What happened?	What's happening?
How much coverage?	Which narratives are winning?
Where did we land?	Where should we focus next?
Output-focused	Decision-focused

“*An obsession with measuring outcomes at the expense of insights and incremental improvement.*”

, Roundtable Participant, London 2026

"If PR teams were consistently speaking to leaders in a more data-led, strategic way, the industry wouldn't need to work so hard to prove its value."

, Sarah Waddington CBE, CEO, PRCA

When data-led insight is not frequently shared, confidence drops. Stakeholders do not feel involved. Other marketing disciplines claim impact. And senior leaders are left without the evidence they need to justify continued investment in PR.

THE ROOT CAUSE

The Unstructured Data Trap

The root cause of this reporting trap is unstructured data. Most PR coverage today lives in PDFs, links, screenshots, and static reports. It has not been consistently tagged, categorised, or organised in a way that machines, or even humans, can reliably interpret at scale.

This matters enormously, and not just for AI. It matters because without structure, there is no consistent basis for comparison. You cannot track whether messages are landing more effectively this quarter than last. You cannot identify which tactics are generating the most strategically valuable coverage. And you cannot build the kind of evidence base that earns a seat at the senior table.

Why AI Cannot Fix Unstructured Data

50%

Half of PR leaders are **not confident** that their data structure would be reliable for AI analysis, and **45%** are not yet using AI tools to analyse coverage data.

The rise of AI has made this problem more urgent, not less. AI is only as useful as the information it is given. When AI tools are applied to unstructured PR data, the results are predictably limited: inconsistent outputs, shallow or generic insights, and analysis that still requires significant human checking.

In many cases, what is being presented as "AI-powered analysis" is still heavily reliant on Boolean keyword matching layered with light automation. And that creates a fundamental limitation, because PR does not work in exact phrases. Messages are rarely delivered verbatim.

"Messages are never conveyed verbatim. One client might have a message that they're a socially responsible company, but the journalist is never going to say 'X Company is a socially responsible company.' So you have to look for inference of the message. That keyword approach, it's going to miss loads, and you need to double-check it anyway."

, Steph Bridgman, AMEC Board Member

Why AI Cannot Fix Unstructured Data

The consequences of unstructured data are not abstract. When AI tools are applied to messy, inconsistent PR data, the limitations are immediate and concrete:

- **AI cannot reliably identify which messages are landing** when coverage data is untagged and inconsistently structured.
- **AI cannot compare performance across campaigns, markets, or tactics** without a consistent underlying data architecture.
- **AI cannot surface patterns that confidently inform strategy** when the inputs are messy, incomplete, or contradictory.

"I'm a big believer in the Gartner hype curve. Gen AI is actually plunging into the trough of disillusionment. A lot of people will have been doing trials on AI but will be either a little bit underwhelmed or not able to scale their experiments. There's a McKinsey report showing that 90% of organisations are experimenting with AI, but more than two-thirds have not been able to actually implement it at scale."

, Paul Hender, AMEC Board Member & Diploma Course Lead

What the Industry Really Thinks

Our senior roundtable in London brought together agency, in-house, strategy, and measurement professionals to discuss the realities of modern PR measurement. Alongside our survey of 160 PR leaders, several recurring themes emerged that speak directly to the unstructured data problem.

1

The Confidence Gap

Capability, knowledge & the one-person problem

When senior stakeholders ask "what is actually working, and where should we invest more budget?", PR teams lack confidence in the answer. The discussion opened with a stark observation: measurement often depends on one person's knowledge, one spreadsheet, or one isolated process, and that fragility is a direct consequence of unstructured data.

“Not one brand I've spoken to would confidently answer that question.

, Roundtable Participant

68% of PR pros agree that PR budget decisions made without **structured coverage analysis** is essentially guesswork.

Our wider research confirmed this. Over 50% of PR leaders are not confident their measurement system could be followed by someone else if a key team member left. The knowledge is locked in people's heads, not in structured systems.

Proof of Activity vs. Proof of Influence

The reporting tension that holds PR back

One of the strongest themes was the distinction between *proof of activity*, coverage volume, media hits, daily updates, and *proof of influence*. Teams are often judged on vanity metrics that tell a story of effort, not impact. Without structured data, it is impossible to build the latter.

"It's proof of activity, not proof of influence."

, Roundtable Participant

85%

say they don't use **any formal method** to assess the quality or strength of their coverage, with **63%** relying entirely on personal judgement.

More coverage year on year is not always better. Stronger PR may sometimes mean fewer but more relevant pieces, stronger message pull-through, and better audience alignment, but you can only demonstrate this with structured, comparable data.

The Reach Metrics Minefield

Why big numbers lose credibility

Consider a UK-based campaign that claims 200 million gross impressions. There are roughly 67 million people in the country. Immediately, the number strains credibility. The problem compounds over time, if you claim 200 million impressions per month and multiply by twelve, the annual figures become astronomical and entirely meaningless.

"There's a risk around just counting up raw reach numbers or impressions and coming up with a very large number, because that can be incredible. You can come up with very large numbers that just lose credibility when you're presenting it to a senior marketer or CEO."

, Paul Hender, AMEC Board Member

"I always advocate for the smaller number because your outcome number, an outcome is actually then what people did after the comms campaign, after they saw it. People's egos get in the way when they're searching out a reach figure, and that's where it leads them to report on these large numbers that don't bear any resemblance to the likely outcome."

, Steph Bridgman, AMEC Board Member

4

The Measurement Person Dependency

Why processes living in one person's head is a critical risk

A recurring operational challenge highlighted in our research is that measurement processes often live entirely in one person's head. Spreadsheets become the primary system of record, and tagging logic is rarely documented or shared across the wider team.

50%+

Over half of PR leaders are **not confident** their measurement system could be followed easily if a key team member left tomorrow.

34%

said their biggest challenge was the **coverage tagging logic living in one team member's head**.

This isn't a failure of effort. It's a symptom of an industry that has never been given a shared operational structure. As Sarah Waddington CBE noted, the goal is for *PR teams* to speak to leaders in a data-led way, not just analysts or specialist measurement departments. When data structure is democratised, the entire team becomes more strategic.

“You can't interrogate trends if the structure underneath isn't consistent.

, Roundtable Participant

From Visibility to Insight: A Practical Path

The solution to the unstructured data problem is not more complex dashboards or heavier reporting processes. It is about building a foundation of structured coverage data that enables strategic insight. PR measurement is not a single leap, it is an evolution through three stages.

Stage	What It Looks Like	What It Enables
1. Visibility	Coverage gathered in one place	Up-to-date metrics, easy querying, professional reporting
2. Structure	Consistent classification applied	Defined categories, clear message tracking, comparable datasets
3. Insight	Data drives decisions	Pattern recognition, narrative tracking, activity-to-outcome correlation, real-time strategic adjustment

Most teams are comfortable at Stage 1. The challenge is making the leap to Stage 2, where you begin classifying coverage consistently so that it can be compared and analysed over time. This is where the real strategic value begins to emerge.

"Measurement really should be about measuring what communications is intended to achieve. So it's really about aligning those data points with what the objectives are. My starting point would always be starting with objectives and then working back from there for the data points that would then tell the journey to those objectives."

, Paul Hender, AMEC Board Member & Diploma Course Lead

What Structured Data Actually Looks Like

At Stage 2, teams should be tracking fields such as: primary topic or theme, key message presence (Y/N), spokesperson featured, narrative type, brand in headline (Y/N), image included, backlink included, sentiment, and call-to-action presence.

"What does our ideal article look like? Our message in the headline. It's positive. It's delivered our message. It features a spokesperson. It features our research. It features a call-to-action. Brilliant. Let's structure that. Each one is a column. Yes, no, yes, no. And then very simply on your spreadsheet, you can count how many times you've said yes, often divided by your number of articles. So you're saying the percentage of coverage that featured our research was 86%, and that's a really useful data point."

, Paul Hender, AMEC Board Member

Four Principles for Structured PR Data

The shift from unstructured to structured PR data does not require a complete overhaul of how your team works. It requires consistent habits, clear categories, and the discipline to ask better questions of your data. Here are the four principles that matter most.

1 Start With Objectives, Not Outputs

Before selecting data points, before choosing tools, before building dashboards, you must be clear on the communications objectives. There is a significant difference between a short product launch with a specific call to action and a longer-term brand-building programme. The data points you use for each will vary considerably.

2 Categorise for Insight, Not Just Volume

Question every category and ask: what insight will this deliver? Prominence, sentiment, and context of the brand mention will deliver far more strategic insight than media tier alone. According to Reuters, 8 out of 10 people only read the headline of an article, so even a simple yes/no column for brand-in-headline is a powerful structural step.

3 Embrace Smaller, Credible Numbers

Be comfortable with smaller, credible numbers. They will serve you far better in the boardroom than inflated figures that collapse under scrutiny. Use reach as a comparative tool, plotting trends over time, comparing campaigns against competitors, or seeing if you got a bigger bang for buck within one set of media versus another.

4 Tell the Story in 30 Seconds

Data is not a scarce resource. Attention is. You can do months of analysis, but often all you need to share is one slide with one killer point. The squint test applies: if you squint at a page and it goes into a blur with lots of stuff, it is not serving its purpose.

“*Data is not a scarce resource. Our attention is a scarce resource. And if we are communicating to a really senior person, you might have less than five minutes to convey that message. If you throw a dashboard with a million data points, they're going to say, 'What does that mean?'*”

, Paul Hender, AMEC Board Member

Where this research is pointing

Across the roundtables, survey findings, and wider industry conversations, a theme is starting to emerge. The industry does not need more reporting. It needs easier access to consistent, actionable insight while activity is still happening.

The real value is not simply proving outcomes months later, but helping teams understand what is working now, where momentum is building, what needs adjusting, and where effort or budget should shift while campaigns are live.

We've taken one idea from the discussions in particular:

"A system of evidence for attempts at influence."

This idea felt important.

A suggestion that emerged during the roundtable was that deeper analysis of coverage and content could help provide evidence that communications activity is applying pressure in the intended direction, even if that does not directly prove a real world change in audience perception or business outcome.

That distinction matters.

PR teams are not always trying to claim direct control over reputation, behaviour, or commercial outcomes. But they are trying to understand whether their work is contributing meaningful influence over time and whether signals are moving in the right direction.

Participants repeatedly stressed that short term reporting still matters as a hygiene factor. Teams still need visible reporting outputs, stakeholder updates, and proof that activity is happening. The opportunity is not to replace reporting, but to layer smarter insight and guidance on top of it.

Long term outcomes will always matter and they should flex depending on objectives, audiences, and business priorities. What should stay consistent are meaningful signals and strategic guidance throughout activity, not just retrospectively at the end of it.

Increasingly, PR teams are asking for insight that feels practical, accessible, and genuinely useful in day to day decision making. Not heavier reporting processes or more complicated dashboards, but structured insight that helps practitioners, strategists, and budget holders make better decisions with greater confidence.

The direction feels increasingly clear.

Making strategic insight easier to access, easier to act on, and more naturally embedded into the flow of PR work itself.

This is still an evolving area of research for CoverageBook. The future opportunity may not be more measurement for measurement's sake, but insight that is practical, accessible, and genuinely useful in the day-to-day flow of PR work. Not a separate reporting layer that sits outside the work, but a system of evidence for attempts at influence, built into how PR teams already operate.

We will be making moves to help PR teams in this area through the app throughout this year. If you're interested in hearing more, or simply want to talk about this topic, please get in touch with Stella.



GET IN TOUCH

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