

CISION One

The Complete Guide to Building a Data-Driven PR Strategy



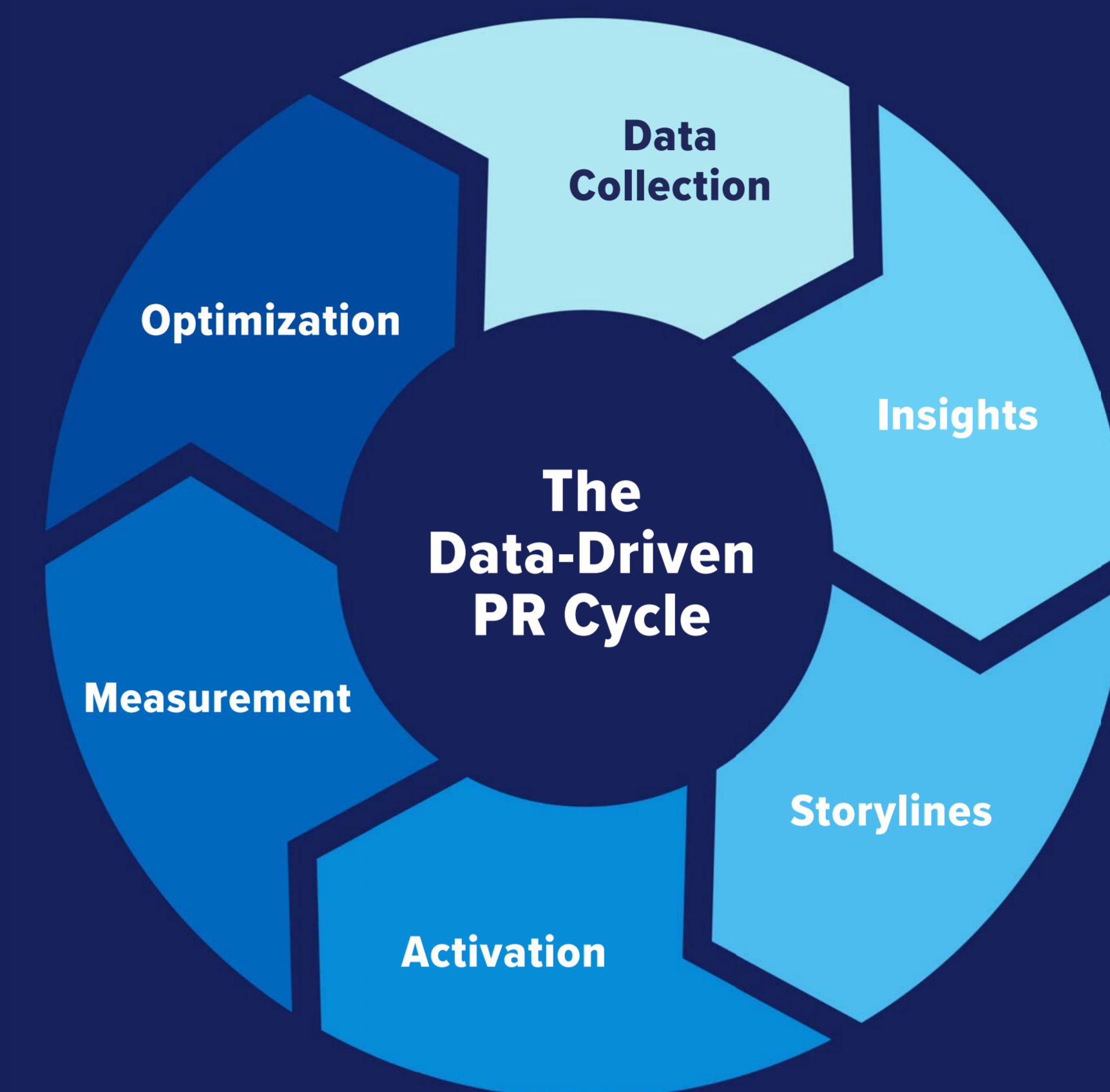
Introduction

Public relations is fast becoming a balancing act between intuition and digital intelligence. Gut instinct and a book of reporter contacts need to be backed up by data-driven decision-making. The human side of PR will never go away, but the profession is turning to AI-driven platforms that can collect, organize, and analyze vast amounts of information in real time.

Today's PR teams face a relentless 24/7 news cycle, C-suite demand to prove ROI, and an increasingly fragmented media landscape where traditional outlets compete with influencers, podcasts, and independent publications.

We hear this from our own research:

- **60% of PR professionals** cite the changing media landscape as their top challenge, according to the Inside PR 2026 Report
- Via the same report, **31% say using data and analytics** to show ROI and strategy is their greatest opportunity in 2026
- **84% of 2025 Comms Report respondents** note that the C-suite has sought their counsel more frequently than ever.



How can PR navigate these challenges? Smart use of data is the key to showing the true value of their work (monitoring, measuring, and media relations) and securing a seat at the C-suite table.

This guide will examine how to build a data-driven PR strategy from the ground up. We'll explain how best to gather data, turn insights into compelling stories, and how to iterate and refine the process over time.

Contents

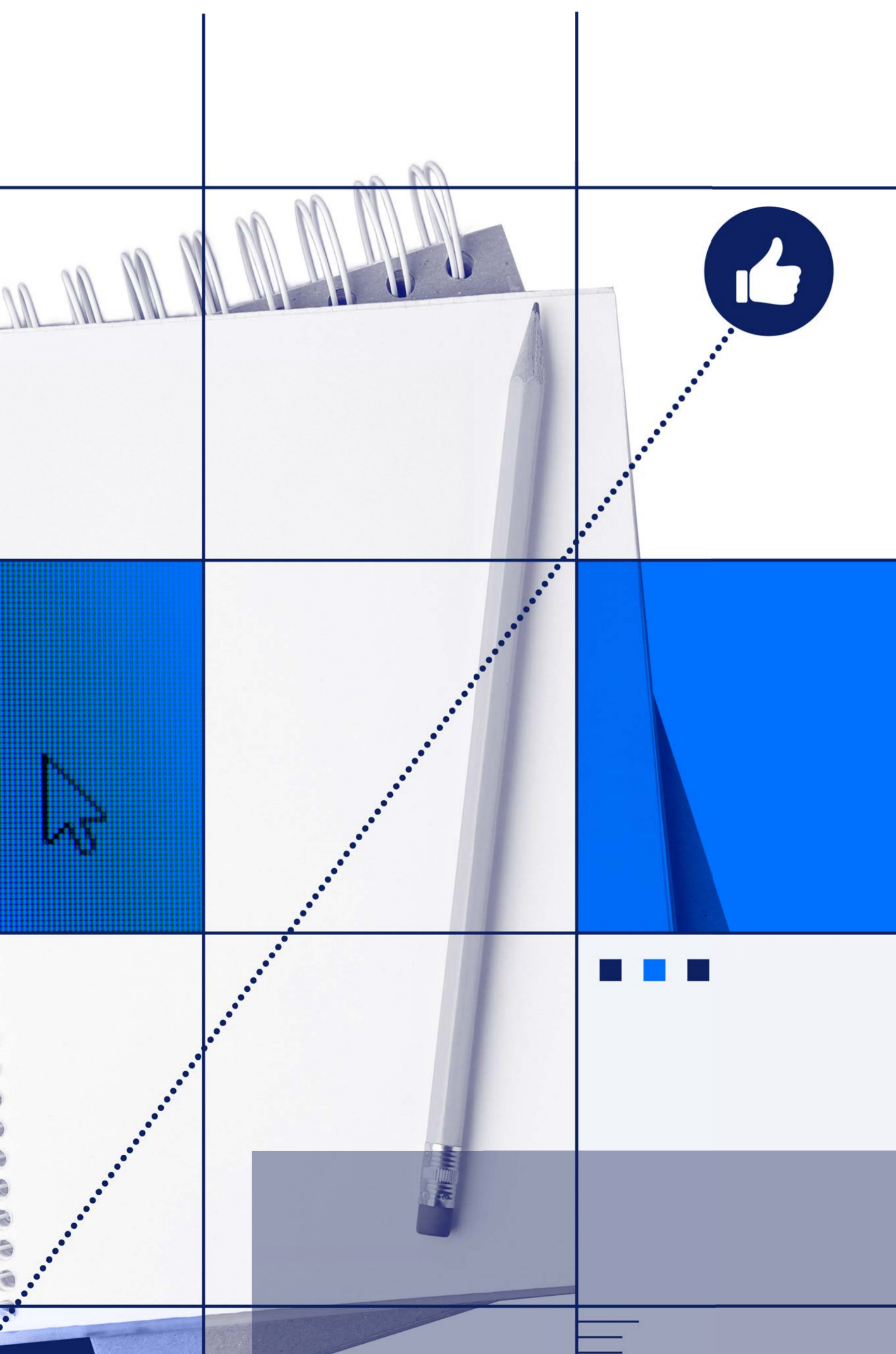
Part 1: Data Basics for PR	4
Part 2: Establish Your Data Sources	7
Part 3: Identify Insight Themes	10
Part 4: Develop Data-Backed Content	13
Part 5: Build Reporting and Dashboards	16
Part 6: Optimize and Improve	18
Part 7: Your 90-Day Data-Driven PR Plan	20
Final Thoughts	22
About Cision	24

Part 1:

Data Basics for PR

Data Basics for PR

Before looking at data sources and tools, it's important to understand what data can and can't do for PR. In addition, it's key to recognize why data matters and what questions you should be asking before you put a full strategy together.



What data can do

Data can tell you a story. Or help identify one that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. It can reveal patterns, show momentum building around conversations in real time, and give you the ability to be proactive rather than reactive.

It can also help shape your pitches with information to back up a compelling narrative. If a journalist asks, "Why should I care?" for instance, you'll be able to show them proof.

Data gives you a platform to make strategic decisions to back up gut instinct. While intuition still plays a role, supporting it with concrete information builds confidence and credibility, both internally with key stakeholders and externally with journalists and audiences.

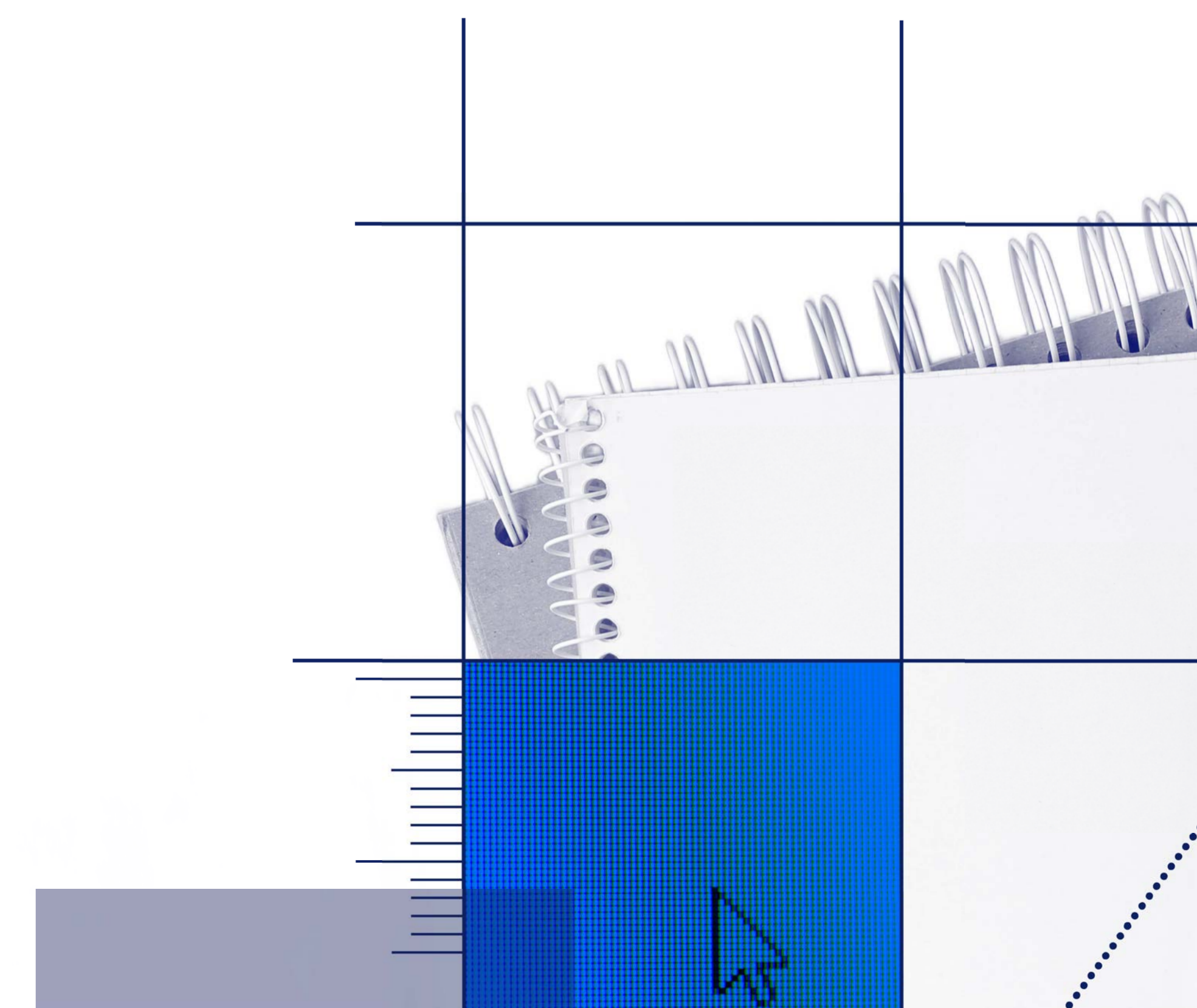
Perhaps most importantly for PR, data proves impact. It connects your work to measurable outcomes, showing how media coverage drives sales and revenue, how thought leadership builds brand awareness, or how crisis response protects reputation.

What data can't do

Data can't solve all your problems or guarantee campaign success. Even the most data-informed strategy can struggle if the creative execution is adrift or external factors change unexpectedly.

Moreover, data needs human insight to explain exactly what it's telling you. Numbers in isolation don't say much unless there's analysis and context. For example, a spike in the number of positive brand mentions might correlate with a product launch, but determining exactly what drove that positivity requires a deeper look.

Crucially, data can't replace human judgment. The best campaigns blend data-backed insights with human storytelling, relationship-building, and creativity.



Where to start

If you're not used to dealing with data or data-gathering tools, the process can get overwhelming. So starting small and simple is a good entry point. It's better to track a few metrics consistently (see sidebar for a starter guide) rather than trying to track everything with a chart-heavy dashboard.

To identify which metrics matter, ask yourself questions linked to business goals:

- What topics drive engagement?
- Which journalists cover our space?
- Are competitors getting coverage in areas we're not?

Begin in a space where you think you can make an immediate impact. Use the data you gather to support decision-making, not as a replacement for the experience, relationships, and creativity that make PR truly work.

5 Starter PR Metrics to Track

If you only have capacity to track a handful of metrics, start with these five. They should give you a clear view of visibility, engagement, and business impact without needing a complex dashboard.

1. Engagement

Track unique views or average time on pages for key owned assets like blogs, reports, or newsroom posts. High engagement signals topics and angles worth doubling down on.

2. Referral traffic

Use your web analytics to see how many visits come from PR placements and press mentions. Look at which outlets drive the most traffic so you can develop relationships with them.

3. Brand sentiment

Classify your coverage as positive, neutral, or negative (you may have media monitoring tools that do this automatically). One goal here may be to catch negative coverage early and confirm that any counter-narrative is landing the way you intend.

4. Brand mentions

Count how many stories mention your brand and group them by publication tier (e.g., top-tier, trade, niche). This shows whether you're consistently landing coverage where it matters most.

5. Share of voice

Track how your brand is being mentioned next to competitors. Alternatively, drill down into relevant themes that align with your strategy (for example, "AI in automotive") and compare how often you show up in these topics vs. the competition.



Part 2:

Establish Your Data Sources

Establish Your Data Sources

Building a data-driven PR strategy requires an understanding of where you can pull information from and what it can tell you. You don't need every tool all at once. Instead, focus on gathering data across a few sources you already have. This could include:

Media monitoring

Media monitoring platforms track your brand's earned media presence across online, print, and broadcast channels. Think volume of brand mentions, reach, and advertising value equivalency (AVE). Many all-in-one platforms, such as CisionOne, now combine media monitoring with social listening and media databases, giving you a comprehensive view of earned and social media in one place.

Search trends

This is an area where you can partner with your marketing team, who are likely already using an SEO or keyword tool to understand audience search behaviors. Alongside this, they may also have visibility over your brand's AI search strategy, which builds on traditional SEO and is commonly referred to as AIO (AI Optimization). Two other related terms worth knowing here:

AEO (Answer Engine Optimization): Optimizing content to appear in answer-based search features. Think Google's "People also ask" boxes and feature snippets, all elements that provide direct answers to search queries.

GEO (Generative Engine Optimization): Where AEO targets specific answer boxes within traditional search engines, GEO looks to position your brand within AI-generated responses in platforms like ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, and Gemini.

If people are searching for terms related to your sector and service and your brand doesn't appear, that's a lost opportunity. Search trends can also highlight rising topics before they hit mainstream media, giving you a chance to position your brand as an authority in a topic or conversation early.



Audience behavior

Website analytics tell you which content on your owned channels are resonating with audiences. These platforms also track referral sources to see which media placements are driving the most traffic. Plus, they monitor page views and time spent on pages to understand what topics are keeping people with content for longer.

If a particular piece of thought leadership drives significant engagement, consider repurposing it into multiple formats or pitching similar angles to other outlets.

Survey and research data

Hearing directly from your audience is fundamental to effective PR. Tools like SurveyMonkey and Microsoft Forms let you gather insights on audience perceptions, preferences, and behaviors.

Gathering this intelligence can strengthen your PR strategy. Your research helps identify how your brand is perceived, highlight pitch angles for media outreach, anticipate potential reputational risks, or stress-test a campaign before launch.

Pro tip:

You may already have access to some (or all) of these data sources through existing tools. Make use of them; let the insights guide your decision making – and prove what you’re doing is working.

If you're getting started, focus on just a few core sources: A media monitoring tool to understand coverage volume and sentiment, Google Analytics for owned website referral traffic, and a survey platform to gather first-hand insights and perspectives.



Part 3:

Identify Insight Themes

Identify Insight Themes

Once your data sources are set, the next step is to turn the data you gather into insight and ideas. This step is when you should break down any silos separating your data platforms, then join the dots across these sources to see what they're telling you and how you should act.

Cluster data into themes: Review your data as a whole. Try and spot patterns that repeat across channels. If your website analytics show high engagement on a particular topic and your media monitoring reveals growing press interest on that same subject, you may have found something worth exploring.

For all the themes you identify, categorize them in a way that makes sense for your organization. For example, industry trends, customer pain points, and competitor messaging could all be established as relevant themes. Group related data points under each of them and track how they evolve over time.

Prioritize based on relevance: Look at your insights through the lens of your business objectives. Does a particular theme connect to product launch, revenue goals, or brand positioning priority? If not, it might be worth putting on the backburner.

It's also worth considering timeliness. Some insights represent moments you need to act on quickly. Others point to shifts that require sustained attention. Build a mix of fast wins and longer-term strategic plays.



Connect insights to opportunities: For each theme you identify, ask: What's the opportunity? It could be:

- A content gap where you can establish thought leadership
- A journalist beat that opens new media relationships
- An underserved audience need you can address
- An emerging trend worth getting ahead of
- A competitor weakness you can exploit

Build your insights structure: Create a live document that captures your key themes, the data supporting them, why they matter to your business, and what action you could take. An example theme to include could be:

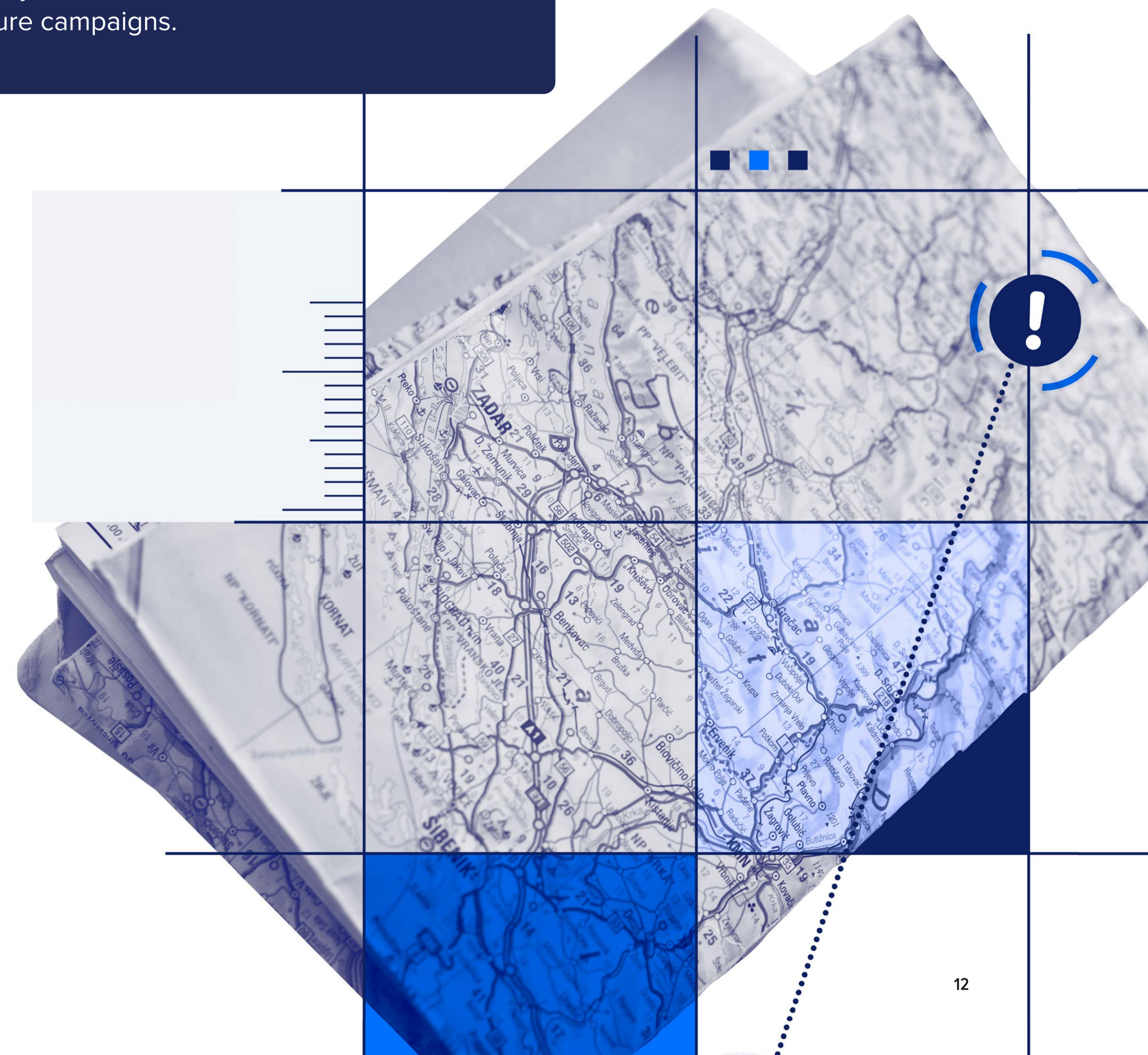
Shifting audience perceptions following a recent brand announcement

- **Supporting data:** Sentiment analysis from social listening tools tracking changes in tone and volume of brand mentions before and after the announcement.
- **Recommended action:** Identifying negative sentiment clusters and briefing spokespeople to proactively address concerns through targeted media engagement.

Update this document regularly as new data comes in. Over time it can help shape your strategic roadmap and serve as a guide to content creation, media outreach, and campaign planning.

Pro tip:

Don't be afraid to move quickly. Even a pattern across two or three data sources can be enough to test an approach. Launch a piece of content or pitch a story, then use the results to validate or refine future campaigns.



Part 4:

Develop Data-Backed Content

Develop Data-Backed Content

With your insights and key narrative themes ready to go, the next step is translating them into compelling storylines and bringing them to life through content, pitches, and messaging.

Craft your story and messaging

What's your big idea, the core narrative you're looking to own? The answer should link to your overall business goals and, ideally, fill a gap in the market conversation.

Build a story framework around these questions:

- **Core narrative:** What's the overarching story you're telling?
- **Supporting data:** Which key messages gained traction with media and audiences? Identify storylines that performed well and those that were lost.
- **Audience relevance:** Why does this matter to your audience right now?
- **Media fit:** Which media outlets, journalists, and formats align with this story?

Every piece of content you produce should connect back to these elements.

Pro tip:

Create a content library organized by theme, format, and channel. Document what made successful storylines work; the data points, messaging, and formats that drove results. From there, apply these lessons to content going forward.

Use data to justify pitch angles

Journalists are being pitched stories constantly. According to the 2025 State of the Media Report, 54% of reporters say their ideal pitch includes compelling data or statistics – so providing this will help you stand out from the crowd.

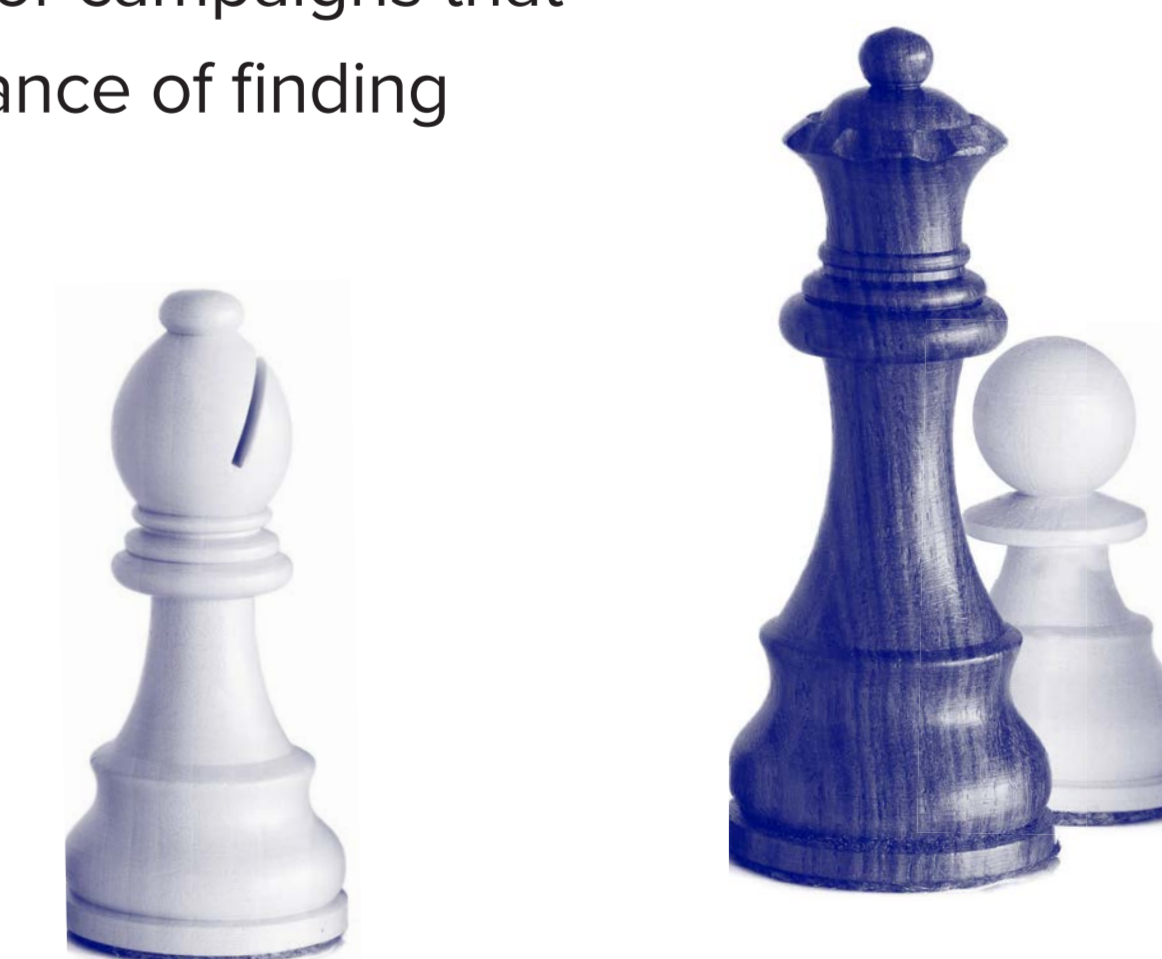
Statistics that demonstrate timeliness can be effective, e.g., “Search volume for soccer has increased 60% in six months” is better than saying “Soccer is becoming popular.”

Position spokespeople as experts who can contextualize your data. A CFO discussing financial news or a CTO explaining new technologies will add credibility. Place your data around broader industry trends, not just your brand.

Use search trends for topic selection

Search data can tell you what people are actively looking for. Tools like Google Trends, Ahrefs, and Trajaan can reveal rising queries, across traditional and AI-based search engines.

Look for topics with increasing search prominence but limited content. If you can fill that demand gap with content or campaigns that showcase your brand, you stand a good chance of finding an audience.



Let data guide messaging

Use A/B testing to stress-test various PR tactics – from subject lines for email pitches and press release headlines to LinkedIn thought leadership posts. Track which messages gain the most traction or generate responses. Analyze earned coverage with media monitoring to identify which proof points appear most frequently. If content about a specific topic is driving significantly more engagement, lean into that angle.

Tailor content formats for channel and audience

You need to keep your core storyline and messaging consistent, but how and where you tell it can change. For instance, B2B trade publications want depth and detail, while B2C outlets look for content with broader appeal.

On your own social channels, you may want to switch up your content to suit different platforms – e.g., LinkedIn allows for longer thought leadership content, Instagram favors visual assets, and Threads requires short-form sequential posts.

Think about what collateral you have and how to repurpose it intelligently. You might want to turn a whitepaper into LinkedIn posts, a webinar into a podcast interview, or exclusive research into earned media pitch angles.



Part 5:

Build Reporting and Dashboards

Build Reporting & Dashboards

Data-driven PR will only succeed if you look at the data consistently (see chapter one for a set of starter metrics to track) and give visibility to the right people.

With reporting it's worth thinking about rhythm and purpose: How often will you review performance? Who needs to see it? And what decisions should that reporting inform? Getting this cadence right matters more than building the perfect dashboard.

The value of regular reporting

Consistent reporting gives you three things ad hoc measurement can't:

- 1. A reliable guide to progress:** Trends only become visible over time. Six months of coverage tells you something is working in a way that a single month won't.
- 2. Proof of impact to stakeholders:** If you can show that a placed story drove 200 website visits and 10 demo requests, that's evidence that earns trust and resources. PR has historically struggled to connect its work to business outcomes; regular reporting gives you the opportunity to make that connection clear.
- 3. Alignment and accountability:** Sharing reports with marketing, sales, and product teams keeps everyone working with the same information, and creates a natural incentive to deliver on what you've committed to.

Start simple

When you're new to data dashboards, nothing's worse than an over-stuffed screen with too much information. Don't track everything from the start, instead narrow your focus to:

- Number of earned placements each month, split by publication tier
- Referral traffic to your site from those earned placements
- One action metric tied to your business goals, e.g., demo requests

Once you've built the habit of reviewing these consistently and stakeholders trust the data, layer more on top.

What to measure next

As your reporting evolves, widen your scope to track visibility by outlet type and topic to spot patterns. For example, if trade publications cover you consistently but mainstream outlets don't, that's a messaging gap worth addressing.

Further, you may want to track share of voice against competitors, not just by brand mention but by topic, so you can see who owns which narratives in your space. And use sentiment analysis to catch problems early – a negative news cycle can sometimes be offset by positive social conversation, but only if you're looking closely enough to act in time.

Pro tip:

Start with the questions your stakeholders care about, then build reports that answer them. Don't create big dashboards unless there's a need for it. A simple weekly or monthly slide deck is better than a dashboard nobody checks.

Part 6:

Optimize and Improve

Optimize and Improve

Bringing data into your PR strategy isn't a one-and-done thing, it's a continuous cycle of learning and improvement. Once you've established a data-based plan, the next step is to use the information you uncover to optimize and continuously improve processes.

Refine your approach

As your tactics mature, you'll need to keep adjusting your approach based on the data you're seeing and the resources to hand. Keep these four actions in mind as you look to get the most out of your campaigns:

1. Refine outreach targets: Use engagement history to prioritize journalists and outlets and identify contacts covering emerging trends. Consider segmenting media lists by topic, tier, and relationship strength for more strategic outreach.

2. Optimize timing and frequency: Use response data to identify the best days and times for pitching. Adjust your cadence to avoid pitch burnout for recipients and align content releases with news cycles and audience behavior patterns.

3. Shift resources to high-performing channels: Double down on outlets, formats, or topics that drive real results. Move budget away from low-performing tactics and test new channels based on audience behavior data.

4. Refresh and repurpose content: Update underperforming assets with new data, angles, or brand-appropriate design style. Repurpose high-performing content across different formats and platforms and retire content that no longer aligns with your strategy.

Build an improvement cycle

How do you go about elevating your work? Implement regular reviews and gather feedback from across your organization. Here's how to create a cycle of improvement:

Establish a reporting cadence: Hold regular insight reviews for tactical adjustments, quarterly deep dives for strategic planning, and annual benchmarking to measure progress year over year.

Run cross-business insight sessions: Bring together PR, marketing, product, and sales teams to review performance data, emerging trends, and brainstorm new ideas.

Document and scale: Create a shared insights bank tracking what worked and why, and build guides for repeatable success. Start small, prove ROI, then expand tools and capabilities to move from reactive to proactive PR.

Pro tip:

Once you've made it to this point, it's worth looking back to where you began. Review your data sources to ensure you're still asking informed questions and capturing the right information. As your PR strategy matures, the kind of data you'll need will evolve too.

Part 7:

Your 90-Day Data-Driven Plan

Your 90-Day Data-Driven PR Plan

Becoming data driven shouldn't require major upheaval. It just needs careful planning to take you through each step. Use this 90-day guide as a framework to build momentum.

By the end of these three months, you'll have a basic measurement framework, proven data-backed storylines, and a reporting cadence that demonstrates the true value of PR.

Days 1-30: Set the foundations

- Confirm two or three core business goals PR supports (Think: brand awareness, new product launches, or new CEO or executive hire announcements)
- Choose your starter metrics and create a simple tracking sheet (see 5 Starter PR Metrics to Track in chapter one)
- Sync with marketing and analytics teams on which tools you'll rely on for media monitoring, SEO, and web traffic data
- Run a baseline check: Capture where you stand on placements, share of voice for key topics, and traffic from earned media

Days 31-60: Turn data into insight and narratives

- Review your first 30 days of data to spot early patterns (topics, outlets, and format performance)
- Define "insight themes" that tie to business goals (e.g., "we want to win more mainstream consumer coverage")
- Build data-backed narratives anchored in those themes, including a core narrative and supporting proof points
- Launch a small test: A focused pitch campaign, a thought leadership piece, or a mini research angle you can bring to media

Days 61-90: Report, optimize, and scale what works

- Produce a simple one-page report for stakeholders showing: What you did, the metrics that shifted and what that tells you
- Identify highest-performing outlets, topics, or formats and double down on them for the next cycle
- Refine your media list based on engagement and responses, and retire low-value tactics
- Document your process and wins so you can repeat: E.g., how you chose themes, built storylines, and measured impact

Final Thoughts

Final Thoughts

A clear data-driven PR strategy will completely transform how you work. Imagine moving from guesswork to uncovering true insight that leads to concrete business results – that’s what you have the potential to unlock.

Teams don’t have to use every tool or data source on day one. You can start modestly and build momentum by isolating an overlooked aspect of your work, use data to prove its value, then roll out into other areas.

Data should inform your PR decisions, not replace instincts entirely. Keep in mind that the best campaigns will always come from blending unique human storytelling with data-backed insights.



About Cision

Cision is the global leader in consumer and media intelligence, engagement, and communication solutions. We equip PR and corporate communications, marketing, and social media professionals with the tools they need to excel in today's data-driven world. Our deep expertise, exclusive data partnerships, and award-winning brands and products, including [CisionOne](#), [Brandwatch](#), [PR Newswire](#), and [Trajaan](#) enable over 75,000 companies and organizations, including 84% of the Fortune 500, to see and be seen, understand and be understood by the audiences that matter most to them.

Find out how CisionOne can help your team team integrate media intelligence into your workflow.

[SPEAK TO AN EXPERT](#)

