

What Did You Say?

Plan for tomorrow's PR with a communications audit today

by Julie Jones

One of the most difficult aspects of public relations is ascertaining whether the intended audience received the intended message.

You know what you said, but did that attorney, student, judge, or professor get the message?

Did they care?

What about all the other messages—intentional or not—your library emits every day?

What is the larger impression you are communicating about your library in the aggregate?

If you don't know the answer to these questions, a communications audit may be in order.

What is an Audit?

A communications audit is a systematic evaluation of all the messages—both internal and external—an institution disseminates. It is an objective analysis of how an organization is communicating on every level that ultimately determines what is working well, what needs improvement, and whether any communication vacuums need to be filled.

For a library, the external audit may include every public aspect of the establishment, including signage, displays, brochures, e-mail lists, voice messages, Web sites, blogs, podcasts, vodcasts, service at the circulation and reference desks, posters, newsletters, special events, and library design. In short, it includes every potential avenue by which the public interacts with your library.

In-House v. Consultant

Deciding whether to conduct an audit internally or to hire a communications consultant is one of the first orders of business. An internal audit will likely be less expensive and may engage staff, potentially building better communication within the organization. However, it will not bring an optimal level of objectivity and experience and will take time and resources away from professional responsibilities.

Engaging an outside consultant will bring objectivity and expertise to the project, as well as time and availability. Moreover, your intended audience will likely speak more freely and honestly with an authoritative and independent third party, thereby garnering the best data. Many experts stress that while internal audits are possible, they are

not recommended specifically because of their inherent lack of objectivity. However, the short-term cost for an external audit will be greater.

In either case, creating a request for proposal (RFP) is an integral part of the process. When looking to hire an external expert, the RFP is essential for laying the groundwork for the contract and defining expectations. If you're conducting the audit internally, an RFP will help the organization focus its intentions and conceptualize specific desired outcomes of the project.

That said, what does a communications audit entail? There are five primary steps.

Step One: Understand Strategic Communication Practices

Knowing the standards for strategic communication establishes a bar by which to measure your efforts. These are practices that may be done by a single individual or an entire team. Adapted from common strategic communication practices for not-for-profits, these questions, organized by category, will help you determine your strategic communication practices.

Strategy: What is your communications vision, and how does it relate to your organization's mission?

Are your communication goals well-defined and measurable? Have you identified your specific target audience(s), including key decision makers? Are your messages specific, clear, persuasive, and reflective of audience values rather than



institutional values? Are your messages communicated through an appropriate medium?

Implementation: Are materials attractive, accessible, and varied for maximum exposure and visibility? Have you aligned with key stakeholders who can carry your message? Are these key stakeholders trained in your message and consistent in their deliveries? Is outreach to multiple audiences regular and sustained? Are activities consistently monitored and evaluated?

Support and Integration: Does your institution's management support communication as an integral aspect of the organization's success? Are sufficient resources dedicated to communications? Are communication considerations integrated throughout the organization? Are all staff members mindful of communication efforts and strategies? [Adapted from *Strategic Communications Audits*, see "Further Reading" on this page.]

Step Two: Identify Levels of Practice

For each standard of communication practice investigated in step one, an organization may be engaging in that practice at a different level. According to Julia Coffman, there are five basic levels of performance.

First, ad hoc practices occur where few staff and resources are assigned to a communication practice, but success may be achieved by one or two highly motivated individuals.

Second, planned practices are deliberate and managed, but still irregular, with perhaps sub-optimal resource allocation.

Third, institutionalized practices are routine and have been improved over time based on qualitative evidence, and key players have developed some proficiency.

Fourth, evaluated practices have been analyzed based on quantitative data, and the activity's success rate can be accurately predicted.

Finally, optimized practices are continuously evaluated and improved over a considerable period of time with sufficient resources.

Step Three: Assess Current Performance

Audits typically utilize a number of information-gathering methods to evaluate an organization's communication portfolio. Comprehensive surveys, often called communication satisfaction questionnaires (CSQs), of all library constituents assess the organization's main communications vehicles. Focus

groups with primary library users delve more deeply into challenges and specifics. Individual interviews with key stakeholders and representative patrons provide more detailed information and can reinforce or nuance survey and focus group results. An objective review of all marketing efforts of the institution as a whole is the final piece to the puzzle.

Further Reading

"Conducting a Comprehensive Communications Audit," by Barbie E. Keiser and Pamela H. Stein (2006) www.sla.org/PDFs/2006CPKeiser.pdf.

"Strategic Communications Audits," by Julia Coffman (Oct. 2004) www.mediaevaluationproject.org/WorkingPaper1.pdf.

"What's the Message? Is Anyone Listening? A Communications Audit can Help you Find Out," by Peggy Barber and Linda Wallace (2002) www.ssdesign.com/librarypr/content/p030402a.shtml.

Steps one, two, and three may then be systematically combined into a single matrix. Creating a graph displaying communications practices against levels of practice, the performance assessment will show at what level the organization is performing for each item. It should provide an at-a-glance view of the organization's communications strengths and weaknesses.

Step Four: Identify Areas for Improvement

A final report is then created, which discusses the audit's methodology, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. It is a document that the library should use as it moves into the future in a systematic manner. There will likely be suggestions that can be easily and immediately implemented. Others requiring additional planning and consideration may be implemented in the short term. Longer term initiatives, those requiring substantial planning, new skill sets, and resources, may be contemplated for the future. The audit should also let the organization know what it is doing right.

After areas in need of improvement are identified, they should be prioritized. An extensive list of deficiencies may lead

to an overwhelmed staff and paralysis. The organization should select the most important ideas and focus on those. The report should also provide specific guidance on how to enhance the communication at issue. The data itself will point to concrete steps to take.

Libraries, and any other institution for that matter, should not expect to perform at optimized capacity for all practice areas. The purpose of the audit is to see a clear picture of what is being communicated and how, and to what effect. Improvements can then be implemented as necessary and feasible. It is an opportunity to take stock and plan with eyes wide open.

Step Five: Refine and Repeat

Major communications audits are typically done approximately every five years, or when an organization redefines its mission, changes its leaders, or experiences an emergency. Recent notable examples include the University of Colorado, which conducted a communications audit after restructuring its communications department in the wake of a few high profile controversies. Lloyds TSB conducted an internal communications audit to assess its methods of communicating available benefit packages to its employees.

To receive optimal benefit from an audit, the library will regularly review the most recent audit to stay on track and clear about audience values and desires. The audit, after all, is more about our users and less about us and our preferences.

Final Thoughts

A major benefit of a communications audit, and the information gathering stage in particular, is the opportunity to educate the library's users. Surveys, focus groups, and interviews all foster opportunities to raise public awareness about your library's products and services. Furthermore, people often feel an increased sense of ownership when their input and opinions are actively solicited.

Even if your library lacks the time or resources necessary to conduct a full-fledged communications audit, conducting an informal inventory of the totality of your library's communications can be a fruitful effort. It may allow you to gain a clearer view of the forest, even when trees are a daily part of life. ■

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