



Get started on your communication audit

There's no better time than the present

by Karen Vahouny, ABC

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If you’ve been thinking about doing a communication audit, now’s the time. The challenging economy is likely just the catalyst you need to take an objective look at your communication organization and activities to determine if they are as effective and efficient as possible. What better way to demonstrate to management that you are focused on return on investment and not falling into the trap of making assumptions or stale thinking?

Just ask Wendy Heshka, ABC, a partner at Communication Solutions. Based in British Columbia, her firm

hired a consultant to conduct an audit and survey clients, prospects and influencers. What they learned made a real difference—in dollars and cents.

“The findings shaped considerable changes and facilitated strategic growth for our firm,” says Heshka. She said the audit pinpointed the attributes their clients most valued and how the agency differed from its competitors.

Heshka and her team made a number of changes. They refined the language they used to define themselves, reworked their web site and redecorated the office to reflect their brand

personality. They reorganized the agency, emphasized cross-selling, and set up quarterly “coffee chats” with clients, prospects and influencers. One of the real benefits, she says, was that the audit opened communication with their client com-

munity—and brought new business opportunities.

“We’ve grown 100 percent [in revenue] in the past year,” she says, “and the audit was a significant factor.”

set of data—e.g., x percent feel this way and y percent feel that way...but the focus groups tell you why they feel that way,” he says.

Audits: A best practice

If the bottom-line results haven’t convinced you and you need more ammunition, consider this: Auditing your communication is a best practice. Janet Nagly works for Deloitte Australia in Sydney and is in the process of planning her firm’s audit, most of which will be done in-house.

“We want to learn which communications are working well for the entire company so that we can eliminate the ones that aren’t effective,” Nagly says. “We are hoping to uncover which activities are working well in one business unit so we can share those ideas with other units.”

Elsa Mercado of Scotiabank Mexico in Mexico City did a two-part audit to evaluate how employees perceived the bank’s communication channels, and the changes made as a result yielded demonstrable financial benefits as well as improved communication.

“We started with management interviews and employee focus groups to assess whether the current tools were useful, attractive, interesting and clear, and get their views on timing and frequency,” she explains. “We decided to use an outside firm to do the audit, because we thought employees would be more open and candid.”

They surveyed about 8 percent of the workforce, and the findings were revealing.

Audit or assessment?

An audit is often referred to as a snapshot of an organization’s health. But it’s not a “silver bullet” that will cure all your communication woes. And there’s no one-size-fits-all approach. Audits can be small and targeted (like a web audit), and they can be focused on internal or external audiences. They can be comprehensive, covering the breadth of communication activities and audiences. Generally, a more thorough audit includes a review of the communication plan and policies; an analysis of communication vehicles; interviews with management and key constituents; and an audience survey. The research is followed by a summary, highlighting strengths, weaknesses and recommendations for improvement. Audits don’t have to be expensive, and they can be done in-house or by an outside professional. Most communicators agree that doing an audit every year or two is invaluable.

Michael Zimet, president of Dialogue Solutions in Newtown, Pennsylvania, prefers the term *assessment* to *audit*; *assessment*, he says, is “infinitely more descriptive because you’re assessing the effectiveness of your communication strategy and programs.”

Zimet generally works on internal assessments, using both surveys and focus groups. “Surveys provide a wonderful

What an audit can tell you

- What are your communication strengths and what needs to be improved?
- Are your messages clearly communicated?
- What do your customers think of your communication vehicles?
- Are your media relations efforts successful?
- Are your communications linked directly to your organization’s goals?
- Is your communication structure aligned with the organization’s goals and staffed to provide the greatest return on investment?

Steps to consider before conducting an audit

- Identify what you want to learn. Do you want to understand perceptions about the organization, views on the communication style and practices, effectiveness of selected communication tools, or all of the above?
- Get senior management’s support, from the perspective of budget, time and transparency of results.
- Determine if there is existing survey data that can be factored into the audit, possibly eliminating some steps and cost.
- Give advance notice to the people who will be interviewed or surveyed, to explain the purpose, timetable and plans.
- Develop or review all interview and survey questions.
- Evaluate the results, and develop recommendations.
- Present the results and plan to senior management.
- Communicate the summary of findings to your constituents, and let them know what changes will be made as a result.

What an audit can include

- A review of the communication plan and policies
- A review of communication structure and staffing
- Analysis of communication vehicles
- Interviews with senior managers, communication staff and other key constituents
- News media analysis
- Audience surveys
- An assessment of strengths and weaknesses

“Employees said that they received too many media,” Mercado notes. “For instance, there were a number of magazines, and employees felt they didn’t understand what they should do with the information. They were also concerned about the cost to produce so many communication materials.”

Mercado and her team subsequently reviewed all their organizational communication tools and eliminated nearly all of the magazines, expanded their electronic media tools (including a new e-newsletter), and improved their bulletin board program. The ROI result: “The gains associated with cutting the magazines more than covered the costs of our audit,” she says.

Research is critical

Mari Lee, CEO of Development Communication Solutions in South Africa, conducts an audit for every client. She believes there’s a real value in using both focus groups and surveys, and related an experience with a client that had two troubled areas of business. One of the areas they explored was whether their name created problems in the marketplace, but survey results showed the name was viewed positively. Phone calls to constituents revealed that lack of awareness was the problem. Lee and team developed a communication strategy to raise awareness, beginning with a detailed communication map listing tools and frequency.

In six months, the awareness level rose to 100 percent, and more important, said Lee, they could demonstrate that awareness was directly connected to

ROI. “In that time, our client gained increased donations and new partners.”

Audits may be prompted by a question about the best organizational structure for a department or division. Danny Diehl, public information director for Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, started an audit process three years ago when considering the best way to organize the function. Following an extensive internal audit, which included face-to-face interviews, surveys and a task force, the decision was made to shift the public information officers previously assigned to various departments into one centralized group. The audit also uncovered that employees were suffering from e-mail overload, so Diehl’s team consolidated e-mail communication into one weekly distribution.

He is now auditing the quality of their services and evaluating whether the reorganization has been positive. He hopes the audit also will yield answers on how his team can raise their scores in response to an annual community survey question: “Does the county do a good job communicating?”

Actions and opportunities

An audit can be eye-opening, though its true value comes from the actions that are taken as a result. Tracy Finneman, marketing manager for the North Dakota Department of Commerce, recalls that a senior management retreat led to a decision to survey all employees, delving into staff satisfaction and understanding of the orga-

nization’s mission and values. The findings, she says, were no surprise: Communication was the No. 1 priority for improvement, with employees offering 15 pages of suggestions. The response of greatest concern related to whether the organization was doing a good job in communicating decisions that affected each employee—for example, job openings were promoted externally, without any prior notification to employees. The department created an intranet to address this and other issues brought to light.

“Our senior team took the survey seriously,” Finneman says, “including the decision to tie our compensation to a positive movement in the next year’s data. The follow-up results are in, and communication has improved significantly. There’s been a direct connection between employee satisfaction and improvement in all departments on the delivery of their services.”

Back to the economy

Diehl believes that an audit can be especially useful in this tough economic environment. “It can help justify and hone your team’s products and services,” he says. “In tough times, tough choices need to be made. An audit can help you really understand what’s most important to your customers before you start cutting services.”

Whether you want to demonstrate your commitment to ROI or build an excellent communication practice or function—or both—look no further. Start with an audit. Don’t let the economy stop you. ●

find out more

Get the inside scoop on the research efforts behind Gold Quill Award-winning case studies from Deloitte Australia, Scotiabank Mexico and others in *Best Practices in Communication Planning and Implementation 2008*, available at www.iabc.com/knowledge.

about the author

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