

Ten Steps for Conducting a Communications Audit

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What are you communicating? Are your communications effective?

A Communications Audit will answer these questions. A Communications Audit is a systematic research method, which will identify the strengths and weaknesses of your current internal and external communications.

An effective Communications Audit will identify:

- how past communications were handled
- key audiences, what they currently know about your business, service, product or organization, what they need and want to know and how they prefer to be reached
- strengths and weakness in current communications programs
- untapped opportunities for future communications

A Communications Audit asks:

- What are our current goals and objectives for communications?
- How well is the current Communications Plan working?
- Are our messages clear and consistent? Do we have a coordinated graphic identity?
- Are we reaching key audiences with our messages and moving them to action?
- What communications have been most effective?
- What do customers think of our communications?
- Do our communications support our overall strategic plan for our business or organization?
- What would make our communications more effective in the future?
- What communications opportunities are we missing?

You may either conduct a self-assessment or hire a professional to perform the audit. These 10 steps will help you complete your Communications Audit.

Step 1: Determine key areas to be audited.

Look at both internal and external communications. Include everything from your standard identity pieces (business cards, letterhead, logo and signage) to promotional materials to news coverage received. Don't forget to analyze your Web site and other online marketing materials.

Step 2: Choose your research methods.

To conduct your audit, select among numerous research methods such as one-on-one interviews, focus groups, online or telephone surveys and media analysis.

Step 3: Collect and evaluate your past communications.

Spread all of last year's communications pieces—internal and external—on a conference room table. Ask:

- How did we inform the public about our business? What worked? What didn't?
- Were our graphics coordinated and messages consistent?
- Who were our key audiences?
- What were our key messages?
- Did we reach our audiences with the right messages?
- What media coverage did we receive? Was it effective? What media opportunities did we miss?
- Did we successfully tell our story in our communications?

Take the time to analyze each communications piece. Create a written list of what worked, and what didn't. Survey a few trusted staff and clients. What did they appreciate and why? What didn't work for them?

Step 4: Look outward: Query your customers.

Choose neutral researchers to query your customers. Electronic surveys, one-on-one interviews, telephone interviews or focus groups are a few techniques. Select a limited number of questions to analyze your communications from your customer's point of view. Ask: What are your impressions of our communications? What do you think of our graphics, identity pieces, Web site and other marketing materials? How could we improve our communications? Remember the saying, "a complaint is a gift." (This is the title of Janelle Barlow and Claus Moller's classic, highly recommended book about responding to customer feedback.)

Step 5: Look outward: Query your community.

What does the community know and perceive about your organization? Take a broader look at the impact of your communications. Again, ask questions to reveal public perceptions. This can be achieved by hiring a research firm or an objective person to conduct a formal community survey or by informally interviewing community members.

Step 6: Look inward: Query your staff and volunteers.

Don't forget your internal audiences. Collect their opinions about your communications. Ask: What are your reactions to communications during the past year? What was effective? What wasn't? What could be improved? Did internal documents serve your needs? What future communications could help you function as part of the organization? You will need to determine if all communications were understood by all internal audiences. And examine how your internal audiences present your organization to the public. Do all employees have an accurate, consistent "elevator speech" about your organization? Do you speak as one voice?

Step 7: Analyze your media coverage.

Keep all your press coverage in a media binder. This can include television and radio tapes and/or transcripts and Web coverage. As in Step 3, spread your media coverage around a table. Include articles and paid ads. Look at the frequency and reach of your coverage. What is the tone and impact? Are your key messages being promoted? Are your audiences being reached? What media opportunities have you missed? To oversee coverage, contract with a news monitoring service or use Google's free Media Alerts to track your coverage in the press, blogs and Web sites.

Step 8: Conduct a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis.

Pull your data together from the previous steps. Do a SWOT analysis of your communications using a simple chart:

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS


Analyze how you can capitalize on strengths, stop weaknesses, maximize opportunities and defend against threats.

Step 9: Think like a communications consultant.

Based on your findings, what would you recommend to yourself for future communications? Select a team to help you analyze your audit results and strategize about future actions.

Step 10: Put together a plan for future communications.

Use your research as the starting point for creating a Communications Plan for your organization. Either create the plan internally, or hire a professional to design and implement your plan.

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