

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I SAY?

THE COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT By Wendy Sue Lyttle, CAE



Associations produce a wide array of materials for external distribution. Stepping back to consider the various audiences you are targeting with those materials, and identifying the best ways to reach them, is a best practice that should be employed by everyone.

Quantifiable data obtained through member research can indicate how effective your organization is in communicating with your membership. Typical surveys ask members to rate various publications, their association's effectiveness in advocacy, whether or not they read information sent to them, and if so, via what distribution channels. Others ask if the information they receive from the association is relevant. So what is wrong with this picture?

Why not look beyond the good news or bad news factor in your opinion polls and become more progressive in the cycle of communicating to members? In today's world of infor-

mation overload, it's foolish to assume that you are the only one communicating with your target audience. The fact is associations are competing for their members' attention. Your members' daily focus is not your association. This critical fact must be factored into your communication strategy.

When working with clients, one of my main goals is to identify the effectiveness of their messaging. Typically we find an association communicates with their members ten times a year through various communication vehicles. In one case, an association had ten communication vehicles disseminating information to members - their members were receiving information from the association 8 to 11 times per month or 94 to 132 times annually! Another association was sending out mountains of information but in no collective order. Yet another association was targeting a very selective market with the same general message and materials that were sent to all of their stakeholders.

Associations often know what they want to accomplish – they have strong programs, but fail to clearly engage their key audiences due to inconsistent messaging. Unclear communications consistently fail to articulate who the association is and what the association is trying to achieve. Again, it's all about effectiveness.

Count up the number of communication vehicles your association has disseminating information. Then ask yourself how effective you are at engaging (or disengaging) members based on your frequency of communication.

Associations are failing to address the dimensional change that their demographics indicate is present in their environment. Another shortcoming, in certain sectors of the association world, is that they simply don't understand who their key audience is - they want to please everyone who interacts with their association, but in times of limited

resources or instant market changes, generalizing messages to all isn't the answer.

How is your association responding to the diversity challenge? Remember, the words and phrases used by your association are critical to your success – they are directly tied to membership growth and membership retention. Your talking points must also clearly articulate what you want your members to do or perceive as benefits of membership.

The Communication Audit

A communication audit is a systematic and comprehensive analysis of your association's communications. It will provide answers to the following key questions:

- Are we accomplishing what we set out to do?
- Are we achieving our communications goals?
- Do our messages convey our positioning?
- Are our messages in line with our mission, vision and values?

Conducting a forensic audit of your membership communication materials is a must. The reference to a forensic audit simply means being honest (brutal if needed), encompassing every avenue of communications, leaving political ownership of certain communications to the side, and incorporating a team effort. It is about reviewing the clarity and consistency of your messages and your association's branding.

Communication audits can be assigned to internal staff if their expertise fits the outcomes. However, some associations find outsourcing this project to an experienced communications company results in a more objective approach to the process and the injection of new ideas.

Defining the objectives of the audit is the first step. The goals may include: consistent branding of all materials; refreshing materials; looking at effective messaging; or, implementing a new best practice process for your association.

The audit process should flow like this:

1. Compile all existing communication materials

Your audit encompasses all written, spoken and electronic interaction with your internal audiences (your members) and external audiences (partner organizations, beneficiaries of your programs, investors that may include foundations, corporations, government, etc.). I have categorized association members as your internal audience which is an important factor to remember.

An important step in this process is to ensure when gathering these materials they be organized into your target audience or segmented markets both internally and externally.

2. Identify your target markets

Demographic changes within association memberships have resulted in the creation of entirely new marketing approaches designed to engage and grow association memberships. Diversity of members is very prevalent today. If your association has not yet addressed this fact, it is vital to your communication audit. Depending on the industry sector your association represents, your audience will include:

- Members – split into segments
- Non-members
- Related associations
- Competing associations
- Educators, federal, regional and local governments
- And more...

3. Reviewing your messaging

Are you consistent in language used to describe your association and its work? The words and phrases used to talk about your association need to be relevant – they need to highlight the benefits and at the same time, minimize the real and perceived challenges your association faces. What are the talking points in your present communications materials? Do you devote more time to justifying the value of membership rather than member needs? Remember that your messages must reflect the needs of your members, not the needs of the association.

4. Branding of materials

Look at the way your brand is represented in your communications materials. Is there a consistent look and feel throughout? Are there guidelines for using logos and colours guiding future creative materials and templates to ensure consistent branding and messaging? Does your logo and tag line support the image you are conveying through your written and verbal communications? Members expect consistency in materials delivered by their association.

Developing a communications guide that can be used internally by staff and the Board ensures clarity in your expectations about how the brand will be conveyed.

5. Talk to key stakeholders

A focus group of key stakeholders can help identify needs, perspectives, opinions and areas of improvement as well. The intent is

to ensure that you don't make assumptions about what your stakeholders want, or their interpretation of your key messages, etc. Ask questions. And listen!

Review any relevant polling data through member surveys as well.

6. Develop recommendations

The outcome of the audit will be valuable recommendations for developing a new communication strategy, or the restructuring of the communications functions along with guidelines that will have a positive budget impact.

7. Put the audit into action

Establish timelines from the outcomes of your audit. Separate the action objectives into logical time periods (monthly, weekly, etc.) and assign accountability for each action. If your audit results in a recommendation to upgrade or revamp your communications vehicles, budget impacts will need to be considered. You may also need to consider working with an outside firm to develop or refine your logo and colour schemes, or engage a company specializing in creative messaging.

8. Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate

Establish methods for measuring results. Check with your internal and external audiences to determine what is working and what needs modification. Evaluate your successes and challenges on a regular basis to ensure that stumbling blocks are addressed – successes should be shared and built upon for member engagement. Be honest about changes that may need to be made and make them.

Earlier I noted the dimensional change that is impacting many associations today. If your association has not entertained or implemented a forensic communication audit, what has stopped you from assessing and improving your communications?

If your association has gone through an extensive communication audit in the past two years, it is time to evaluate, evaluate, and evaluate again. Your steps will be less intense, but don't assume all is working well because of your initial investment.



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