

The Good Kind of Audit

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What can you learn from a communications audit, and how can it lead to actionable results?

By Dan Goldfischer

Frequently, when you hear the word "audit," you think of the Internal Revenue Service and that little bit of income you didn't report 12 years ago. But unlike the IRS experience, a communications audit can be good for you—and your association.

This was the topic of a roundtable held on the third day of the Association Media & Publishing Annual Meeting in June. Al

Rickard, CAE, president of Association Vision, was the facilitator.

Rickard has held senior communication, publishing, and marketing positions at the Greater Washington Society of Association Executives, National Food Processors Association, Snack Food Association, International Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus, and ASAE.



He began by encouraging participants to think of an audit as a "strategic communication analysis," adding that audits can be limited to just an association's publications or be as wide as the entire communication program, including marketing, public relations, and staff communications.

A good communications audit includes the audit team talking to senior staff, sending an extensive survey to a random sample of members (Rickard's surveys are 25 questions), and conducting in-depth telephone surveys of volunteer leaders and regular members. These research methods provide powerful insights about the association's communication program. An audit also includes a review of the association's strategic plan, communication materials, the competitive environment, past research, available metrics (especially web metrics), and more.

Research results and analysis of the reviewed materials are then integrated into what is typically an 80- to 100-page report that includes both strategic and tactical recommendations. Rickard says an audit takes about two to three months to complete.

A good communication audit, he says, also determines the following:

- Is the communication strategy is right?
- Are all key audience segments being served?
- Are the messages consistent?
- Is the content is appropriate?
- Do any of the communications overlap?
- Is the mix of communication vehicles serving the association in the best way possible?

Today's communication audits also delve into the use of social media and other communication vehicles not entirely under the association's control that might affect the organization's reputation and brand. In addition, the audit often includes an analysis of other publications in the same field.

"The focus of the audit should be on making actionable recommendations," Rickard said. "However, all suggestions may not be politically possible."

A Balancing Act

A participant in the discussion asked Rickard what is usually the biggest concern to come out of a communications audit. "Member complaints about association e-mails," he replied. "There are too many of them, they seem to come randomly, and there is often little coordination." The answer to that problem, he added, is to create a good communication plan and better coordinate outbound e-mails.

Another common issue he finds is that members don't have much time. For association media professionals, the communication conundrum is that members need to see a message many times to get them to pay attention, but then they complain about too much e-mail and other communications from the organization. "Messaging is a balancing act," he noted.

Another participant asked Rickard what is the one thing associations are most surprised about in their communication audit findings. The answer: How little their websites are used. "Associations put lots of work into their 'treasure troves of knowledge,'" noted Rickard, and then "executives are surprised when the audit shows that a typical member visits the site once a month, maybe to look up when the annual meeting is." The audit gets associations to focus on how to present the right information on the website and use web metrics to track usage.

And what is the biggest mistake he's found in the actual communication vehicles? "Writing too long, and saying too much," he said, although he did note that this is happening more now in association marketing materials than in their publications.

"Everything needs a focused and strong message," he said. "But that doesn't mean providing less information or fewer resources. For example, a printed piece can send people to an online source to find more information, and an online publication can have lots of links."

If your boss wants a lot of information that would make a piece too long, Rickard advises asking him or her about their own personal experience with "too much information" and what types of communications they pay attention to. That might help winnow things down.

The bottom line on the value of a communications audit is that it should help align communications with organizational strategy—and it might be a catalyst for change in an association's media mix.

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