

# Communication News

*Advancing Your Success*

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## **Auditing Your Communications for Impact**

**By Lisa Junker**

Perhaps you're looking for a quick "temperature check" to see how your association's PR, publishing, or Web efforts are doing. Maybe you suspect there are problems with your communications efforts and you want to identify the weaknesses and how to fix them.

Or perhaps you're like us at the American Industrial Hygiene Association, Fairfax, Virginia. In 2003 we decided the time was right to do a thorough evaluation of our overall program. We wanted to find out just how well we were communicating about our association's most important issues and then establish a baseline for improving our communications program.

No matter why you're conducting an audit, here are several steps to help you ramp up quickly.

**1. Decide between outsourcing and "insourcing."** Both approaches have pros and cons.

Hiring an outside consultant to conduct your audit brings an objective viewpoint as well as a fresh set of eyes. Immersed as you are in your own programs and subject matter, you may find that projects whose purpose seems obvious to you may not be as intuitive to a consultant—or, in fact, to your target audiences.

In addition, a consultant may help you garner more useful responses to interview questions. Although members, volunteers, or trade reporters may not feel comfortable criticizing your association's communications to you directly, perhaps they would be more open with a third party.

On the other hand, as a newcomer to your subject matter, an outside consultant may need much more time to get up to speed—and time translates to money. If you need quick results, or if your budget is bare-bones, an internal audit may be more appropriate. Consider bringing in staff members or volunteers who don't normally work in communications to get some of that fresh viewpoint.

**What we did at AIHA:** In fall 2003, we contracted with Association Vision, a communications, PR, and marketing firm in Chantilly, Virginia, to conduct a full audit of our program. The audit took about 10 weeks and cost \$6,000—a price that was set because the audit was the first step in a longer-term contract. (If you're not getting the service as part of a larger package, you can probably expect to pay more.)

Following the communications audit, Association Vision worked with us on message development, identification of key audiences, and preparation and ongoing implementation of communications plans for our annual conference and the association overall.

**2. Get everything in place.** Gather the following information before your audit is scheduled to begin:

- Contact information for board members, other key volunteers, and key staff.
- Contact information for key external contacts (such as trade media).
- Archives of all major competitors' publications.
- Archives of all your publications. Be sure to include one-time publications such as your annual report or conference publications. For online communications, the Web address of the archive page is probably sufficient.
- A password to your Web site's members-only section (if you have one).
- Your association's strategic plan, mission statement, and vision statement.
- Archives of press releases.
- Archives of press clippings.
- Job descriptions for all communications-related positions in your association.
- Communications budget information, ideally trended over the last two to five years.
- Internal policy and procedure documents related to communications.
- Recent survey information from your membership and/or other key audiences (if available).

For the various archive items, a six-month supply is probably sufficient. But for materials you publish bimonthly, quarterly, or even less frequently, you may want to go back a full year to give the auditors a better sense of the material.

**What we did:** We learned the importance of this step the hard way. On several occasions, our audit was delayed while staff searched for records or materials our auditors needed.

**3. Consider what you want to get from your audit.** Be clear about your needs at the outset so your auditors can allocate time and resources accordingly. Here's a list of subjects our audit covered. For a faster or more targeted audit, you may either choose only a few of them or focus in depth on some and touch lightly or not at all on others.

- Major issues facing our association and the profession it represents.
- Our messages (as currently presented in our publications, mission statement, and Web site).
- Key audiences.
- The competitive environment (related associations).
- Trade press perceptions and coverage.
- Our organizational structure and how it relates to communications.
- Our communications vehicles.

***What we did:*** As you can see, our audit covered a number of areas that weren't directly part of our communications department's responsibilities. But all the areas do have an impact on our work.

When we got our results, I found the information on press perceptions particularly interesting—it showed us several opportunities to better serve the media that regularly cover our issues. And the analysis of our competitive environment helped us gauge our resource allocations for communications/PR in comparison to what our competitors did.

**4. Keep an open mind.** Whether you're working with an internal or external auditor, you will certainly hear things you disagree with or don't want to face. It's important to set aside your immediate reactions, listen carefully, and take time to consider that your thinking may be wrong.

***What we did:*** When our audit suggested improvements in our magazine, it was difficult to put aside my personal attachment to the publication and acknowledge the relevance of the comments. But once I did listen, I found several ways to improve the magazine—which is the result I was aiming for. Thanks to the recommendations, we're reworking the design of our cover and table of contents to make it easier for readers to find what they're looking for.

**5. Finally, think long term.** Ideally, a communications audit is just the first step in a longer process of making your program more effective. If you simply perform the audit, read the report, and file it, you're failing to mine its full value. But if you read it and use the findings to make strategic improvements to your communications program, you can bring your work up to a new level.

**What we did:** Within three months of receiving our 65-page report, we overhauled our communications with our industry trade media to provide them with better and more personalized support. A year later, in cooperation with our consulting firm, we've developed key messages for our communications efforts and provided media training to AIHA leaders to help them communicate these key messages. The firm has also developed lists of publications read by our key audiences and have begun targeted communications with them.

For us at AIHA, the goal of our communications audit has been better results from a reduced budget. We're now well on our way.

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