Conducting A Communications Audit
Paralyzing nightmare or...
…Liberating Dream Come True?
Schedule

• Introductions
• The Basics of Audits
  – What, How, Why, Who
• Process
• Step by Step Non Profit Audit
• Practical Application
  – Case Study
• Reporting Formats
• Brand Standards
• Your Situations
Gary Gerdemann - Vice President Of Account Services
A seasoned public relations pro working for some of the biggest corporate names in America, Gary leads our team of PR professionals. He has expertly handled some of the toughest PR issues from national consumer product launches to EPA lawsuits; from Initial Public Offerings to long-term communication strategies. As a corporate PR veteran and entrepreneur, Gary sees public relations as a means to growing a business and is equally comfortable in the newsroom and the boardroom. Gary is a graduate of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas.
Introductions

- Name
- Organization
- Organization mission
- Why are you here?
- Interesting fact about you
Why Non Profits Don’t Do Marketing

- What is marketing?
- We don't advertise.
- It's not in the budget.
- Who's going to do it?
- We're amazing. Everyone knows that.
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The Basics

• A methodical examination and review
• An evaluation of a person, organization, system, process, project or product.
• Performed to ascertain the validity and reliability of information; to provide an assessment of a system's internal control.
• The goal of an audit is to express an opinion on the person/organization/system in question.
• Repeatable, measurable
Communications Audit

Strategic communications audits are, at their core, an evaluation tool. Unlike most evaluation tools or practices, however, they do not focus on the results or outcomes of an organization’s communications practices after they are implemented or among their target audiences. Rather, they focus on the organization itself, its practice and capacity, and how the organization has positioned the communications function.
Why?

• Organize the communications of an organization
• Identify process or lack of process
  – Strengths and weaknesses
• Identify and prioritize or re-prioritize audiences
• Stakeholder research: what they know, need to know, want to know, how they prefer to be reached
• Untapped opportunities…identify gaps
• Drive consistency
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 stakeholders think of our communications?
- Do our communications support our overall strategic plan?
- What would make our communications more effective?
- What communications opportunities are we missing?
Decision Factors

- $$$
- Time
- Expected outcome
- Objectivity
- Political
Internal versus External Assessment

*Internal*
- Lower cost
- Engages the organization and can gain support for communications goals

*External*
- Objectivity
- Time/availability
- Knowledge from other organizations
- Credibility/expertise
Potential Communications Audit Methods
Regardless of whether the audit is done internally or externally, a common set of methods can be used to gather data needed to make assessments about practices.

**Interviews** – Probably the most common audit method, interviews allow the person conducting the audit to better understand communications-related work processes. Interviews allow respondents to provide a rich qualitative sense of how practices are performed and how the organization treats communications. Interviews can also be conducted with the organization’s external stakeholders or target audiences.

**Surveys** – Surveys or questionnaires are the second most common audit method. They can be administered to all staff within a short timeframe, and they allow for a standardization and comparison of responses.

**Critical Incident Analysis** – Staff are asked to describe, through an interview or questionnaire, specific effective and ineffective experiences with communications. The purpose is to collect examples of experiences that staff find memorable in order to “see” how communications practices are performed within situational contexts.
**Potential Communications Audit Methods**

**Network Analysis** – Network analysis has gained much popularity in recent years as a method for examining information flow, or the channels and relationships through which information is exchanged. It asks individuals who they communicate and for what purpose. It reveals an organization’s communication structure, which may be very different from its organizational structure. It also reveals where blockages are occurring and possible routes that are currently untapped.

**Participant Observation** – The individual conducting the audit participates in organizational activities involving communications in order to see how and when practices are performed.

**Document Review** – Communications documents (e.g. publications, campaign materials, press releases, etc.) are reviewed to assess the development and targeting of materials as a communications practice.

**Focus Groups** – Groups of five to fifteen people meet together in a moderated discussion and respond to open-ended questions about communications practices and organizational capacity. Their main advantage is the group interaction that takes place as participants react to and build on one another’s responses.
### How?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Time to Nonprofit</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Information Yield</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>30-60 minutes each</td>
<td>Moderately expensive (time to conduct, analyze)</td>
<td>Qualitative, in-depth data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>20-30 minutes each</td>
<td>Moderately expensive</td>
<td>Standardized data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Incident Analysis</td>
<td>20-30 minutes each</td>
<td>Inexpensive</td>
<td>Specific examples of practice/process flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network Analysis</td>
<td>20-30 minutes each</td>
<td>Expensive (analysis, software)</td>
<td>Process flow/interaction and integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Observation</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Expensive (time)</td>
<td>Process flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document Review</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Expensive (time)</td>
<td>Material, message evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
<td>1-2 hours</td>
<td>Moderately expensive (depends on number)</td>
<td>Qualitative in-depth data; specific examples</td>
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Process

- Planning
- Audit
- Analysis
- Reporting
Process

Planning

*During the planning stage of your communications audit, all stakeholders and decision-makers in your company’s communications strategy are identified, and a plan for interacting with employees, customers, and media during the audit is drafted.*

1. Determine audit areas: Internal, external, brand, web site,
2. Research methods: Personal interviews, focus groups, online or phone surveys, media coverage analysis
3. Past communications: newsletters, ads, brochures, collateral, business cards, letterhead, press releases
Audit

Information about your current communication strategy is gathered with tools such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, network analysis, content analysis, technology assessment, critical incident analysis, or document analysis.

1. Evaluate past communications
2. Question your stakeholders
3. Question your staff/volunteers/board
4. Analyze media coverage
5. Conduct a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats)
The consultation process today...

Do you think that the development plan is -

A. Very good.
B. Incredibly good.
C. Extremely good.
Analysis

*Review findings, score and evaluate feedback, develop an objective viewpoint of your organization.*

Reporting

*A formal document is created and presented with professional recommendations to optimize your organization’s communications strategy.*
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Step by Step for Non Profit

- **Strategic Communications Audits**
  - Prepared for the Communications Consortium Media Center
  - Julia Coffman
  - October 2004
STEP ONE: Know Critical Strategic Communications Practices

Knowing the specific practices associated with strategic communications is the first step to assessing an organization’s performance and capacity with respect to those practices. These are practices that every nonprofit trying to implement strategic communications should be performing at some level, whether by a single individual or by many staff members throughout the organization. There are 16 essential practices grouped into three areas:

**Strategy** – Includes the core tasks of communications planning and strategy development.

**Implementation** – Includes practices most common to an organization with an *active* communications function.

**Support and Alignment** – Includes non-communications-specific practices within the organization that help to ensure the communications function is successful.
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<td>The communications vision is aligned with, but distinct from, the organization’s overall mission.</td>
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<td>b. Choose goals and outcomes</td>
<td>Goals and outcomes are well defined, measurable, and help guide a defined plan of action.</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Select target audiences</td>
<td>Audiences are specific (not the general public) and include key decision makers or individuals with influence on the issue.</td>
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<td>d. Develop messages</td>
<td>Messages are specific, clear, persuasive, reflect audience values, and include a solution or course of action.</td>
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<td>e. Identify credible messengers</td>
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<td>g. Scan the context and competition</td>
<td>Risks and contextual variables that can affect communications success are identified and factored into planning when possible.</td>
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<td>h. Develop effective materials</td>
<td>Materials are developed in attractive, accessible, and varied formats for maximum exposure and visibility.</td>
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<td>i. Build valuable partnerships</td>
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<td>j. Train messengers</td>
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<td>l. Monitor and evaluate</td>
<td>Activities and outcomes are regularly monitored and evaluated for purposes of accountability and continuous improvement.</td>
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<td>m. Support communications at the leadership level</td>
<td>Management understands and supports communications as an integral part of organizational viability and success.</td>
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<td>n. Earmark sufficient resources</td>
<td>Fundraising regularly includes dedicated resources for communications practice.</td>
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<td>o. Integrate communications throughout the organization</td>
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<td>p. Involve staff at all levels</td>
<td>Communications is not seen as an isolated function; most if not all staff members have some knowledge and/or participation in communications efforts.</td>
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STEP TWO: Identify Possible Levels of Practice

To assess an organization on the practices in the previous table, it is important to have a gauge that helps to measure and illustrate where the organization currently stands in terms of its performance. That gauge is offered here in the form of a “practice maturity scale.”
Level One: Ad Hoc
The communications practice is ad hoc and unorganized. Few if any staff and financial resources are dedicated to it. Success is based on the competence and efforts of one or two “heroic” individuals. Despite this chaotic environment, however, the communications practice may be implemented successfully. But because it is uncoordinated, efforts are often inefficient and go over budget and schedule. Quality may also be variable because different people perform the practice over time.
Level Two: Planned
The practice is planned and deliberate as opposed to being performed on a reactive or “as needed” basis. Resources are allocated to the practice, responsibilities are assigned, and the process is managed. The practice does not occur regularly, however, and may still be performed by one or two individuals.
Level Three: Institutionalized
The practice is routine and part of the organization’s “fabric.” The organization has qualitatively determined the “best” way to approach the practice and has institutionalized it. Practices are known and coordinated within and outside the organization.
Level Four: Evaluated
The practice is evaluated and analyzed. Measures of performance and progress are collected and analyzed. Often a quantitative understanding of success is known and tracked, and the organization has a better ability to predict or estimate performance.
Level Five: Optimized
Because of its recognized importance to the organization, the practice is continuously reflected on and improvements incorporated.
STEP THREE: Assess Current Performance and Capacity

The main tasks for the third audit step are to collect data about communications practices, and to use that data to make assessments about organizational performance and capacity. It involves actually using the scale described above to gauge where the organization stands on all essential strategic communications practices.
### Step 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice Maturity Scale</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
<th>Support and Integration</th>
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<tr>
<td>5. Optimized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Evaluated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Institutionalized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Planned</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Ad Hoc</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0. Not Performed</td>
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- Choose goals and outcomes
- Select target audiences
- Develop messages
- Identify credible messengers
- Choose communications mechanisms and tools
- Scan the context and competition
- Develop effective materials
- Build valuable partnerships
- Train messengers
- Conduct steady outreach
- Monitor and evaluation
- Support communications at leadership level
- Earmark sufficient resources
- Integrate communications throughout organization
- Involve staff at all levels
Step 4

STEP FOUR: Identify Areas for Improvement
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Communications Audit

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SECTION 4
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Assignment/Scope
XXXXXX engaged Peritus Public Relations in January 2008 to review the organization’s internal and external communications processes and products. Peritus conducted a Strategic Communications audit to assess the organization’s capacity for and performance of essential communications practices. This report is both evaluative and formative in that it provides snapshot reviews of certain existing practices and makes recommendations in areas in which the organization can improve its performance. Additionally, this report reviews the organizational philosophy of communications and the structure of the communications organization and makes recommendations on both.
Case Study

The following research methods were used to inform the findings and recommendations of this report:

• Interviews with staff:
  o XXXX XXXX
  o XXXX XXXXXXXX
  o XXXXXX XXXXX
  o XXXXXX XXXXXXX
  o XXXXXX XXXXXXX
  o XXXX XXXXXXX
  o XXXX XXXXXXX
  o XXXXXXX XXXXX
  o XXXXXXX XXXXX
  o XXXXXXX XXXXX

• Critical Incident Analysis
  o WFPL news story

• Analysis of News Coverage from the past two years

• Comparative Analysis with multi-state organizations to assess and recommend an organizational model

• Organizational structure comparison to recommend

• Materials Review, both printed and online
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<td>2 Target Audiences</td>
<td>Audiences are specific and include key decision makers or individuals with influence on the issues.</td>
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<td>3 Messages</td>
<td>Messages are specific, clear, persuasive, reflect audience values and suggest a course of action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Advocates</td>
<td>Advocates are credible to the target audience and are available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Mechanism/Outlet</td>
<td>Outlets are chosen for their reach and credibility with target audiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Risks</td>
<td>Variables that can affect outcomes are identified and factored into planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Materials</td>
<td>Materials are attractive, accessible and easily available in a variety of formats.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Partnerships</td>
<td>Links exist with internal and external stakeholders who can effectively deliver messages.</td>
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<td>Outreach and dissemination to audiences through multiple outlets is regular and sustained.</td>
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<td>11 Monitor and Evaluate</td>
<td>Activities and outcomes are regularly monitored and evaluated for continuous improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Senior Leadership Support</td>
<td>Senior management supports and is committed to communications as an integral part of the organization’s success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Structure and Resources</td>
<td>The function is organizationally relevant and receives enough headcount and budget to reasonably accomplish its goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Organizational Integration</td>
<td>Communications is viewed as an integral part of the organization’s strategy.</td>
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<td>15 Involve Staff at All Levels</td>
<td>Communications is not seen as an isolated function; most if not all staff members have some knowledge and/or participation in communications efforts.</td>
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CURRENT PERFORMANCE AND CAPACITY ASSESSMENT

The matrix arrays the fifteen communication practices along the bottom row, and arrays the practice maturity scale vertically.
CURRENT PERFORMANCE AND CAPACITY

XXXXXXX XXXXXX nation merits high marks for awareness of communications needs and integration of communications into the organization. State directors are selected, in part, on their communication abilities and public affairs positions are part of the business model at the state level. It follows that the organization’s strongest scoring is in support and integration. It is also noteworthy that many for-profit organizations score strongly in strategy and implementation, but show significantly lower scores in support and integration.

With respect to strategy, usually one or two people decide on messages, messengers and communication mechanisms. This is sometimes performed on an ad hoc, almost intuitive basis at the C-level, and can circumvent a deliberative approach that seeks to measure outcomes.

Regarding implementation, the organization is purposeful in its communications practices but efforts still tend to be concentrated in the efforts of one or two individuals. Outreach is slightly more routine with established customs regarding outreach to, and collaboration with, target audiences.
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

XXXXXXX, by design and by obligation, has many points of contact with stakeholders and the media. It is not possible to control every interaction. But it is imperative that the organization prepare its messengers to deliver key messages consistently and effectively.

The lack of an organized approach to training and preparing messengers presents a liability that will grow as the organization grows and adds more messengers. This is certainly correctable.
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“I don’t have any answers. I’m a non-prophet.”