



By **Robert J. Holland**

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HOW TO CONDUCT A COMMUNICATION AUDIT—AND WHY

No half-measures, say the authors. They recommend a communication audit every couple of years. Read their justification—and their advice on how to get it done.



By **Katrina Gill**

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It used to be that if you wanted to get a group of communicators into a passionate argument, you just took them out to a bar and said something like, “You know, I think it’s about time we got a seat at the management table.”

Sad commentary on our social lives aside, communicators have evolved beyond such trite subject matter. Nowadays if you want to get a group of communicators into a passionate argument, you just take them out to a bar and say something like, “You know, I think communication measurement is a lot of B.S.”

This journal and others are packed with articles that make the case for measuring the effectiveness of communication. A recent study found a 10 percent increase over two years in companies using formal communication metrics, a trend driven by research linking effective communication to business performance. Seventy-one percent of respondents to another survey said their communication goals directly link to business goals, helping to ensure measurability. A study by the Public Affairs Council revealed that 80 percent of communicators believe measurement is a critical part of their jobs.

The case for measurement has been argued again and again. Yet many communicators—including prominent voices in the profession—continue to express doubt about the need and even the ability to measure, communication effectiveness. *The Ragan Report* last spring stirred up the hornet's nest by reprinting PR blogger John Wagner's criticism of communication measurement: "I'm not a big believer in measuring the effectiveness of PR programs."

Actually, Wagner had a good point buried in his oratory. Many communication programs are difficult to measure, and communicators often do a poor job of measuring them. "If public relations professionals are to be credible 'at the table,'" Wagner wrote, "we have to make sure that the data we provide for our programs can withstand the scrutiny of bottom-line oriented business managers."

Wagner is right. We communicators ask business leaders to fund our programs, to hire more communication staff, to ask for our counsel and to rely on our vehicles for getting information out to critical audiences. Yet often we cannot prove that our programs are worth funding, our staff is necessary, our counsel is wise or our vehicles are effective.

One of the best ways to prove these things is by conducting a thorough communication audit—not a 10-question survey asking how much of the publication employees read, but a large-scale study of the organization's business goals and how communication can most efficiently and effectively be used to help achieve them.

We believe that a communication audit is not only a good thing to do but necessary in today's business environment. We also believe

that a communication audit does not have to be cost-prohibitive. Yes, it costs money to conduct a thorough audit upon which business leaders can base decisions about resource allocation. But, as we have heard many communicators say after a communication audit, it's a relief to know your decisions are based on facts rather than guesswork.

Still, we recognize the reality that a communication audit costs money. The more efficient communicators can be in preparing for and conducting an audit, the more confident business leaders will be in trusting them to do the right thing in all aspects of communication.

To that end, we offer six ways to get the most out of your budget for conducting a communication audit.

1 Use an objective third party to conduct the audit.

Research is useless if it is not credible. Nothing destroys credibility more than having an organization's communicators conduct a communication audit. You simply are too close to the subject of the study, and employees won't be candid and frank. A third-party audit is necessary in *any* aspect of business; communication is no different. In addition, experts in communication measurement not only know how to deliver scientifically valid data, but also how to ask the right questions in the right ways.

2 Gain management buy-in up front.

Commitment to communication starts at the top of an organization. Things get done when the boss is behind them. Every communication audit we have conducted had senior management's blessing, which led to more full participation by employees, more reliable data and more meaningful recom-


mendations for improvement. It's unlikely you'll get the green light for a communication audit if the boss couldn't care less.

3 Use both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

Qualitative tools like individual in-depth interviews and focus groups help identify the issues to be explored in more detail during the survey. Detailed qualitative data can also help explain quantitative findings. We usually recommend a series of in-depth interviews with senior managers to get their perspectives on communication issues in the organization, then a series of focus groups with randomly selected employees at various job levels and positions (and locations, if appropriate) to get their views. Themes quickly reveal themselves and issues bubble to the top. For example, if employees repeatedly mention face-to-face communication as a problem or the intranet as a great resource, this helps set the agenda for further study. The alternative is to develop an aimless survey that asks 100 questions in the hopes that 20 of them will hit the hot spots—a waste of time and money.

4 Commit to doing something with the results.

An audit reveals the truth about your communication program. It delivers reliable information about the current state of communication, so even if the results are hard to take, at least you know they are accurate. Many audits reveal surprisingly positive perceptions about communication in their clients' organizations. In some audits we've conducted, our clients have braced for the worst and were delighted to find they were doing many things right. In the end, the audits suggested ways in which communication could be taken to the next level of >



excellence rather than the need to start over from scratch. In all cases, the audits gathered reliable baseline data for our clients to benchmark progress against in the future.

Whatever the results of an audit, you must be willing to trust the data and to take action. Otherwise, the audit is nothing more than an exercise in either self-gratification or self-flagellation.

5 Report the results. Although it is not always necessary to give a full, detailed account of every question asked in every interview, focus group and survey of an audit, you must report a summary of the results to everyone in the organization. The most practical reason for reporting results is so that employees will participate the next time. And telling employees what you're planning to do based on the audit's findings, who is accountable and when to expect changes lets them know you've heard them and you value their feedback. It's an excellent form of communication in itself.

6 Measure more than once. There are two employee reactions to tactical communication changes: 1) the immediate response to changes—for example, they either like it or not, “get it” or not, etc.;

and 2) long-term changes in employees' attitudes, opinions, knowledge and behaviors, and, ultimately, in the corporate culture. It makes sense to build in some short-term follow-up measurement after an audit to gauge employees' knee-jerk reactions to make sure you're on course with your changes. For example, immediately following implementation of some of your highest-impact changes, do a brief pulse survey or talk to a focus panel of employees to see exactly how they have been influenced by the communication.

Once you determine you're on the right track with your specific communication strategy and tactics, you'll want to reassess the overall effectiveness of communication. We recommend a communication audit every two to three years to ensure the communication program remains relevant, efficient and effective. The follow-up audit should take place not less than two or three years after the first one because it takes time for changes to play out in an organization—to put strategies and tactics in place, get employees to notice them and make the changes you desire. But don't wait more than two or three years,

because conditions and circumstances change quickly in organizations, and communication must keep up. Think about this: Ten years ago, most companies did not have intranets. Now intranets are the primary communication vehicle for many organizations. With the advent of blogs and other new social media, the proliferation of mergers and acquisitions, and a global economy that brings one surprise after another, communication strategies and tactics rapidly become outdated.

Follow these guidelines and we believe you will gain insight and information about your organization's communication program that will lead to much greater value and effectiveness. In today's environment, business leaders expect no less. ■ J