

MODEL COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT LAYOUT

What is a Communication Audit?

A communications audit can be many things depending on the individual needs of an organization. In a comprehensive or generic way:

- A communications audit is a snapshot of an organization's communication strategies, activities and programs.
- A communications audit is an assessment of the effectiveness and credibility of current communication vehicles and media including: publications, news releases, external web site, intranet, social media accounts, videos, blogs, face-to-face communication strategies, media relations, and other communications that exist.
- A communications audit uses processes such as observations, analyses and evaluations, focus groups, interviews, and surveys of key audiences whose support is needed to improve communication, understanding and collaboration in the organization.

What Does a Communications Audit Deliver?

A communication audit will deliver some or all of the following:

- Review of existing communication policies, publications, and vehicles, indicating strengths and weaknesses of each.
- Summary of comments of focus groups and interviews.
- Report of the employee survey results.
- Recommendations for strengthening your communication strategies and programs.

Communications Audit: How Can It Help You?

Organizations communicate in two directions: internally to staff and externally to parents, students, community members, and the media. Imprecise internal communications can lead to mistakes and unhappy staff. Poor external communications can jeopardize image and community support. Any overall management strategy needs a communications plan or the whole operation might fail. A communications audit studies that plan.

A communications audit analyzes your organization's practices to reveal how effective they are throughout the whole district or in specified parts of the district. It can pinpoint problem areas such as frequent misunderstandings, information blocks, information lacks, information duplication, misrepresentation. An audit could be part of a *periodic health check*, but it is especially helpful at a time of change or a time of uncertainty.

The exact nature of the audit always depends on the type of organization and their particular needs and opportunities. It will certainly aim to identify target audiences as the external audience will have different needs from an internal one. It will identify the key messages that need to be communicated and the channels that exist for conveying them. It will look not only at the communications that the organization makes but also how they are being received.

Communicating is a complex process with potential pitfalls at each stage:

- Is the message clear?
- Is the medium for transmitting it appropriate?
- Has the recipient actually received it? If so, has it been understood?
- Did it have the desired effect?
- Does the recipient have a channel for feedback?
- Can the recipient understand how to provide the feedback?

The audit is a systematic approach that powers your school district to look at what it is really doing as opposed to what it believes it is doing. The old metaphor of communication holds true ... *you thought you said one thing but when you check you find out that a totally different message was received.*

The audit will look at the people who send and receive messages, the means of communicating, and a comprehensive picture of what is happening. Every aspect of communication provides another piece of the jigsaw and, once this is complete, you have the basis for an evaluation.

It is important to evaluate the audit within a relevant framework. For this reason, key people will have to clarify the purpose for the organization's existence, its cultural values and its identity.

In summary, the audit is a valuable tool for enhancing internal communications and for beefing up your community position. It can be handled internally but there are benefits from using an external consultant. Employees might feel inhibited about expressing their real view to another school district employee, whereas an outsider, who guarantees their anonymity, will be less of a threat.

Questions Answered by your Communications Audit

Information about your current communication strategies are gathered with tools such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, content analysis, technology assessment, and document analysis. The following questions are answered:

1. What are your current goals and objectives for communications?
2. How well is your current communications plan working? (*Is there one?*)
3. Are your messages clear and consistent?
4. Do you have a coordinated graphic identity?
5. Are you reaching key audiences with your messages and moving them to action?
6. What communications have been most effective?
7. What do stakeholders think of your communications?
8. Do your communications support your overall strategic plan?
9. What would make your communications more effective?
10. What communications opportunities are you missing?

Plan of Action for Communications Audit

Here are the suggested steps for a Communications Audit:

1. Identify contact points between school district and consultant.
2. Identify district goals for the audit.
 - a. Team session with Superintendent, Board, Communication Staff.
 - b. Individual sessions with Superintendent, Board, and Communication Staff.

3. Identify the district's main concerns.
 - a. Team session with Superintendent, Board, Communication Staff
 - b. Individual sessions with Superintendent, Board, and Communication Staff
4. Create a plan of action for conducting the audit.
 - a. This is best completed in phases with preliminary phases established.
 - b. Secondary phases will be planned as needed.
5. Gather communications and marketing materials for assessment.
6. Analyze and assess the materials for overall effectiveness, consistency, clarity, accuracy and call to action.
7. Identify electronic communication channels for assessment.
8. Analyze and assess the electronic communication channels for overall effectiveness, consistency, clarity, accuracy and call to action.
9. Review, analyze, and evaluate media coverage, media references, search highlights, and more.
10. Develop a questionnaire for interviews
11. Conduct one-on-one 15-30 minute interviews with several members (*numbers and identity selected by district*) of district administration, board members, campus administration, elementary teachers, secondary teachers, engaged parents, non-engaged parents, booster club members, community partners, and media partners.
12. Conduct 30-60 minute focus groups of 10-15 internal and external stakeholders.
13. A minimum of 5 focus groups will be the most beneficial.
14. Create a survey for stakeholders that can be completed in less than two minutes to assess perceptions, strengths and weaknesses.
15. Analyze assessment results and create a report with proposed changes.
16. Present data.