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Marketing & Communications

RESONATE YOUR MESSAGE



# Unleashing YOUR BEST Communication

# Congratulations!

By downloading “**Unleashing Your Best Communication**”, you have made the commitment toward excellence in communication!

Effective communication is an ongoing process that involves research, planning, strategy and evaluation. In other words—being committed to the time, energy and patience required for this process will pay off through increased trust and engagement in your organization and attaining your organizational goals!

This guide—which includes a worksheet for you to note your ideas, thoughts and observations—will outline the steps that your organization needs to take to:

- Identify its key audiences
- Audit its communications, including communication delivery mechanisms and conducting focus groups with organizational stakeholders which will help you to:
  - Recognize and overcome barriers to effective communication
  - Discover and mitigate patterns in ineffective communication
  - Establish a strategy to overcome communication challenges
  - Pinpoint your organization’s key communicators, and develop a valuable Key Communicator Program
  - Develop a course of action that leverages communication as a tool in advancing your organization’s goals and objectives
- And...most importantly....this guide will **UNLEASH** your **BEST** communication!

I wish you all the best in a very successful execution of your communication strategy! If you need any assistance with your plan, please contact Sounding Board Marketing & Communications at 916.673.8868 or [hvmcgowan@sounding-board.net](mailto:hvmcgowan@sounding-board.net).

## Identify Your Key Audiences

Communicating is a two-way street—and there may be many streets in your organization, from an audience perspective. Let's take a moment and define audiences:

**Internal audiences:** Your organization's internal—or primary—audience includes the individuals or groups most closely associated with your organization. This includes employees, board members, paid members (if yours is a membership organization), volunteers, donors, partners, students, parents, and retired employees (particularly in school districts). These audience members feel most personally connected to your organization.

### Identify Your Organization's Internal Audiences:

**External audiences:** Your organization's external—or secondary—audience includes the individuals or groups outside of, and not closely connected with, your organization. This includes community members, community leaders, elected officials, the media, or people who work or reside near your organization.

Identifying your key audiences involves looking at both your internal and external audiences and defining each of those audiences. For example, if your organization is a school district, your employee audiences include: certified employees (teachers, paraeducators, etc.), classified employees, confidential employees, coaches, and administrators. Distinguishing your audience members plays a key role in your organization's communication audit activities (described later in this guide). For organizations with donors and volunteers, you may need to further define the types of donors and the types of volunteers.

So...why is it important to identify your key audiences? **WHAT** and **HOW** your organization communicates to and with your audiences will differ, depending on the audience member. As you will see in the Communication Audit process, one size does not fit all when communicating with your various audiences.

**Identify Your Organization's External Audiences:**

## Conduct a Communication Audit

A communication audit is one of the most effective ways to gather information and thoroughly research the effectiveness of your organization's communications. The goal of a communication audit is to seek facts as well as perceptions, and from these you will develop a strategy that will lead to improved management of public relations, greater stakeholder engagement and involvement, and enhanced two-way communication between the internal and external audiences of your organization.

A communication audit is best performed by two to three employees of your organization who are responsible for communications—an audit by committee can become an unwieldy, time-consuming process, and should be performed by those who are engaged and familiar with best practices in organizational communications.

Note: A communication audit conducted by Sounding Board Marketing and Communications enables a school district or agency to view its communications from an "outside" perspective. The audit is performed by a seasoned communication professional that has many years of experience in public relations/communications. Sounding Board Marketing & Communication offers a Communication Audit as one of its Single Note services, and if you believe your organization would benefit from an independent communication audit, please contact us for additional information about our Communication Audit services.

## PRIDE Communication Audit Process

PRIDE stands for the five components of the communication audit process: **P**reparation, **R**esearch, **I**nterpretation, **D**eployment, and **E**valuation. A worksheet to outline your thoughts and ideas is included, below.

### P: Preparation

- ✓ **Identify the individual(s) who will be involved with developing the communication audit:**

- ✓ **Establish the goals and intended outcomes of the audit:** At a minimum, the goal of a communication audit is to seek facts as well as perceptions, and from these you will develop a strategy that will lead to improved management of public relations, greater stakeholder engagement and involvement, and enhanced two-way communication between the internal and external audiences of your organization. Also determine the key areas that will be evaluated by the audit: promotional materials, electronic communications (website, email-both day to day and mass emailing, social media, autodialer system), organizational identity (logo, letterhead, business cards, signage, tagline), customer service, organizational environment, community outreach activities (town halls, networking, community involvement, issue forums).

**Goals:**

**Key Areas to be Evaluated:**

**R: Research**

- ✓ Choose your research methods to obtain data and information from your stakeholders: survey (on line and/or telephone), one on one interviews, focus groups, media analysis

**Research Methods:**

- ✓ Conduct focus groups, interviews and/or surveys with your organization's key stakeholders (check which stakeholders will be involved in your research):

**Examples of Education Stakeholders**

- External stakeholders: Community leaders, elected officials, business partners
- Central Office administrative assistants
- Current District Parents (including parent representatives on district advisory and curriculum councils)
- Students
- Elementary and Secondary Teachers
- Assistant principals and counselors
- Bargaining unit representatives
- School clerical staff
- Classified staff representatives
- Media Representatives
- Board of Education members
- Superintendent's Cabinet
- Leadership/Administrative Team Members

**Examples of Non-Profit Organization Stakeholders**

- Representatives of partnering organizations
- Board members
- Organization staff
- Media Representatives
- Members of organization
- Individuals benefitting from the organization
- Donors
- Volunteers

When planning focus groups, ensure that your focus groups are just that—focused! You are asking these individuals—from their stakeholder perspective—to answer questions that will provide you valuable information about your organization's communications. To achieve this, ensure that you:

- Ensure that each focus group member is sent an invitation well in advance of the meeting, and that the time, date, location and purpose of the focus group meeting are clearly stated in the invitation.
- DO schedule focus group meetings at a time and location that is feasible for each stakeholder group. For example, avoid scheduling focus group meetings with teachers during instructional or non-contractual hours. Do provide parent and community members focus group options of daytime and evening hours.
- Be aware of the Brown Act when scheduling focus groups with elected officials from the same government (your school board, the city council) to avoid violations—this may require scheduling individual interviews instead, or two separate focus group meetings for each group.
- Plan no more than one hour for each focus group meeting. This will allow enough time for thorough responses, but is short enough for individuals' busy schedules.

- Develop the same questions for each focus group—but make adjustments to ensure that the questions are appropriate for the audience. For example, when inquiring about opinions about your organization’s website, students may use the site differently than parents, and parents may use the site differently than Board of Education members. Therefore, instead of asking, “What are your opinions of our website?” you may want to start with a question like, “How do you use our website?” to obtain valuable information about its use by each stakeholder.
- When opening the focus group meeting, set some key ground rules: Encourage honesty, ensure confidentiality (meaning, people’s names will not be used in the focus group report or communication audit), keep discussion relevant to the question, and respect the role of the facilitator (this is important, because when the facilitator—either you or another staff member—needs to cut off discussion to move forward to the next question, or redirect the group to the discussion, participants tend to bristle at the facilitator’s role!).
- Have both a facilitator and a scribe
- Provide refreshments for focus group participants
- ✓ Prepare your focus group, interview and survey questions based on the goals of your audit. Here are some examples:
  - What are the strengths of ABC organization?
  - What are its challenges?
  - How do you receive news and information about ABC organization?
  - What are the ABC organization’s best sources of information?
  - What is working well/not well about ABC organization’s:
    - Website
    - Newsletter
    - Social Media
    - Email system
    - Customer service
    - Phone system
  - How can the ABC organization immediately improve its communications?



**Focus Group, Interview an Survey Question Ideas:**

- ✓ **Evaluate** your organization by doing a **physical walk-through—through the eyes of a your stakeholders (see questions that follow)**. At each step, ask the staff to tell you what changes (other than hiring new staff) would improve the experience for the stakeholder. Write down their ideas and feelings as well as your own. Note: Provide immediate feedback where possible, and make a list of observations and recommendations—in the case of a school district or organization with several locations, make note of patterns or areas where consistency is needed throughout the organization.

How does the organization greet visitors, from the exterior of the building to the front desk, to the telephone? Does your organization have a consistent approach? Does the entrance and/or front office (or desk) of your organization look clean and welcoming? Does each office have a consistent greeting?

Try to think and feel as a client or family member would. Observe your surroundings and consider what a client or family might be thinking or feeling at any given moment. Record your observations and feelings.

In the front office—or front desk—do people walk up to greet a visitor, or sit behind a desk? Are there physical or visual barriers that create an atmosphere of distrust?

Is there a central location where up-to-date information about the organization/school/program is available? Is the information attractively displayed or messy?

Is someone readily available to provide a tour and/or information about your organization? Do you have bilingual interpreters available for non-English speaking visitors?

If you have a campus or larger facility—is litter picked up, greenery trimmed, and other physical elements that are attractive? If you have construction, are walkways still accessible, and are detour routes effectively identified through signage?

Is there a place where volunteers can check in and find more information about volunteer opportunities and processed?

If one were to walk through your facility, would they hear conversations that bring pride to your organization...or make them uncomfortable?

What are the visible attitudes of the employees? Relaxed, stressed, open, closed, outgoing?

When walking through a classroom or room dedicated to a certain program, is information about the current lessons/activities readily available or visible, or are the walls bare? Are classroom/programmatic materials organized neatly, or does the room appear messy?

What barriers do you observe in your organization's communication....

**Resources:** Does your organization have the resources (technological, personnel, physical, financial) it needs to communicate well, or are there pieces missing?

**Environment:** Is your communication environment consistent, or is it a mishmash of various colors, styles and messaging?

**Capacity:** Does your organization have the capacity to deploy strategic communications and improve its communications, or is further training needed? What additional training is needed?

**Structure:** How is communications structured in your organization? Is there a structure?

**Perceptual, Cultural and Language Differences:** What perceptual, cultural and language barriers and/or challenges exist between your organization and its internal and external audiences?

**Time:** What types of time barriers exist to your organization's employees providing effective communication?

- ✓ Collect and evaluate communications from the past 12 months, and ask yourself (and staff members) the following questions about each communication piece (Tip: Duplicate this page and the next one, and attach the pages—with your notes—to each piece):

How did we inform our stakeholders about our organizations? What worked? What didn't?

Were we consistent with our branding (messaging, graphics)?

Who were our key audiences?

What were our key messages?

Did we reach our audiences with the right messages?

What media coverage did we receive? Was it effective? What media opportunities did we miss?

Did we successfully tell our story in our communications?

For media coverage (television, radio, web and print), examine the frequency and reach of your coverage. What is the tone and impact? Are your key messages being promoted? Are your audiences being reached? What media opportunities have you missed? Coverage oversight can be achieved by contracting with a news monitoring service or using Google's free Media Alerts to track your coverage in the press, blogs and Web sites.



## I: Interpretation

- ✓ Review and evaluate your research: Make note of any patterns, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Analyze how you can capitalize on strengths, stop weaknesses, maximize opportunities and defend against threats. Tip: Develop your analysis in a separate document so that the findings can be included in your overall communication audit report.
- ✓ Develop audit findings and recommendations: A sample outline of the communication audit is provided in the next section. Ensure that the recommendations incorporate metrics so that results are measurable.

## D: Deployment

- ✓ Present the Communication Audit findings and recommendations to your board. Provide a summary of the approved recommendations to your organization's stakeholders so that they are aware of how their participation influenced the outcomes of the Communication Audit.
- ✓ Incorporate the recommendations of the Communication Audit into your organization's Three Year Marketing and Communication Strategic Plan (Tip: You can receive a FREE Marketing & Strategic Plan how-to guide by visiting Sounding Board Marketing & Communications's website at [www.sounding-board.net](http://www.sounding-board.net) and signing up for our email updates!).

## E: Evaluation

- ✓ Ensure that an evaluation model is included in your strategic plan—this could be in the form of another communication audit, periodic focus group meetings, task completion, surveys, and/or interviews.
- ✓ Specify the evaluation timeline in your Marketing and Communication Strategic Plan—and stick to it!

## Outline/Format of a Communication Audit

Utilizing an outline for your Communication Audit will ensure that your activities and information are organized and that you are not forgetting any details. Sounding Board Marketing & Communications uses the following outline when developing its independent audits.

### I. Introduction

The introduction should describe—in three to four brief paragraphs—the purpose and intended outcomes of the audit. For example:

“Superintendent John Doe, members of the ABC School District Board of Education and the District’s Leadership Team are committed to improving communication within the ABC School District schools and with residents of Mayberry. This audit was developed as part of the district’s Three Year Marketing and Communication Strategic Plan and the district’s commitment to increase communication both within and outside the organization.

The challenges of building and maintaining public and community engagement, dealing with growing enrollments and unpredictable funding, and communicating effectively with all segments of the community affect not only the school district, but the community as well.

Throughout the focus group sessions with a variety of school employees, parents, students, and community representatives, it was obvious that there is a solid base of support for and pride in the school district.

The goal of this communication audit was to seek facts as well as perceptions, and from these to propose recommendations that could ensure improved management of public relations, greater parent and community involvement, and enhanced two-way communication between the internal and external publics of the ABC School District.

The observations and recommendations included in this report should be reviewed carefully. Whether they pertain to the work of the district’s Superintendent or any other department, they are intended to improve communication in a school district that is poised and committed to facing the challenges of education in the 21st century.”

### II. Processes and Procedures

This section describes and summarizes the “R-Research” section you previously completed, providing details about which research methods were used and which stakeholders were included in the research.

### III. Perceptions of Focus Groups

In this section, provide a summary of how each focus group responded to the focus group questions. The key here is to provide a *summary*, not verbatim responses by each focus group. This section should be organized by each focus group, versus by each focus group question, you can easily locate certain focus group responses.

### IV. Observations and Recommendations

In the “Observations” section, begin by summarizing the organization’s strengths (not just communication strengths), both those gathered through focus groups, surveys and interviews, as well as those observed by the individual(s) involved with conducting the Communication Audit. Be certain to note whether a majority of focus group/survey/interview participants noted certain strengths. Note strengths and challenges with internal and external communications, as well as proactive and reactive communications.

Next, outline the Guiding Principles of the audit and its recommendations. Guiding Principles affirm the role that communication plays in management and organizational success, the importance of the commitment of organizational leaders to the overall success of planned communication (including providing the resources and personnel), and the important role that research, planning, implementation and evaluation play in strategic and planned communication. Everyone in a school system is a communicator and must accept a portion of responsibility for that role. Staff members who are informed and involved take greater pride in their performance, and perform more effectively.

In the “Recommendations” section, note that the recommendations are not intended to point out deficiencies in the communications effort, but rather to highlight the areas the district should focus on in order to elevate communications to a higher level designed to fully support its mission and goals.

When outlining the audit’s recommendations, strive toward identifying broad overarching recommendations with key supporting strategies. For example, if the audit’s findings unveil several deficiencies in your organization’s communications vehicles (email, website, newsletter, phone systems), rather than listing the remedies for each of these as goals, instead, develop a broader goal, “Improve ABC School District’s Communication Delivery Systems” and list the remedies as “key supporting strategies”. Fewer broadly stated goals can be more impactful than a listing of multiple strategies. The broadly stated goals will also allow you to evaluate and prioritize the strategies.

### V. Conclusion

The conclusion is a very brief summary of the Communication Audit’s goals and intended outcomes.

## Developing a Key Communicators Program

In addition to the people who have “Communication” in their title or job description, key communicators are the volunteers, staff members, and audience (internal and external) members who are the eyes, ears and spokespersons for your organization. Developing one-on-one relationships is an effective means of communicating with your various audiences. Key Communicators help inform stakeholders about your organization and help your organization understand more about what people think, feel and know about your organization. Your key communicators can be found as participants in committees, organization-based activities (such as PTA, booster clubs, advisory groups), your board and staff members who frequently interact with the public. In fact, during the Communication Audit Process, you have a prime opportunity to identify some potential key communicators!

Establishing a Key Communicator Program for your organization is a highly effective—and inexpensive—way to help overcome communication barriers, advance your organization’s communications strategy, and ensure that key messages are consistently presented in the community. Other benefits of a Key Communicator Program include:

- ✓ Serving as a valuable communications tool to monitor and proactively manage issues.
- ✓ Ensuring that all stakeholder groups are represented, so their input serves as a sampling of district opinions.
- ✓ Keeps your organization grounded in its community values and beliefs.

Some ways to establish this program is through:

- ✓ Asking for volunteers among your organization’s internal and external audiences, in addition to obvious staff and board members.
- ✓ Keeping each Key Communicator routinely kept informed of organizational issues through email messages and newsletters from your Superintendent, Executive Director, or CEO.
- ✓ Asking Key Communicators to share any questions or concerns brought up in the community. For example, throughout the normal course of the day, in formal and informal settings (such as at soccer practice, band practice, meetings, chatting with a neighbor) Key Communicators are asked to share the information then make the Superintendent, Executive Director, or CEO (and/or their assistant) aware of any questions or concerns about your organization that are brought to their attention.
- ✓ Contact Key Communicators (either through email, phone, or a meeting) to obtain their feedback on a periodic basis. In school districts, this might be in the form of a Superintendent’s Communication or Community Advisory Committee; in a non-profit, an Executive Director’s Advisory Committee.

## Parting Thoughts...

It is my sincere hope that this guide not only helps your organization unleash its best communication, but that—through following the steps in this manual—your organization opens up other opportunities for success. Should you need additional assistance, please do not hesitate to contact Sounding Board Marketing & Communications at 916.673.8868 or [hvmcgowan@sounding-board.net](mailto:hvmcgowan@sounding-board.net).