

Strategic Communications Audits

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Nonprofit organizations are now continuously being challenged to be more strategic in their communications efforts. Communications activities must add up to more than a series of isolated events such as the dissemination of an occasional publication or press release. Being *strategic* requires that nonprofits be more deliberate, innovative, savvy, and less reactive in their communications practice. Nonprofits are encouraged to regard communications as essential to their overall success and integrate it throughout their organizations.¹

As a result of this movement, an array of new tools, resources, and trainings have been developed to help organizations better understand the concept of strategic communications, develop their own communications strategies, and evaluate them for both accountability and learning purposes. But while nonprofits are learning how to develop strategies and are gaining a better understanding of their importance, questions remain about their actual follow through in practice and nonprofits' overall capacity to implement their strategies given their relative inexperience in this field and the many priorities, including communications, that often compete for scarce organizational resources.

Nonprofits need ways to better understand their current strategic communications performance and capacity, and to gain a *realistic* sense of what is possible in terms of developing their communications functions. Strategic communications audits are one tool that can help to meet this need.

Strategic Communications Audits Defined

A strategic communications audit is a systematic assessment, either formal or informal, of an organization's capacity for, or performance of, essential communications practices. It determines what is working well, what is not, and what might work better if adjustments are made.

Defined in this way, a strategic communications audit has both evaluative and formative value. It is evaluative in that it provides a "snapshot" of where an organization currently stands in terms of its communication capacity or performance. It is formative in that it also points to areas in which the organization can strengthen its performance. Communications audits are a relatively common practice, though they are more common among for-profits than nonprofits, and not familiar to most non-communications professionals. Audits are most often performed by external communications or evaluation experts, but can also be performed internally.

This brief is for nonprofit organizations that want to better understand strategic communications audits and the main steps involved. It can be used by nonprofits that either want to self-assess and perform their own audit, or hire an external expert to conduct it.

¹ Bonk, K. Griggs, H, and Tynes, E. (1999). *Strategic communications for nonprofits*; Kopec, J. (2003). Tips & techniques: The communications audit. Public Relations Society of America.

The brief outlines five basic steps in a strategic communications audit. The audit can be applied to an organization overall, or to a specific project or campaign within the organization. While audits can be performed in numerous ways, this brief presents one possible approach.

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.

The table on the next page identifies sixteen essential strategic communications practices. They are grouped into three categories: 1) strategy, 2) implementation, and 3) support and alignment.

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.

The table also offers quality standards or criteria for each practice. They describe in brief what the practices should look like.² This list, just on its own, has substantial value in the audit process. It can be used as a checklist to help determine if an organization is actually performing each strategic communications practice. But more importantly, the audit process can reveal if quality criteria are being met, and if not where improvements can be made in *how* the practice is performed.

² Quality criteria are adapted from Bonk, K. Griggs, H, and Tynes, E. (1999). *Strategic communications for nonprofits*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Spitfire Strategies (2003). *Smart Chart 2.0*. Washington D.C.: Author.

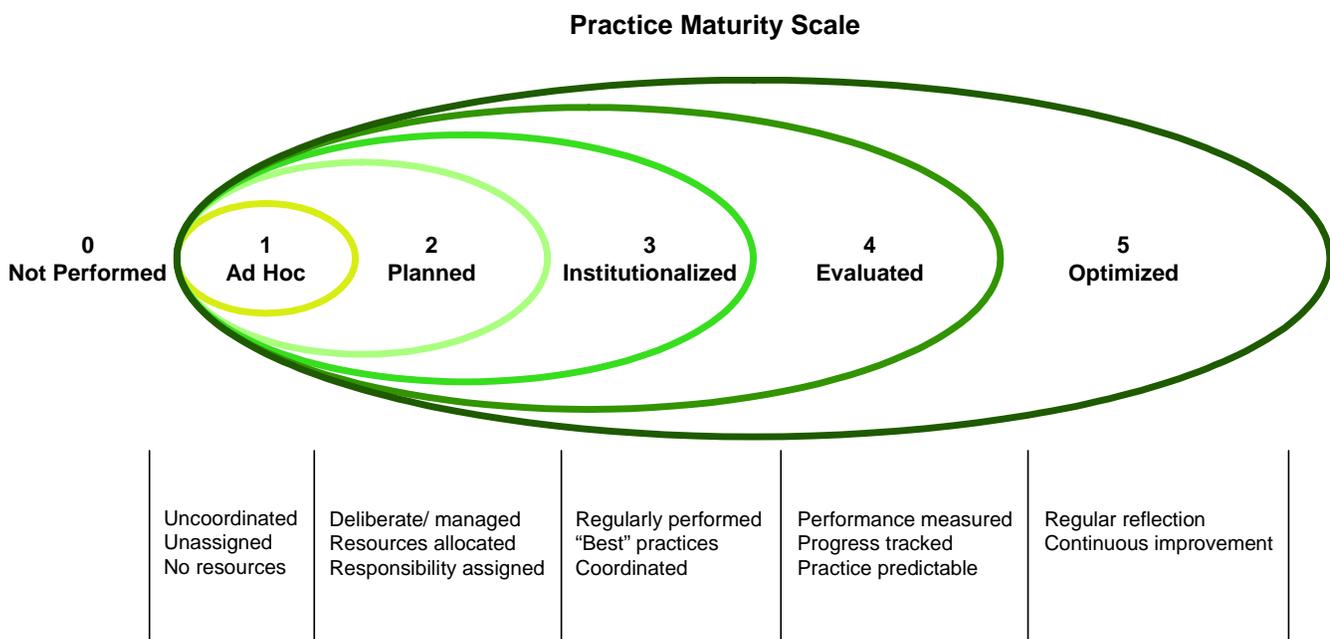
Essential Strategic Communications Practices

	Strategic Communications Practices	Quality Criteria/Standards
Strategy	a. Identify the vision	The communications vision is aligned with, but distinct from, the organization's overall mission.
	b. Choose goals and outcomes	Goals and outcomes are well defined, measurable, and help guide a defined plan of action.
	c. Select target audiences	Audiences are specific (not the general public) and include key decision makers or individuals with influence on the issue.
	d. Develop messages	Messages are specific, clear, persuasive, reflect audience values, and include a solution or course of action.
	e. Identify credible messengers	Messengers are seen as credible by the target audiences, and can be recruited and available to the cause.
	f. Choose communications mechanisms/outlets	Outlets (e.g. both in the air (media) and on the ground) are chosen for their access and availability to target audiences
	g. Scan the context and competition	Risks and contextual variables that can affect communications success are identified and factored into planning when possible.
Implementation	h. Develop effective materials	Materials are developed in attractive, accessible, and varied formats for maximum exposure and visibility.
	i. Build valuable partnerships	Linkages exist with internal and external stakeholders who can help align with and carry the message.
	j. Train messengers	Internal and external messengers are trained in key messages and are consistent in their delivery.
	k. Conduct steady outreach	Outreach and dissemination to audiences through multiple outlets is regular and sustained.
	l. Monitor and evaluate	Activities and outcomes are regularly monitored and evaluated for purposes of accountability and continuous improvement.
Support and Integration	m. Support communications at the leadership level	Management understands and supports communications as an integral part of organizational viability and success.
	n. Earmark sufficient resources	Fundraising regularly includes dedicated resources for communications practice.
	o. Integrate communications throughout the organization	Communications is seen as an integral part of every organizational project or strategy.
	p. Involve staff at all levels	Communications is not seen as an isolated function; most if not all staff members have some knowledge and/or participation in communications efforts.

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.”

The practice maturity scale offers a continuum of possible performance levels for any given practice. The figure below illustrates the scale’s five levels. Higher levels in the scale represent higher levels of organizational commitment to, integration of, and performance on the practice. Each practice may be classified as 1) ad hoc, 2) planned, 3) institutionalized, 4) evaluated, and 5) optimized.³



During an audit, an organization’s current performance on each strategic communications practice can be assessed using this scale. But first it is important to understand the distinctions between the five levels.

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.

³ Scale is adapted from the Carnegie Mellon Software Engineering Institute’s work on its Capable Maturity Model® Integration (CMMI). www.sei.cmu.edu/cmmi/cmmi.html.

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.

Distinctions between levels one and two are based on the degree to which an organization is reactive and disorganized (level one) versus purposeful and proactive (level two). At level three, the practice is performed regularly, consistently across staff members, and has been performed enough that the organization has gained a certain level of proficiency at it. At level four, the organization has committed to tracking the practice for purposes of better understanding how to improve performance. The organization is monitoring the quality of the practice. Level five demonstrates an even higher level of organizational commitment to the practice, as the organization cares enough about it to learn from and improve performance over time.

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. The figure on the next page illustrates in matrix form how this assessment might be structured. Note that this audit step could also involve looking at actual communications strategy content or materials and making assessments about their quality.

The matrix arrays the sixteen communication practices along the bottom row, and arrays the practice maturity scale vertically. Users fill in or check the box that best represents where on the scale the organization falls for each practice (an example of how this might look when filled out is provided later in this brief).

Strategic Communications Audit Matrix

The organization is assessed, either internally or by an outside expert, on each communications practice using the five-level scale.



5. Optimized																		
4. Evaluated																		
3. Institutionalized																		
2. Planned																		
1. Ad Hoc																		
0. Not Performed																		
	a. Identify the vision	b. Choose goals and outcomes	c. Select target audiences	d. Develop messages	e. Identify credible messengers	f. Choose communications mechanisms/outlets	g. Scan the context and competition	h. Develop effective materials	i. Build valuable partnerships	j. Train messengers	k. Conduct steady outreach	l. Monitor and evaluation	m. Support communications at leadership level	n. Earmark sufficient resources	o. Integrate communications throughout organization	p. Involve staff at all levels		
	Strategy							Implementation					Support and Integration					

Internal versus External Assessment

It is important at this point to determine if assessments about organizational practices will be made internally or by outside experts. The advantages to doing it internally are that direct costs are likely to be lower and the process may become an engaging organizational exercise that builds communications capacity in and of itself. The advantages to using outside experts are their objectivity, time and availability, the knowledge they bring from other organizations for comparison purposes, and the credibility that may accompany their credentials and 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. Methods are described briefly below in the context of a communications audit and then followed by a table that compares them on time, cost, and information yield.⁴ Note that while the use of one or more of these methods is recommended, it is also possible to conduct the strategic communications audit informally by, for example, asking each staff member to give his or her own independent and subjective assessments based on existing knowledge and experience, or convening staff to make collective assessments.

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 second most common audit method. They can be administered cheaply to all organizational 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.

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.

⁴ Methods discussion is informed by Downs, C.W., & Adrian, A.D. (2004). *Assessing organizational communication*. New York: Guilford Press.

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.

Comparing Potential Audit Methods

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

STEP FOUR: Identify Areas for Improvement

Once the assessments are made, the next step is to identify areas in which the organization can improve. Note that nonprofit organizations are *not* expected to be a “Level 5” on all strategic communications practices. Rather, the assessment of where the organization should be must be based on an accounting of the organization’s *realistic* capabilities with respect to communications. For example, it may not be reasonable to expect that all funding that comes into an organization will have dollars earmarked for communications. While an organization can make communications a priority and request specific resources for it, the outcome also depends on what funders are willing to support.

Completing the audit matrix on page 6 provides an immediate assessment of areas in which to improve. The following case example about a hypothetical small nonprofit policy advocacy organization demonstrates how the strategic communications audit can be used. The matrix has been filled in to represent this hypothetical organization’s performance on the sixteen essential strategic communications practices.

Case Example: Using the Strategic Communications Audit

Hypothetical Organizational Assessment

5. Optimized																	
4. Evaluated																	
3. Institutionalized																	
2. Planned																	
1. Ad Hoc																	
0. Not Performed																	
	Vision	Goals	Audiences	Messages	Messengers	Mechanisms	Context	Materials	Partnerships	Messengers	Outreach	Evaluation	Support	Resources	Integrate	Involve staff	
	Strategy						Implementation					Support and Integration					

Current Performance and Capacity: With respect to strategy, this hypothetical organization does communications planning, but usually only when a grant is due and the funder requests a specific description of the communications strategy. Even then it is usually done by whoever is writing the proposal and only revisited when a progress report is due to the funder. The organization is reasonably clear about its audiences, as they do not change over time. When it comes to formal communication efforts, such as a campaign, the organization puts resources into testing messages and messengers with polling or focus groups. When efforts are less formal and more routine, however, usually one or two people decide on messages, messengers, and communication mechanisms. No systematic scanning is done of the environmental context and potential risks.

Regarding implementation, the organization is purposeful in its communications practices, but they still tend to be concentrated in the efforts of one or two individuals rather than integrated as an important function throughout the organization. Outreach is slightly more routine, with established and written policies regarding outreach to, and collaboration with, target audiences.

In terms of support and integration, the Executive Director recognizes and supports the communications function and has even received some training on it. However, communications rarely makes it into the budget as a separate line item, and when it does, it is the first area to be cut when the budget needs to be reduced. Communications dollars tend to appear when surplus funds are left over from a grant and need to be spent down quickly. In addition, the communications function is concentrated in one staff member who also handles all editing, publication design, and audience database management, rather than emphasized as a competency that most staff members should share.

Areas for Improvement: The audit assessment points to numerous areas for potential improvement. However, given its size, resources, and the fact that it is functioning reasonably well under the current model, the hypothetical organization chooses three main areas for development and improvement. The top priority, because it affects all others, is making sure that communications resources are a distinct budget line item in every grant proposal. The organization will also develop a communications strategy for the overall organization rather than only for specific projects. In doing that, more attention will be paid to goals and outcomes, and assessing competition and risks. For now the communications function will still largely be concentrated in one person, which leaves the organization at risk if that person leaves. Moving forward, however, that person will try to build communications capacity among other project managers by acting as *support* on communications rather than by performing the function independently.

STEP FIVE: Refine Practice and Repeat the Process as Needed

The strategic communications audit should result in more than just an identification of areas or practices that need to be improved. To maximize the chances that audit findings will be used and actual practice improved as a result, the audit should:

Demonstrate through data how communications problems are causing problems *in the present* (as opposed to speculating about their future impact). At the same time, the audit should reinforce practices that are current organizational strengths.

Generate specific recommendations for *how* actual communication practice can be enhanced. Data need to be linked to concrete actions.

Make transparent the organizational benefits of adopting those actions; in addition to the weaknesses they are designed to address.

Prioritize recommendations so organizations are not immobilized by the prospect of implementing them.⁵

In terms of frequency, formal communications audits should be conducted about every five years. Informal audits on which organizations internally revisit their strategic communications capacity and performance levels may be done more frequently. Audits should also be considered after an organization experiences a critical incident that might affect communications, such as when the organization changes mission, changes leadership, or experiences a crisis.

Conclusion

As described here, 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. Nonprofit organizations, however, often overlook this type of assessment as a possibility when asked to evaluate their communications strategies or activities. Experiencing the strategic communications audit process, using the approach described here or another designed toward a similar end, can be a critical part of an organization's progression toward more strategic, and ultimately more effective, communications.

⁵ Hargie, O., & Tourish, D. (2000). *Handbook of communication audits for organizations*. London: Routledge.