

Communication Audits: Adding Value and Social Impact to Agricultural Communications

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Abstract

Communication audits can enhance the communication efforts of agricultural organizations. Communication audits identify what is being done well, what is not being done well, and how communication efforts can be improved. In addition to communication audits, usability testing adds value to understanding the use of communication materials by a target audience. Taking steps to improve communications, based on the findings of communication audits and usability testing, can help organizations improve their brand consistency, social impact, and overall communication. This paper provides a rationale for communication audits and provides procedures, tips, and experiences for the communication practitioner.

Keywords

communication audit, usability testing, branding, identity guide

Introduction

Agricultural communication programs throughout the nation are well positioned to help agricultural organizations to communicate more effectively. Traditionally, the agricultural industry has not communicated effectively with non-agricultural audiences, especially when compared to organizations opposing agricultural practices and issues (Goodwin & Rhoades, 2011). One step toward improving communication efforts and reaching a desired social impact among agricultural organizations is to conduct communication audits (Root Cause, 2011). Communication audits can be very costly and organizational leaders commonly do not see the cost as justifiable (Holland & Gill, 2006). However, at the university level, agricultural communicators have the opportunity to provide communication audit services to agricultural organizations at a fraction of the cost they would pay elsewhere. A reduced cost is possible when conducted as a freelanced academic research project or student assignment in a university setting. Offering this service at the academic level would allow agricultural communicators to contribute to Priority Area Three of the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda. The priority area includes contributing to a “sufficient scientific and professional workforce that addresses the challenges of the 21st century” (Doerfert, 2011, p. 9). By conducting communication audits for agricultural organizations, agricultural communicators have the ability to help these professionals develop skills and knowledge that will enable them to communicate more effectively with their stakeholders and the public while also developing a consistent brand. This paper provides rationale for the need of communication audits. The paper also provides communication audit procedures, tips, and experiences.

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Communication Audits

At all levels — interpersonal, organizational, and international — effective communication is of vital importance. People rely on good communication to solve problems; however, good communication can be taken for granted until problems arise (Downs & Adrian, 2004). Many organizations commonly utilize too many communication channels when communicating with stakeholders, making it difficult for an organization to understand which communication channel is the most effective (Special Libraries Association, 2004). To ensure effectiveness, it is important that organizations periodically monitor the effectiveness of their communication and communication channels to identify potential problems. Because organizations have a life cycle and are constantly evolving, they must renew themselves and their communication to survive and, ultimately, prosper (Downs & Adrian, 2004). Therefore, communication audits are crucial to the existence of an organization.

Communication audits are formally defined as “a systematic assessment, either formal or informal, of an organization’s capacity for, or performance of, essential communications practices” (Communications Consortium Media Center, 2004, p. 1). Communication audits identify communication that is working and what can be improved (Communications Consortium Media Center, 2004). A communication audit should be viewed as an ongoing, dynamic process. This means many communication components should interact together. Additionally, the outcomes of these interactions are determined by unspecified contingencies and have no finite beginning or end (Downs & Adrian, 2004). In essence, all communication should be understood as being rooted in both a historical and current situational context.

A communication audit involves evaluating, examining, and monitoring an organization’s communication system. Ideally, a communication audit is used to assess what “is” versus what “ought to be” in an organization (Downs & Adrian, 2004). This can be done by providing internal comparisons over time, benchmarking with other similar organizations, and analyzing the performance levels of competing organizations. Holland and Gill (2006) suggested communication audits should be done by people outside of an organization to increase credibility and objectivity.

Usability Testing

Similar to communication audits, usability testing can be a vital source of evaluation in any organization. However, unlike communication audits, usability testing focuses specifically on the users of a particular product or organization. Usability explicitly means when someone uses a product, it allows them do so “quickly and easily to accomplish their own tasks” (Dumas & Reddish, 1999, p. 4). Therefore, to ensure “usable” communication materials, one would want to focus on and understand the users of the communication material.

To understand the users of communication materials accurately, usability testing can be employed. This process uses participants representing the target audience of an organization to evaluate the degree to which the organization’s communication meets specific usability criteria (Rubin & Chisnell, 2008). Usability testing is a research tool that can involve both qualitative and quantitative studies, from focus groups to classic survey methodologies. The ultimate goal of usability testing is to gather data on current usability deficiencies in an effort to maintain communication materials seen as useful and valuable by the target audience as well as satisfying to use (Rubin & Chisnell, 2008).

The Contributions of Communication Audits and Usability Testing to Branding

Branding involves all aspects of an organization, including the organization’s employees and stakeholders as well as the organization’s products, communications, values, mission, and culture (Kolter

& Armstrong, 2006). The successful development of a brand for an organization is imperative. Both communication audits and usability testing can be used in an organization's branding efforts.

Communication audits help organizations to better understand the state of their organization — what is being done correctly, what is being done incorrectly, and what, if anything, needs to be changed (Communications Consortium Media Center, 2004). These audits allow an organization to understand how effectively information is being communicated to stakeholders. Communication audits can help organizations to develop a brand that is more appealing, consistent, and attractive to their specific target audience (Kolter & Armstrong, 2006).

Usability testing in this context allows organizations to determine how “usable” their communication materials are to their stakeholders. Usability testing can help an organization to brand itself in a positive manner, ensuring its audience views the organization as providing quality services and communication (Kolter & Armstrong, 2006).

Conducting A Communication Audit

The Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources (PIE Center) has been collaborating with agricultural commodity organizations to help them improve their communication through communication audits. The PIE Center is a non-profit center with a mission “to enhance public understanding of issues in agriculture and natural resources through practical research in education, communication and leadership development” (UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2011, para. 4). The PIE Center has conducted four communication audits to date and has others scheduled in the near future. Since conducting the first communication audit, the PIE Center's procedures have evolved to create a sound and beneficial communication audit process.

The general process of conducting a communication audit should begin by gaining an understanding of the target audience that the organization is trying to reach and the organization's communication goals (Root Cause, 2011). The next step in the audit process involves collecting a representative sample of communication materials from the organization being audited. Once communication materials have been gathered, the examination and evaluation of the communication materials can begin (Downs & Adrian, 2004). Evaluation and examination will vary slightly according to the organization being audited, the communication materials provided, and the purposes or goals of the organization. However, these processes should always include an assessment of consistency in look, feel, and design across all materials. Additionally, the information provided in the materials should have a consistent message in line with the organization's mission and purpose (Root Cause, 2011). Assessing consistency will help the organization solidify its brand and image, ultimately increasing its social impact. In addition to looking at the communication materials provided, it is important to look for missing pieces in a communication audit. Auditors should think about communication pieces or messages that currently are not being used by the organization. Identifying holes in an organization's communication processes can help benefit the overall effectiveness of a communication audit.

The basic processes mentioned above are the audit steps the PIE Center initially took when conducting communication audits. However, it was recognized that in addition to auditing hard copy communication documents, websites and social media also were important communication tools that needed to be audited in today's culture. This prompted the PIE Center to build basic website usability testing and social media assessment into the communication audits that it completes for agricultural organizations. Now when conducting a communication audit, the PIE Center will

evaluate and examine a website according to the standard communication audit process and then will take a second step to test the basic usability of the website. Basic website usability is assessed by the PIE Center staff. This process involves evaluating the accessibility of the website, the inclusion of worthwhile content, sensible arrangement, and a clean page design (Lannon & Gurak, 2011). When assessing the usability of the website, the skimming pattern of websites, amount of scrolling, and interactive options are considered. Most commonly, interactive elements will include links to click on and materials to download. Regardless of the type of interaction, ensuring these components work properly is essential. To assess the worthwhile content of the website, an auditor must assess what information the target audience wants and needs and if this information is present on the Web page (Lannon & Gurak, 2011).

Another important component of website usability is ensuring a search tool is easy to locate and functioning appropriately. A large majority of website usability has to do with sensible arrangement. Sensible arrangement includes easy-to-use website navigation. This includes clearly and consistently labeled navigation features as well as the ability to get to a desired page in as few clicks as possible. Lastly, the page design is evaluated. Page design can impact the usability of a website if it is too crowded, distracting, or imbalanced (Lannon & Gurak, 2011). By testing the basic usability of an organization's website, the PIE Center has been able to add value to the communication audit process; however, it is important to note that this is basic usability testing that could be enhanced by designing and administering a test of the website with the organization's target audience (Nielsen, 1993). The PIE Center currently does not carry out complete and expansive usability testing as part of a communication audit, but it does recommend complete usability testing to organizations as further steps to enhance their communication process.

The last component of the communication audit process the PIE Center has incorporated over time is the analysis of the organization's social media outlets. If social media links are provided by the organization, the PIE Center evaluates those pages and searches for other pages with the same name. If social media links are not provided by the organization, the PIE Center will search for the organization on common social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. This practice has been adopted because past audits have shown multiple pages for an audited organization on one social media site as well as pages made with an organization's name without any organization affiliation or connection. This step allows the PIE Center to ensure communications are remaining consistent and effective in the social media world and ensures organizations are not being represented without their knowledge.

The final step of the communication audit process involves compiling a report of findings and recommendations for the audited organization. In this report, inconsistencies, design problems, problematic language, and other findings are identified clearly in a language understandable to the organization. The PIE Center has found it helpful to report findings for each document individually in the communication audit as well as the website and social media. In addition to these specific findings, it is common for the PIE Center to have a few general and overarching findings. When making recommendations, the PIE Center makes recommendations specific to each document and develops overarching recommendations. It is common for the PIE Center to provide benchmarks and examples as part of the recommendations to add understanding to the report (Downs & Adrian, 2004). For example, when improving logo consistency is a recommendation, the PIE Center uses Susan G. Komen for the Cure as an example and a benchmark. In the past, Susan G. Komen for the Cure had many different logos representing different branches of the same organization (see Figure 1.) However, after a re-branding effort it developed a consistent-looking logo (see Figure 2) that still



Figure 1. Susan G. Komen for the Cure Logo Variations before Re-branding



Figure 2. Susan G. Komen for the Cure Logo after Re-branding

The Susan G. Komen for the Cure logo examples help organizations understand the need for logo consistency and helps them brainstorm ways they can make their logo consistent. In addition, a common recommendation has been for the organization to create an identity guide. The purpose of an identity guide is “to establish a consistent application of the brand identity across all marketing efforts” (Hearden, 2010, para. 3). Common components of an identity guide include the mission statement, key messages, taglines, logo, color palette, typography, paper stock, imagery, and examples of what to do and not do (Hearden, 2010). The PIE Center has provided to client organizations both the PIE Center’s and the University of Florida’s identity guides as examples. Clarity of results and examples provide audited organizations with a complete guide to help them improve their future communications.

Additional Communication Audit Tips

In addition to the steps mentioned above, these additional tips will help enhance communication audits:

- Consider in-depth interviews, focus groups, or surveys with an organization’s management and employees to gain their perspectives on communication within the organization. This will ensure any internal communication problems are resolved before implementing new communication processes based on the audit findings (Holland & Gill, 2006).
- Encourage commitment from the audited organization to use the results to improve its communication efforts (Holland & Gill, 2006).
- Encourage the organization to share the communication audit results with employees and, in some cases, membership to not only gain buy-in from the constituents but also to make them aware their feedback is valued (Holland & Gill, 2006).
- Recommend a communication audit every two to three years. This will allow any changes from the previous audit time to be implemented but also ensure communication efforts are still relevant (Holland & Gill, 2006).
- Recommend the creation of an identity guide, if one is not already in place, to ensure past communication materials are revised to be consistent and future communication materials will be created in the same way, leading to a consistent and recognizable brand (Root Cause, 2011).
- Encourage further usability testing on the organization’s website with an external group of individuals from the organization’s target audience. The individuals should not be previously

familiar with the website and should be given certain tasks to complete on the organization's website. Individuals' ability to complete a task and the time it takes them to complete it can provide great insight to the usability of a website (Lannon & Gurak, 2011).

Impact of PIE Center Communication Audits

The results of the communication audits that the PIE Center has conducted have allowed agricultural organizations to improve their communication materials and create a more consistent brand. The agricultural organizations value the communication audit because they understand it is based on facts and existing communication materials (Holland & Gill, 2006). Audits completed at the PIE Center have helped these organizations improve their communication processes. The communication audit completed for one organization was an integral part of increasing its membership by more than 800 people following a communication audit and membership survey. Additionally, the PIE Center has received favorable feedback from all organizations regarding the communication audit results. The impact of these communication audits will be able to be measured and assessed in full once the organizations have had time to implement suggested improvements.

Outcomes of Communication Audits

As demonstrated by the increased membership following one communication audit, communication audits can help increase the social impact of an organization (Root Cause, 2011). Additionally, identifying communication weaknesses and areas for improvement can help an organization satisfy the needs of its audience and improve its brand recognition (Kolter & Armstrong, 2006). If agricultural organizations are able to work toward improving their communication process through practices such as communication audits, it is possible for the industry to become more effective in communicating not only to its stakeholders but also to the public, as well. However, the process of conducting a communication audit does not automatically lead to communication improvement. The process must be followed up with action to improve the problematic areas identified in the audit (Holland & Gill, 2006). If no action is taken following a communication audit, then the audit is nothing more than an exercise that wastes time and money. To influence the potential impact of the communication audit process, the PIE Center stays in contact with client organizations to encourage action and follow-up and offers further assistance if needed.

Conducting communication audits for agricultural organizations has opened the door for additional research and communication improvement among agricultural organizations. The organizations that have used the PIE Center for communication audits have expressed satisfaction and gratitude. Several of the organizations have expressed they knew their communication materials needed improved, but they were too close to the materials and did not have the time to identify the problems themselves. Additionally, many organizations are returning to the PIE Center for employee or membership surveys, focus groups, and communication training. Organizations that have been audited by the PIE Center are sharing their experiences with other organizations, who have, in return, sought the services of the PIE Center. Organizations are committed to improving their communication and are willing to enlist the help of affordable, trusted, and proven resources, which in this case have been academically based. Offering communication audit services to agricultural organizations not only allows agricultural communicators in academia to impact the communication process, but also it allows agricultural communicators to extend their expertise to practical application. This ability gives industry communicators the tools and skills necessary to improve the communication surrounding agricultural topics, thus addressing the challenges of the 21st century and

contributing to Priority Area Three of the National Research Agenda (Doerfert, 2011).

Discussions/Conclusions

Improving the communication of agricultural organizations and the industry as a whole is an evolving process that will take time. However, communication audits and basic usability testing are simple steps toward improving communication. By identifying what is being done correctly, what is being done incorrectly, and what needs to be changed, agricultural organizations can better understand the quality of their current communication and how to improve upon it for the future (Communication Consortium Media Center, 2004). Adding value and usability to an organization's communication materials, will, in return, help it create a consistent brand and increase its social impact (Kolter & Armstrong, 2006; Root Cause, 2011). Agricultural communicators in academia have the knowledge and ability to help agricultural organizations improve their communication processes and can extend their knowledge to industry professionals. Additionally, building relationships with industry professionals can offer further research opportunities for academic agricultural communicators.

University-level agricultural communicators interested in conducting a communication audit should build a strong relationship with the client organization. This relationship will be essential throughout the process, but it is especially important when providing results, which may be difficult for an organization to accept. However, a foundation of a strong relationship allows organizations to view the results as credible and trustworthy. When conducting a communication audit, it is also helpful to be clear and straightforward with clients from the beginning. Explain to them the process, expectations, the timeline, and the cost to ensure the organization's expectations are closely aligned with yours. Additionally, maintaining contact with the client throughout the process is crucial. Communication throughout the process allows the client to know that their project is valued and allows them to stay connected and current on the project's progress. Strong relationships and continuous communication with clients have led to the PIE Center's continued success with communication audits, resulting in organizations returning to the PIE Center for further research and recommending communication audits to others.

For additional resources on some of the topics discussed in this paper, please see the resources below.

Additional Sources

In addition to the resources referenced in this paper, the following resources provide additional information in regard to communication audits, usability testing, branding, and identity guides.

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