

Are You Using the Power of Assessments & Audits?

*These under-used
tools can revitalize
your organization.*

BY LARRY D. LAUER

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Every nonprofit organization should have assessments and audits in its communication arsenal. You can use these research tools not only to evaluate your programs but to revitalize your entire organization.

What Are Assessments & Audits?

With both assessments and audits, you ask people what they think about your current practices. You then use their answers to revise your procedures. Depending on people's responses, your revisions may be minor or far-reaching.

Although you may use assessment and audit questions in the same setting (as in a focus group), their purposes are different:

You use **assessments** to evaluate communication effectiveness and to gather information to create a strategic plan.

You use **audits** to evaluate the content and style of existing communications materials.

Both assessments and audits can give you a clear picture of how your organization is doing and how it might improve. You may learn some surprising things. For example, many nonprofits assume they need to communicate with more people to get their message across. Assessments and audits often reveal the opposite: The organization needs to communicate *less*—but in a more focused, aggressive way.

The marvelous thing about assessments and audits is that they help solve the very problems they uncover. The fact that you have taken time to listen to people in an organized, responsive way clears up many troubles. Just by conducting an assessment or audit, you are giving people what they need—respect, appreciation, and a chance to be heard.

Both assessments and audits tell you where your organization stands and give your employees and stakeholders a sense of participation. Those are the most important steps toward revitalizing your organization.

Let's look more closely at both research methods:

How to Conduct an Assessment

The first step in an assessment is to design questions to ask your employees, clients, board members, or other stakeholders. Create questions that will tell you what these people think about your organization—its mission, vision, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. Give respondents a chance to air the critical issues on their minds.

The way you design questions is crucial. Don't try to find out too much. Remember that you are gathering information to create a strategic plan, and you want that plan to produce real change. Long-range plans and research projects suffer from the same problem: Most try to do too much and collapse under their own weight. Simple projects get implemented; exhaustive ones only exhaust.

After you have decided what to ask, and whom to ask, there are three ways of asking. Each method has strengths and weaknesses, so you should use a combination of all three. If you design the process properly, each method will lead naturally into the next. Let's look at these three methods in turn:

Often, the experience of being in a focus group is so satisfying that participants become immediate ambassadors.

One. Perform a Survey

It's usually best to start with the most concrete of the three methods, the survey. The advantages of surveys are:

- They can reach many people (sometimes even everyone whose opinion you're seeking).
- They can gather a lot of information (background facts, behaviors, and attitudes).
- They can be objectively analyzed.

Their weaknesses are:

- Responders can lie.
- Survey results often raise more questions than they answer.
- Survey accuracy hinges on the dependability of the survey sample.

It's always advisable to consult experienced quantitative research professionals when doing a survey. Asking questions in the right way, designing cross-comparison features into the instrument, and selecting the right sample are essential. While a survey may not yield all the material you need, it can be a solid foundation for the second asking method—focus groups.

Two. Hold Focus Groups

Focus groups are composed of about 10 people who are similar in some way. For example, you might want the opinions of people who once used your services but no longer do. Or you might want to target those who have never used your services.

A skilled facilitator should lead the focus groups, asking open-ended questions to draw out participants' attitudes, perceptions, and insights. The facilitator moderates the discussion, listens, observes, follows up on people's answers, and eventually analyzes the results, using inductive reasoning. (The inductive reasoner bases understanding on the discussion, rather than testing a preconceived theory.)

It's important not to analyze results of just one focus group. Instead, you should conduct a series of focus groups with similar participants. Such series are necessary to detect patterns and trends.

The advantages of focus groups are:

- You can hear people's responses and immediately ask follow-up questions to clarify their answers or find out more.
- You can hear words and phrases which will later enrich communication materials. This is especially significant if you are searching for new, fresh ways to tell the same story.

Their weaknesses are:

- The sample will be quite small, even if you meet with many groups.
- The final analysis will be much more subjective than the survey method. This is why combining focus groups with surveys is advisable.

Despite their weaknesses, focus groups are ideal tools for communicators, for several reasons:

- Focus group techniques are easy to master with some training. Thus, they can and should become tools of every communicator.
- While focus groups have admitted quantitative weaknesses, these problems are reduced by having a trained facilitator. With experience, a communicator's ability to assess results becomes quite reliable.
- Focus groups can be used as a regular part of an ongoing communication program. They make people feel involved and help empower face-to-face support.
- Focus groups provide two-way communication. Not only can you ask what participants think; you can also tell them about your orga-

nization's work. Often, the experience of being in a focus group is so satisfying that participants become immediate ambassadors.

Just by conducting an assessment or audit, you are giving people what they need—respect, appreciation, and a chance to be heard.

Three. Interview Individuals

After conducting surveys and focus groups, the third step is to hold one-on-one interviews. Just as a survey can set up effective focus groups, a good focus group can lead to helpful personal interviews.

You should always use personal interviews to add depth to your assessment. You will want to interview three types of people:

- Managers with influence. These are the line supervisors who carry out your communication programs.
- Opinion leaders with influence. The line supervisors can identify these people.
- Creative thinkers. The best way to find these people is by observing focus groups. It will be easy to spot the people with special insights, with whom you will want to talk in greater depth.

Like focus groups, individual interviews help you tune in to participants' feelings and views of reality. People can tell you in their own words exactly what they like and dislike about your organization and how you can improve. Combined with surveys' hard data, this is powerful information to have.

How to Conduct an Audit

An audit will tell you how much you need to revise your materials for maximum effectiveness. The first step in an audit, therefore, is collect all your materials.

One. Collect Materials.

Gather all materials which are a part of your public relations and marketing activities. These include: your brochure, program description fliers, news release forms, conference materials, posters, advertisements, videos, internal policy books, letterheads, and so forth.

Sometimes just laying these materials on a table is startling. You can immediately see that their styles are conflicting and their messages inconsistent. The need for a consistent "look" and "central message" becomes painfully clear with little discussion. No wonder your instincts

What Are the Purposes of Assessments?

- 1.To evaluate audience behaviors and attitudes
- 2.To gather information for strategic communication planning

What Are the Tools for Assessments?

- 1.Surveys
2. Focus groups
3. Personal interviews

What Are the Purposes of Audits?

- 1.To evaluate the impact of all communications materials
- 2.To perform a content analysis of each piece

What Are the Tools for Audits?

- 1.Focus groups
- 2.Internal evaluations
- 3.External evaluations

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Tips for Conducting Surveys & Focus Groups

1. Give participants background information about the purpose of the study.

2. To encourage people to participate, provide incentives. For instance, hold a drawing for a grand prize.

3. Focus the questions on one topic. Don't try to find out too much.

4. Arrange questions in a logical sequence, from general to specific.

5. Share the results with participants as quickly as possible.

6. Be sure to act on the results. Gathering information and then doing nothing is worse than not gathering the information at all.

7. Don't do just one. Use surveys and focus groups together, and do them regularly.

have told you that you need to do this audit! A clear identity and market niche are impossible with inconsistent styles and messages.

Two. Lead an Internal Evaluation.

Have a group of staff and board members evaluate each of the materials you have gathered. It's useful to prepare an evaluation form for each person to fill out. For each piece, they should do the following:

- List its main points, and evaluate the effectiveness of these points.
- List and evaluate the effectiveness of its supporting points.
- Assess how well the design and style of the piece enhance its impact.

When all group members have completed their evaluations, compare their forms. Their answers will give you a good idea of how consistent and effective your communications materials are.

Three. Convene an Expert Evaluation

It's important to ask several "outside" professionals to audit your materials. You can use the same evaluation criteria you used for your internal audit.

Communication experts will bring a valuable "eye" to the project. They can answer the following important questions for you:

- How do your materials compare to your competition?
- Are you using appropriate new technologies?
- How can you improve your design and still maintain your individual identity?
- How can you improve your graphics and photography inexpensively?
- How can you improve the layout of your materials? Are you using too many words? Are your materials too "gray" with long wordy paragraphs and not enough white space? Would more cut-lines and bold headings help?

Focus groups can give you reactions to your materials, too, but they may mislead you about the best solutions. They will sometimes ask you to include information which they really wouldn't read if it were there. So the expert audit is an important comparison tool. Professional communicators will translate what your audience tells you into workable guidelines for revision.

What to Do with Your Results

You can use your assessment results to create a strategic plan and your audit results to design more effective materials. But that's only the beginning. You can accomplish far more than that with assessments and audits.

It can't be overstated that audits and assessments contribute enormously to improved morale and a sense of unified purpose. People want to help decide what is said publicly about their workplace. The chance to do so is immensely satisfying.

Remember, too, that assessments and audits are a two-way communication opportunity. They're a chance not only to understand your stakeholders' opinions but also to get across your own philosophy. You can use the participatory environment to gain support for management projects, such as total quality management, reengineering, new customer service initiatives, or a more integrated marketing program.

Assessments and audits will often reveal unexpected communication problems. Employees may voice the need for more open discussion or better channels of communication. They may raise concerns about technology, work climate, or management style. Getting such worries into the open is the key to resolving them.

There is some question about whether you need to prepare a final report of your results. You should be sure participants learn the results of your assessments and audits, of course. But to produce a comprehensive document can be counterproductive. "Final report" sounds too final. The real value of assessments and audits comes when they are ongoing, self-correcting parts of your communication program.

The most important thing to remember is to *use* the ideas you learn through your assessments and audits. When you ask the people most affected by your work for their opinions, you gain insights you can't get any other way. Once you've collected this invaluable feedback, don't set it aside; use it to change, improve, and revitalize your organization. ■

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