



# **It's All in the Mix: Determining the Right Communications Lineup**

**Monday, March 8, 2010  
10:45 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.**

## **Content Leaders:**

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*It's All in the Mix:*  
**Communication Audit Helps  
to Determine the Right Mix**  
Monday, March 8, 2010  
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- **Confronting the Communication Challenge**
  - Print/electronic
  - 24/7 cycle
  - How to get heard?
- **Communication Audit**
  - What it is?
  - When to use it?
  - How to leverage the findings?
- **Elements of a Communication Audit & Outcomes**
- **Case Study: American Water Works Association**
- **Undertaking a Communication Audit**
  - What to consider
  - How to approach
  - Importance of data-based strategy
  - Developing a Communication Strategic Plan
- **What Would You Do?**
  - Case Examples and Strategy
  - Sharing Solutions
- **Lessons Learned and Next Steps**

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STRATEGIC RESEARCH AND REVIEW

# Communication Audits in a Post-Digital Age

*Ensure resources meet organizational goals and changing member needs*

A typical Communication Audit in the 1990s included a flagship magazine, a journal, a print newsletter, perhaps, and a Web site. Sometimes, an annual publication would be tossed into the mix as well. Today, Communication Audits are much more complicated with multiple e-newsletters, perhaps podcasts and Webinars, and, in some cases, customized content delivered based on members' needs. This level of sophistication in association communications makes these audits even more essential to success.

For many associations, as programs expand and departments assume more responsibilities, publications—particularly electronic—may proliferate with little consideration for how new resources may bump into existing ones. It seems easy to launch a new e-newsletter, but the focus may have been on pushing information out rather than recognizing a true need that required fulfilling.

Over the past year, we've seen a number of organizations actually scale back electronic offerings, consolidating e-newsletters into a single multi-faceted communication that lets members scan for information they're interested in. And in some cases, members are able to customize content to their specific needs.

These course corrections ensure the entire mix of communications meet both organizational goals and the information needs and preferences of members.

**Refining the Mix.** The results of a Communication Audit recently prompted the **American Water Works Association**, Denver, CO, to combine two e-newsletters into a new, more integrated publication, *Streamlines*. "AWWA had been getting feedback that we were overloading members with communications, particularly electronic communications," says Mary Parmalee, AWWA content strategist and *Streamlines* editor. "The consolidation to create *Streamlines* as

a more powerful e-newsletter, responding to member needs and maintaining revenue, has also allowed us to leverage staff resources for additional content development for print and Web, and we have saved money with the consolidation."

Indeed, the need to better allocate staff resources and talents, ensure publications are clearly focused, and build the organization's overall brand are often revealed in Communication Audits.

"The communications audit helped us realize that we had too many electronic newsletters, and as a result none had that ever-important brand identity. Before the audit, we had four electronic newsletters; now we have two, but we are better for it," says **Thad Plumley**, director of communications for the **National Ground Water Association**, Westerville, OH.

**Gathering Intelligence.** A Strategic Communication Audit typically starts with member/reader research regarding readership and usage of publications and other communications, information needs, format preferences, information voids, and other areas. It also includes a review and critique of publications, and review of other background material such as strategic plans, plus interviews with staff and volunteers.

Specifically, a Communication Audit looks at the following:

- **Effectiveness of regular communication vehicles** (print and electronic) and whether publications respond to members' needs and contribute to the organization's goals and mission.
- **Effectiveness, ease of navigation, usefulness of content of Web site**, ease of accessing/locating information, etc.
- **Whether the format, graphics, and delivery methods are appropriate and timely enough for member needs**, and if they present an integrated message.
- **Effectiveness of print and electronic communications** in communicating the

value of membership to diverse audiences.

- **Consistency and cohesiveness of messages.**
- **Members' technological capabilities** and electronic preferences.
- **Members' information needs** and perceived information voids.
- **Reaction to the amount/frequency of electronic communications** and whether current level of communication is too much, too little, or on target.
- **Opportunities for enhanced and/or additional member communications** to meet stated needs.

A Communication Audit often leads to a next step, creating a Strategic Communications Plan to guide the program. The plan addresses organizational missions and objectives and outlines how communications support these goals.

**Sharing a Focus.** Deciding to undergo a Communication Audit doesn't necessarily signal a communications problem. Quite the opposite: Healthy organizations aren't afraid to critically assess communications vehicles and then use that information to benchmark success and continue to review, realign, and integrate print and electronic communication vehicles.

At NGWA, all publications now work toward the same organizational goals. "Our association's vision discusses being the leading community of professionals that promote the responsible development, use, and management of ground water," explains Plumley. "Every part of our communications, whether it is a journal article on an industry issue, a column in one of our newsletters, a brochure promoting one of our conferences, or a Webinar on our Web site, strives to help our members be part of that community."

*For more information about communications audits, contact Debra Stratton at [dstratton@strattonpublishing.com](mailto:dstratton@strattonpublishing.com), or call 703.914.9200 ext. 27.*