Understanding the Awareness and Effectiveness of Communication Audit in Public Relations in an Organization: A Survey

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Abstract

Communication is an indispensable part of public relations. When one has to evaluate public relations, the first thing to analyse is the communication process, elements, channels and results. The most common way to assess the communication system is the tool of communication audit. Literature and various academic books on public relations have talked a lot about the tools and methods of communication audit and its effects. This study tried to understand the three aspects, first whether the public relations professionals were aware of the tool of communication audit, second did they have any knowledge about the methods and purpose of an audit of communication and lastly, when they had seen the implementation and the effects and so provided with a swot analysis of the tool used in their organizations. 132 practitioners participated and the results showed the limited awareness and maximum emphasis was unwilling management and lack of standardized tool for measuring communication.

Introduction

PR professionals have to deal with communication. The job of a public relations manager of a company is to build healthy and long-term relationship with its various stakeholders through continuous communication. Time and again due to lack of communication internally or at time, with less or no response from the top management and indifferent attitude from other departments, the public relations department face difficulties among the publics of the organisation. All this may affect the efficiency and relevance of the profession. As pointed by (Hon, 1998), “Effective public relations occurs when communication activities achieve communication goals (in a cost efficient manner).”
Since the profession has more to do with communication and when there is lack of communication support from the top management or from middle or from supervisors even from the other staff and line function, this in return may create gaps in the communication process for a PR of the organization. Hogard and Ellis, 2006 stated the influence of communication to the forms of service.

The assessment of a public relations systems cannot be considered without evaluating the connection taking place at some point. Public relations and communication are so interwined that it is almost difficult to distinguish the two. Although hundred of concepts of public relations (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee, 1998) have been established over the years, communication is almost always a key component. (Newsom & Carrell, 2001) call communication the “heart” of public relations practice, while Hunt and Grunig define public relations as “the management of communication between an organization and its publics.

Today concrete information is necessary, assumptions and probability are unacceptable. "Accurate information about how both internal and external customers perceive the communication climate is vital. Illusions, hopes and pretence have to give way to an appraisal of what is. This constitutes the fundamental rationale for auditing communication" (Hargie and Tourish & Wilson, 2000). One tool for measuring the effectiveness of communication is the communication audit. To study gaps between the actual and expected state of communication, Communication Audit has been the best way to reach out to the publics. (Booth, 1989) defined Communication audit as "the process whereby the communications within an organisation are analysed by an internal or external consultant, with a view to increasing organisational efficiency".

Communication Audit is a standardised tool to assess the communication climate and “its impact on wider organizational functioning”. (Hargie, Tourish, & Wilson, 2002). Looking at the importance of communication audit, (Odiorne, 1954) first pointed out its usage in 1954 where he used communications audit an effort to determine the precision and course of communication within an organization.

With practitioners facing greater demands for accountability, every public relations plan must achieve an impact that is measurable" (Guth & Marsh, 2003). (Springston & Lariscy, 2004) define micro evaluation as focusing on the public relations tactical and strategic levels - the parts of the program - while the macro level would measure the effectiveness of the program as a whole, especially in terms of reputation management and stakeholder relationships.
Literature on public relations tends to shift in the direction of addressing and evaluating the relationship between the company and the public. The theories, methods and ideas are needed to combine into the context of communication audit. Public relations experts and practitioners should benefit greatly from this convergence of methods and analysis. But so far, no such attention has been paid to such the communication audit and its relevance in public relations. It is ironic that it is mentioned, although not elaborated, in public relations textbooks but rarely discussed in journal articles.

These all above explanations clearly states the relevance and significance of communication audit for a public relations professional. With these factors, the objective of the study is

**Research question 1: To determine the awareness and knowledge of the tool of communication audit among Public relations professionals.**

The step is required to find out the responsiveness among the communication professional. It is first required to know the level of awareness among PR professionals as whether they have ever come across the term. What all and where had they studied about communication audit. This step will help to justify the state of existence of the tool of communication audit in the literature studied or exposed to the PR Professional.

**Research question 2: To ascertain the relevance of the tool of communication audit for Public relations professionals.**

This step is a move further with respect to assessing the relevance of communication audit for PR professionals. This objective will analyse whether the public relations professionals have idea about the use of the audit tool as what purpose does it solve and how can it be conducted and for whom.

**Research Question 3: To learn the significance of the communication audit tool in the public relations of an organization and its effects**

This objective is with reference to know significance of the communication audit tool for the public relations professionals who came across this tool in their current organization or may be in their past organization. What all strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats they could find in the usage of communication audit after its execution in the organization.
Methodology

Research Settings

The public relations executives under different names from corporates like corporate communication manager, or manager corporate affairs, or corporate public relations officer participated in the study. Survey was done with the tool of questionnaire. Random sampling method has been used where the company’s PROs were requested personally to share their inputs.

The questionnaire consisted of 41 questions with 40 close-ended questions and one as open-ended to know the views and opinions of the public relations professionals of the organization. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Part A is knowing the background with respect to the respondent’s age group, belongingness, education, name of the post held, position, income level, name of the sector etc. Part B is all about the knowledge of communication audit whether the respondents had ever heard of the audit tool and their related knowledge about the tool as its utility, for whom could it be conducted, what purpose would it solve, channels required for conduction of an audit in an organization, who should conduct, when it should be conducted and how often it should be used.

Third and the part that is Part C which is the implementation part, this part studies the adoption and the analysis of audit tool for adaptation in an organization. This part has 18 questions focusing all on the conduction process and the results. Last question was an open-ended question to find the opinion and suggestions on communication. Also, finding out any other related tool used in the organization.

Data Collection

Questionnaires were given personally through appointment as well as through emails. Google form too was used to collect data for convenience. The forms were sent to approximately 400 professionals but only 132 public relations officers participated in the survey. Out of which only 29.5 percent were females and 70.5 percent were males.
Data Analysis and Discussion

The participation was from all the age groups ranging from 20 to 50 years with maximum participation in middle aged category. 70 percent of the participants were having post-graduation with 3% with a doctoral degree as well. There was an equal number of participations from the participants with an experience ranged from 5 years to 20 years. 82 percent of the data came from private sector and 18 percent from government and semi-government sectors. The companies where the participation was strong were mostly new and innovative. The maximum participation was from the multinationals. The companies were more from the tertiary sector inclusive of financial, real estate, professional services, public administration, trade, hotel, transport, communication etc industries. The lowest was from primary sector with just 1 percent mainly from agricultural sector.

To analyse the data, let's first discuss the data question-wise:

Research question 1: To determine the awareness and knowledge of the tool of communication audit among Public relations professionals.

1. To find out the awareness of the communication audit among the public relations professional: 80 percent of the PR/corporate communications professionals were aware of the tool of communication audit. Only 19 percent never heard of it and only 1% were doubtful about the tool specifically.

2. 50 percent of the professionals came across the term communication audit only in their past/ current organization. 18% through formal education, 18 percent from peers in the industry and 16 percent never heard of it anywhere.
3. People who know about the tool of communication audit are all with a good number of experiences, in the age bracket of 40-50 years with 23 percent of the entire sample and all of them have heard more from their past or current organization. 32 percent of the respondents from the age bracket of 20-30 years heard about the tool of communication audit though vaguely from books and through their formal education.

4. The awareness and existence of the tool of communication audit is 40 percent from the private sector. The government sector representative had no idea and most of them were in the category of ‘never heard of’.

**Discussion**

This clearly states the increasing relevance of communication audit among private sectors. With the data more form the age bracket of 40-50 years also speaks for the need and the existence of communication audit in the organization in India, the tool is not new and seemed to have been adopted by the organization at some level. But with few stating they can not explain the difference in the tool used and communication audit, the presence of communication audit is questionable.

But at the same time, it also states another contradictory factor that the use of any such communication tool in the organization was not department specific rather it could be a common tool. This justifies the lack of awareness of the tool of communication audit among public relations professionals.

**Research question 2: To ascertain the relevance of the tool of communication audit for Public relations professionals**

1. Defining communication audit: 15 percent believe it is only used in determining the communication gaps. 12 percent defined it as the way to determine whether
organization’s statements and publications are consistent with value driven mission and goals. 10 percent sees it as a tool for finding out the perception of core audiences. 16% for checking whether communication programme is building right attitude and opinions about the organization. 13 percent defined it as a tool for analysing organizational messages. 34 percent mentioned that a communication audit is used for all of the reasons stated above.

2. When communication audit should be conducted: 18 percent believed that it should be conducted when the Public relations/Corporate Communication cell is created, reorganized or receives a new mandate from management. 13 percent wanted it to happen when a new public relations campaign is planned, 13 percent consented for its need when the organization’s positions, statements, or purpose are misunderstood by publics.

3. People for whom the audit is required: 85 percent felt the need for communication audit to be for both internal and external publics for assessing communication.

4. Stage for conducting audit: 43 percent respondents stated its need at all the three levels—planning, implementation and evaluation. 23 percent wanted it to be more at the planning level than 16 percent insisting at the evaluation level, 18 percent wanted it to be a part of an ongoing campaign and public relations activities.

5. The requirements of conducting a communication audit: on giving rank order to the requirements of money, expertise, management support, time and publics’ participation, the top ranker was Money followed by management support and publics’ participation, time and expertise.
6. Who should conduct audit: 50 percent wanted the hiring of outside agency for conducting audit with 11 percent favoured the collaborated work of agency and internal communication team, 27 percent desired it to be conducted by the department of the Public relations, 9 percent answered in favour of management for conducting audit, rest were in favour of human resource department.

7. Channels for conducting communication audit: 77 percent selected surveys as the best tool for conducting communication audit followed by face-to-face interaction or interview for data collection. 19 percent stressed upon self-evaluation or communication diary for channels of assessment.

**Discussion**

On being asked for the reasons of conducting communication audit, their chosen answers clearly state the areas where the public relations professionals felt the greatest need for conducting audit in the organization. Also, this speaks for forming a tool covering all these factors for evaluating communication in organization. The maximum respondents realised its need when there is department reorientation or when a campaign is planned. Other usage can be during new campaign launch or to counter misunderstandings among publics for organization’s positions, statements or purpose and so it validates its usage both for internal and external publics. More issues were seen in spending of money and lack of support from management with few people realised the need of expertise for conducting audit. With the desire of the conduct of audit by the PR department, it states the fact that to strengthen good relationship within and outside, only PR department can add more relevance by using audit tools. Further it was found that they insisted on either surveys or self-evaluation methods for evaluation. Thus, there can be use of both the methods of evaluation for a complete audit.

**Research Question 3: To learn the significance of the communication audit tool in the public relations of an organization and its effects**

In this part of the questionnaire, to find out the implementation and effectiveness of the communication audit in the organization.

1. Out of all the respondents, 80 percent saw the implementation of communication audit and amongst them, only half of them found its existence in their current organization, 40 percent in their past organization and rest of them could in other’s organization. Also, the ones who did not see its existence in their current organisation but in the past
organizations are the ones who either shifted from the small companies to large companies or from private to government sector.

2. In 42 percent of the organization, the Public Relations conduct the communication audit and in 30 percent, it is the outside agency which conducts the audit in the organization. In 15 percent of the cases it’s the HR department which does and in 10 percent cases it is the management.

3. The use of channel is written questionnaire in 70 percent of the case, only 10 percent used self-evaluation methods like communication diary and critical incident analysis. Also, the level of participation was also seen half-hearted with only 50 percent of the active participation in their organization and so the satisfaction level is half.

4. On being asked, for the suggestions to improve the process of communication, half of them wanted to change the tools of auditing and half of them, wanted to audit the objectives. Even half of them found the process of audit difficult.

5. On being asked about the effect of communication audit, 65 percent of them found it beneficial in achieving direction and clarity towards organization’s vision and mission. 25 percent found it helpful in defining relationships and improving relationships internally. Externally, they found it the most effective tool in building image of the organization and managing reputation. 5 percent even observed the increase in levels of innovation within the organization. Along with the effects, half of them observed the conduct was biased and lacked expertise.

6. While undertaking the SWOT analysis of the organization, only 33 percent of the companies check their competitors’ tools and techniques of audits. The major weaknesses of an audit process were the absence of willingness among top management, as well as the lack of expertise. The opportunities in using the communication audit were reduction in communication gaps with respect to a controlled and reliable communication network and a committed work force. Threats were unresponsive publics and lack of trained communication auditors, as observed by the respondents.

7. In the last open-ended question, most of the opinion were in the favour of conducting a communication audit. Many of them found it new and innovative. For some it can be effective only if due care with respect to its standardisation is done. Few believed it as a best tool for building reputation and building healthy relationship with their peer groups as well as with the people outside. Some of them, even suggested the role of training and so the introduction of special session on the same within the organization. Few
recommended a change in public relations curriculum for adding a special unit on communication audit with practical assignment on the same.

Discussion

The data shows the usage of communication audit in many organizations. But less than half of respondents seeing it existing in their past, it also states the fact that small companies are not considering it as an important tool for evaluation plus government sector still not working very rigorously on this. Also, in one-fourth cases, PR department is seen involved in the audit that clearly states the neglect of the internal communication because even HR too has not seen actively involved in the same. Also, the common technique used is written questionnaires in most of the organisations than the other self-evaluation techniques which has half of the level of the participation. Even the purpose of conducting the audit too needs to reworked along with the tools and process. As per the SWOT analysis responses, more questions were raised on the auditors’ tools either with respect to the expertise or training. Other issues which are of a major concern is the lack of willingness among management which may be again due to non-popularity of the audit tools among the communication managers.

Result

1. There is a lack of awareness of the tool of communication audit among the public relations professionals,
2. The knowledge about the communication audit was incomplete and unclear, many have heard about it but no knowledge with respect to its usage and application.
3. Implementation of the audit tool was seen by the public relations professionals but many of them could not differentiate between the tool used in their organization and communication audit.
4. While undertaking the swot analysis, absence of willingness among management was found mainly due to two factors, first is the involvement of money in seeking professional help. Second factor is time because this may require quality time and involvement.
5. Lack of a standardised tool and need for expertise were other factors of major concern.
6. When checked with the willingness of the public relations professionals, almost all of them desired for such tool for evaluation. Some of them even insisted for the tool to be
designed by and for a public relations department specifically rather than a common
tool meant for all.

7. Other concerns were with respect to defining the communication objectives first from
employee communication perspective as mostly they are more customer-centric.

8. There is a need to focus more on evaluating internal communication as neither public
relations nor human resource department found very actively engaged in the conduct of
the communication audit.

9. Since, the use of communication audit can also contribute to enhancing the
organizational image and help in reputation management, therefore outside agencies
can be used or collaborated with to avoid biasedness and for standardisation.

10. There is a requirement of the use of at least two-methods of conducting audit. Both
survey method as well as self-designed self-administered questionnaire can be used for a
complete audit.

Conclusion

Communication has reached its peak and there is an urgent need to set and assess the
communication objectives rigorously in the organization. It is essential to create awareness
and involvement among the employees towards the need of the communication audits plus a
necessity to look for innovative methods to collect data. The communication audit tool has to
be chosen with due care so that there can be an active participation from the employees.
Employee involvement is the pre-requisite in setting the objectives as well as in choosing the
method of evaluation. But most importantly the top management which is found unwilling to
conduct audit has to be oriented too. Furthermore, the solution has to be found to deal with
the need for creating awareness and training of the public relations and communication
professionals. Orientation is necessary at all levels and forming an audit tool is the need of an
hour. The best solution to the problem, I suggest is first, use of more than one method of
communication audit for a complete analysis should be there. Second, there should be
acollaboration of academia with industry for training and developing a workable tool to
assess communication in public relations. Third and final, the curriculum of public relations
is required to be revisited and attention should be given to more hands-on training to scholars
on auditing communication.
References


