How to perform a communications audit

A comprehensive guide

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You're probably reading this manual because you've read our blog on communications audits. Although audits are usually performed by a third party, we don't know your affiliation with the brand being audited.

So, for the sake of simplicity, we'll be referring to the audited brand as "your brand" throughout this guide.

In this guide, we'll take you through the stages of a communications audit. While doing so, we'll clarify notions like brand consistency, target audience, company vision and mission.

Enclosed with this manual is a Communications Audit Template. We've filled the first number of rows with two examples from imaginary companies. The space above the table can be used for lists of key notions or other notes.

We're going to give you some tips on filling out the audit table and explain what to look for when assessing your brand's content.

Finally, we'll explain how to proceed with your conclusions.

Let’s talk about:

1. Scope

a. Timeframe

b. Volume

c. Channels

2. Parameters

a. Brand mission

b. Brand vision

c. Brand values

d. Audience

e. Call to action

f. Tone of voice

g. Good practices

3. Consistency

a. Stop words

b. Greeting and signing-off

c. Emotion

d. Clarity

4. Evaluation and implementation

a. Roadmap

b. Presentation

c. Guidebooks, workshops and training

As you’ve probably guessed, you (or your consultants) are in for at least a week of meticulous content analysis. But, as we’ve already mentioned in our blog, it will do a world of good! So let’s put on our lab coats and get to work!

First, you will have to:

Define the scope of your work

The scope is a selection of content that you're going to analyse in your audit.

a. The time period for which the content is selected can vary depending on the client's wishes or the purpose of the audit. We would recommend selecting content generated over the last three months if the brand's communication has been handled by the same person or team.

If the brand has been working with different content creators on and off, we would recommend looking at a longer timeframe — up to a year. A company might want to ask you to have a look at a crisis communication case (or just a specific case) that happened in the past, even if it is out of the timeframe set for the communications audit.

b. The number of entries analysed during an audit may vary from 100 to 300. Of course, the rules are not set in stone — however, a smaller number may be unrepresentative, while a larger number will be more difficult to process without the complex (and costly) software used by professional data scientists.

c. Typically, the number of content items to be assessed is decided by the auditing party (consultant) along with the client , after which the client's head of communications sends the content selection to the consultant.

d. Most representative pieces of text for analysis can also be chosen by a consultant if the company doesn't have a communications department.

e. Channels may vary depending on the purpose of the audit or the specifics of the audited brand, and may or may not include:

1. Website content
2. Social media publications
3. Emails to clients and partners
4. Message texts (including chatbots)
5. Call scripts
6. Catalogues and brochures
7. Advertisements (from radio station ads to banners on the web)
8. Other

This is the content that you're going to paste into the second column of your audit table (under Content). If the sample is too hefty for one cell, you can simply paste a link or describe the content in your own words (like in our example).

Tip!

Ourexperience shows that assigning names and numbers (like 001_Web_Ad) to your samples can save you a lot of time and minimize stress in the process. It comes in handy to identify the pieces of text that you've assessed — just in case, for example, you'll need to come back to those particular examples while preparing for a final presentation on the audit's findings.

Assessment of texts

After you've filled out data in the first three columns (please refer to our Communications Audit Template), you can begin the assessment process.

Communications audits are usually focused on a limited set of parameters, for consistency.
These parameters include:

A. Brand mission

Simply put, a company's mission is your brand's reason to exist. Why have you chosen your line of business? What is the purpose of the prod- ucts or services that you offer? How is your brand making the world a better place?

It's important to have a clear idea of how you're going to communicate your brand's mission in your texts. An audit can then assess whether this is being done in a clear and consistent way.

B. Brand vision

While your company's mission refers to your present goals, a company's vision is something more global. It's what your brand aspires to in the future. The ideal state it wishes to achieve.

What problems is your brand hoping to solve in the future? What does your company hope to become? How can you convey your global aims right now?

Just as with the mission, a company needs to know how it wants its audience to perceive its vision. The effectiveness of vision communication is one of the main parameters of a communications audit.

C. Brand values

Brand values are the core principles that guide and direct the company and its culture.
What is important to your brand? What is important to your employees?
What values do you think are important to your audience? Here, too, the same approach applies as with the auditing mission and vision communication.

D. Audience

Even with the most grandiose company vision, you cannot convey your message to the whole world population. If you want to be heard, you need to decide on who you will be talking to — then, you can find the proper words to get through to them.

Who do you think your brand is going to appeal to? How do you see this person or persons? What age are they, where do they live and how do they identify themselves? What will attract them to your brand? What products can they afford and how often?

Your audited company communicates with distinct groups of people, and every group is described by a target audience persona. Each persona is defined by parameters that are relevant to your audited brand and the particularities of the buying process that person goes through.

When describing an audience persona, think of a name, age, social status and whether they have kids or not. Where do they work? What are their lifestyles and hobbies? Try describing in detail the brands of household items they use. Characterise their habits and state of affairs that relate to a service or product. What is their main reason for choosing that particular service or product?

Tip!

Don’tmake things up. Consider talking to your clients and other audience representatives.

Interviews and focus groups would also be very beneficial for creating a really insightful audience persona.
Also, keep it simple. Out of a myriad of possible characteristics, choose those that are relevant to your specific case — sometimes it will matter if your customers drive a car or own a cat, sometimes — not so much.

Tip!

Sincethere are usually several buyer personas (even for niche brands), we recommend assigning them names which can be referred to in your future communication guidelines. You can even name them after someone you know.

For example, if you think that your brand should appeal to people like your friend Alice and that it may also attract partners like your former boss Jen, you can code-name your retail clients “Alice” and your business clients “Jen”. This will help you keep a clearer picture of your audience in mind.

E. Call to action

Calls to action are phrases encouraging the client to do something. It can be an imperative – “Buy now!”, a warning – “Don’t miss”, or a milder “Feel free to try”. Straightforward or indirect, a call to action should always be present in your business communications.

F. Tone of voice

Your tone of voice is the main instrument for communicating all the above parameters to your audience.

Tone of voice is also Writitude’s area of expertise and we’ve prepared blogs and guidelines to tell you more about it.

Your brand's tone can be official, business-like, neutral, casual, friendly, empathic, playful... Whatever you want it to be. But keep it consistent throughout all your communications so that your brand doesn't sound out of tune with itself.

G. Good practices

Besides these company-specific parameters, there are also universal rules that apply to all kinds of communication. Whether you are writing a personal letter, a news article or a business email, you want your text to be readable and engaging. This is why you should try to avoid overly long sentences, confusing phrases, grammatical and punctuational mistakes, misprints, etc.

If you notice any such inconsistencies in the audited content, enter them into the columns in the Communications Audit Template dealing with destructive communication practices, no-no words and mistakes.

Of course, your brand name should be spelled the same throughout all of your communications. The Brand Titles Column of our template will help you take note of any possible inconsistencies.

We also recommend looking at item length. The optimal length for content like social media publications, publication titles and weblinks is easily googleable and worth taking into account.

Evaluate consistency and tone

Now that you've defined the main parameters, what you're looking for is consistency. Without consistency, a brand has no foundation on which to build a relationship with its customers or partners.

- Are you consistent in communicating your mission, vision and values to the audience?
- Are you keeping to a consistent audience image?
- Are you empathic?
- Is your tone of voice the same throughout all your communications or does some content sound out of tune?

When assessing your brand communication for consistency, keep the following points in mind:

A. Stop words

Words and phrases that you find unacceptable to use in your communications. There may be different reasons for doing so. Do you find certain words distasteful? Are they too slangy or too formal for your brand? Maybe they bring up strong associations with other brands and products?

Whatever the reason, you need to make sure they don't come up in your brand's audited communications.
You can list your stop words, phrases and destructive communication elements above the main table and refer to them in the Stop Words & No-nos Column.

B. Greeting and signing-off

How you greet your audience and how you say goodbye to them set the tone of your message and so should always be consistent with your tone of voice.
The entries in the Standard Text section of our table are going to take care of this issue.
The Address Column will be useful for languages where both formal and informal "**you**" is used, like the Spanish "**tú**" and "**usted**", for example.

C. Emotion

Just like in personal communications, not all messages from your brand will make your customers happy.

There may be notifications about incorrect passwords or logins, emails about delayed or misplaced deliveries, news about closing a store and so on.

The emotional tone of the message can greatly differ from its initial meaning (or from the brand's preferred tone of voice).
So, if an advertisement sounds too detached, or an error message sounds too cheerful, it's worth noting in the Emotion Column (and also the next column) of our audit table.

Sure, this involves a subjective evaluation — don't be afraid! There's no objective emotion-metre anyway. Just try to be consistent yourself and be ready to defend your judgement.

D. Last but not least, every message should sound clear

If it seems vague to you, it will make even less sense to the customer. The questions in the Purpose and Clarity Columns will help you evaluate how well your content is succeeding with delivering your message.

Evaluate and make conclusions

Now that you've filled out the Communications Audit Table and supplied all entries with notes, it's time to evaluate the results. Think of it as a thermal im- age of a building — the audit will show you what channels of communication are functioning properly, and which are letting the heat escape, i.e., lacking consistency.

After identifying the inconsistencies in your brand communication, it's time to put your discoveries to practical use.
Here are the main steps that need to be taken to improve brand communication:

Summarise

Write a summary of your audit. Based on the summary, develop a road- map for fixing the communication issues. By the way, our experts at Writitude prepared a Tone of Voice Guide that you can **download** and fill in for this purpose!

We recommend selecting several representative samples of inconsistency and rewriting them (try using the last column, Rewriting Proposition, in our table). This will help you guide the communications team in the necessary direction, as well as efficiently illustrate your points during a potential presentation of findings and further communication training.

Advocate for change

Prepare a presentation to explain the issues to the managing board and the communications team. Start a discussion to find solutions for said issues.

Of course, changes can only happen if all parties, starting with the management, are on the same page regarding both the issues and solutions.

Change management and training

Now it's time to implement the changes! To efficiently improve your brand's communication, you will need to (re)write your Tone of Voice guidebooks — adding more specific examples or redefining the tone all over again.

> Feel free to share these new automated guidelines with your team, using smart Writitude tools and features!

Communication training and workshops will help your copywriters (and everyone on the team) to gain a more profound understanding of the new guidelines. To find out more about communication training, read our blog article.

Tips for Communication Training: overcoming resistance and teaching the tone

Your company has developed a great tone of voice (ToV) guide. It may be coherent and detailed and really captures the spirit of your brand, but the problem is — without implementation, it will rest in peace forever.

In this article, we will talk about:

- **Why resistance to changes in communication may occur**
- **Ways to mitigate it while developing a style guide**
- **Training and workshops as part of the change management.**

Previously we discussed why guidelines for the verbal communication of a brand need to be as detailed and specific as visual brand books. Yet even the most well-defined TOVs face a challenge that visual guidebooks don't — verbal language is simply a more abstract matter.

There's a crucial difference between applying a colour scheme defined by a brand book and producing original written content based on TOV guidelines. A writer doesn't have a colour-picker tool to verify if the wording they are using corresponds to that specified in the TOV.

This means that even the most detailed descriptions of the desired style and tone of communication will always leave some room for interpretation and imagination. And that, in fact, is good news because you certainly don't want your ToV to be a creativity killer!

So how does a company facilitate creativity while also ensuring compliance? The answer lies in implementation and, more specifically — in training the employees who perform the communication.

Change to manage

Since a judgement of what is and isn't compliant with a defined ToV cannot be mechanical, a copywriter (by which, in this case, we mean every person who writes something on behalf of the company) and any managers who approve the texts have to literally train their ear to detect false notes.
So what an effective training program needs to achieve is not only how to memorise the rules but also how to apply them creatively within each new context.

Another objective of employee training is to overcome the fear of change (or rather, of underperforming under new conditions) or any resistance the communicators might have. It needs to tackle their insecurity in the face of change in an emphatic manner.

Enforcement strategies that impose the guidance from above prove to be ineffective. After all, a TOV guide is just a document — it needs active collaboration from actual communicators to work. That is why a training programme needs to be part of a broader change management plan.

We shall overcome (and we talk from our experience)

The training programmes need to be both practical and creative because this is the nature of text production itself. Sometimes teaching involves a lot of joint effort and teamwork. Sometimes we go for individual coaching sessions. At other times, we combine both.

Sometimes one session is enough, while often there is need for one or two follow-up sessions. We have also applied psychotherapy-inspired methods with great success when there is insecurity, resistance and inertia to overcome.

Every time, a training programme should be based on the very specific characteristics of the ToV guidelines, the team, the audience and the brand itself. You will know you fulfilled your role when not only the employees and the core communicators have learnt to implement the TOV independently but they are also able to teach their skills to each incoming team member and, thus, keep the brand’s communication coherent amid staff turnover.

Successful implementation allows the TOV guide to serve as a source of inspiration for employees who previously struggled to get their texts right, by providing them with a firm ground to stand on and create.

If you are still reading this, it must mean that you are either a very patient reader or you were curious to know how long this manual is. In any case, we thank you for being here and hope that you found our guide useful. The best of luck with your audit!