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It's time for a marketing communications audit

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Except for IRS audits, most audits are welcome. An energy audit can show where heat is escaping and how to fix it. A commercial broker audits your lease to ensure the landlord is providing all you're entitled to. Any well-run business regularly has a CPA review their books. There's another kind of audit that you may want to consider: A marketing communications audit.

Whoever is managing your PR/marketing, whether it's in-house staff, a part-timer, an agency or a consultant, they should help to determine your target audiences, what messages you want to disseminate, which products or services are priorities (today), what vehicles you should use, and help to develop a schedule and budget.

A communications audit can help your organization analyze strategies, activities, goals and results. It should include:

- * Analysis of all internal and external communications - logos, website, brochures, ads. Does it all look like it came from the same organization? Is it eye-catching and appealing? Your audit may involve staff, customers, salespeople and key executives;
- * Research on the level of awareness about your products, services and the company itself among your target audiences;
- * Short and long-term marketing goals by order of priority;
- * Review of past, current and potential customers (why are some "long-time," why are some "past?");
- * Description of your products or services - your perception vs. customer perception;
- * Review of past marketing programs, vehicles, successes, failures;
- * Measurements - number of website visits, media mentions, sales volume of past year;
- * Your competition - what they're doing well and not so well; How do you differentiate yourself?
- * A Communications plan - media, budget, assign duties, create a schedule, implement, review.

Of course, the size and scope of your communications audit depends on the type and size of the business. Recently, the owner of a small company asked me to review and rewrite his website content. He had no clear plan to motivate people to visit his website unless they saw it on one of his trucks. One initial, affordable fix: A regular flow of news stories and blogs that differentiate his company from the competition, to be sent to papers, posted on his site, mailed/emailed to his lists, distributed by salespeople. Another: Transform the sides of his trucks into catchy billboards to be seen by thousands daily - with the web address in big, bold letters.

Many of the audit steps can be accomplished internally. But just as you wouldn't audit your own financial records and recommend your own fixes, it's best for a business owner or top managers to focus on building the business and retain an experienced PR/marketing pro to work with your staff to analyze where you are and develop a strategy to help attain your goals.

Some veteran marketing pros offer a complimentary get-acquainted communications audit. A

professional audit can lead to many good ideas - and one good idea can be worth a million dollars.
A good PR person is worth a lot more.

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