

The Parish Communication Audit



***How to Review your Church's Communication
Activities, Assess Their Effectiveness and
Pinpoint Areas in Need of Improvement***

George Miller • CatholicLector.com c/o Miller Resources LLC

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Dear Parish Leader,

A strong "member-centered" communication system is crucial for a parish to thrive; actively, socially, financially and spiritually.

When communications are not top priority, the parish is vulnerable to apathy, spiritual decline and membership erosion.

But when it's given the top priority it deserves, your parish can be an exciting, vibrant and spiritually alive place your members will be proud to be part of.

A communications audit will help keep your parish visible, accessible and welcoming to existing and prospective members, visitors and your outside community.

So give an audit for your parish some serious consideration, because everyone will be rewarded by it.

Take a good look at the guidelines in this report, and if you can use some help putting your communications audit in motion, contact me at the email address at the end of this report.

Yours in Christ,

George Miller / CatholicLector.com

What is a Parish Communications Audit?

It's an objective review of all a church's communications activities, programs, systems, policies and strategies. It assesses the strengths, weaknesses, challenges, effectiveness, quality and credibility of all communications vehicles (online, print, visual, auditory and physical), its consistency with the church's mission statement and goals, and shows where changes and improvements are needed.

A Good Audit Will Determine...

- What parishioners say they really want and need to know
- Where the communication gaps are that need to be bridged
- How well-informed members are across staff and ministry lines
- How motivational and response-driven a church's communication vehicles are by audience segment (retirees, youth, parents, etc.)
- The messages and feelings people are getting from the church grounds (walkways, landscaping, lighting, messages boards, etc.)
- If information on services, activities and contact people is easy to find
- If the style is consistent across all materials in fonts, formats, colors
- If all materials are up to date, easy to read and inviting
- If your church is using local media effectively

When Should the Audit Be Done?

Annually, but at least before the beginning or ending of any particular communications program, branding revisions or major changes in styles, logos, colors or website design.

Who should Do It?

As with any financial audit, an outside third party such as a diocesan representative or communications professional should coordinate and oversee the audit.

This provides fresh perspectives and unbiased, candid opinions unaffected by politics or personal sensitivities and agendas. Staff members or volunteers can assist the audit coordinator when needed.

Steps to a Successful Audit

Consider your mission statement as the North Star to which all your short- and intermediate-term communications objectives and long-term goals point to and center around. It is the overall purpose and vision your parish leaders aspire to: the light at the end of the often-dim communications tunnel.

Keep it short and succinct in a similar way you'd write an elevator speech of 15-20 words.

Set Objectives

Decide up-front what you want to learn from the audit. State specific desired outcomes such as knowing which communication vehicles are best for different parishioner segments, how up to date your information, and parishioners' receptiveness to future vehicles being considered, such as new website pages or social media features.

Define Your Audiences

List all the demographics your church serves: youth, baby-boomer parents, retirees, elderly, race, new members, outside visitors, etc. Identify the types of information you believe they want and need from your church.

List All Communication Vehicles in Use

- State the actions you want people to take from each vehicle.
- Put yourself on the receiving end of each of your audience segment and determine which vehicles are being understood and acted upon, or not, in the ways you want.
- Look for gaps. If you're not getting the responses you want, determine which vehicle, or part of, is not connecting with your intended audience segment well enough to generate the response you want.

Gather the Data

The depth and extent of this phase will depend on the time and resources you're willing to put into gathering meaningful information. Pew cards with a few multiple-choice questions, walkway interviews, door-to-door chats, focus groups and detailed surveys, both print and online.

Weigh the Results

Determine the types of communication your parishioners want by audience segment and how they prefer to respond. Look for patterns emerging, particularly in the areas of online communications and social media that may not have existed before? Check how closely their wants and needs align with the mission and goals you've set for your communications ministry.

Report the Results to the Parishioners

It's important to do this in a timely manner to prevent the survey respondents from wondering if their efforts were worth-while. The quickest way to lose the credibility of the survey and the parishioners' trust and sense of partnership in the project is to linger about presenting the results and plans for implementing the needed changes and improvements that surfaced in the survey.

Data Gathering Approaches

To gather detailed information from a parish-wide survey, it's best to first conduct focus groups to determine what questions to ask in the survey.

Facilitating Focus Groups

- Invite your most active and involved parishioners to one-hour focus group sessions (10 people max per session to allow all to contribute quality responses).
- Assign a person to take minutes and notes of discussions. Audio recordings of sessions are ideal for completeness and accuracy of information.
- Ask a series of general questions about what types of communications they prefer in order to keep informed and grow spiritually.
- From the responses you receive, develop a more detailed survey that you can distribute to the congregation and on your website.
- Spending an optional 10-15 minutes after the main sessions to brainstorm added communications ideas can also be helpful.

- Consider having two facilitators. What one facilitator can miss, the other may pick up.
- Choose facilitators who will respond to participants openly and work well with groups. The pastor or staffers directly responsible for communications may not be the most encouraging for participants to talk with candidly.
- Try to break down focus groups by demographics such as youths, parents and seniors. People will talk more freely and be more comfortable with facilitators and participants of similar ages, lifestyles and backgrounds.
- Invite people to the focus group with a letter from the pastor. Stress the importance of their participation. Without being overly flattering, mention that they were "selected."
- Open the meetings with an explanation of the purpose of the focus group, that it is for the church and that all they say will be kept in confidence. Personal identities can also be kept anonymous if preferred.
- Explain the procedure and say that the more who contribute, the better the groundwork will be for preparing the parish-wide survey. But do not pressure those who remain silent to contribute.
- Begin with a prayer followed by a moment of silence. Then begin by asking the prepared questions. As a facilitator, encourage discussion by the group. Your job is to draw out responses. So ask and listen. And don't talk too much.
- If someone dominates, say something like, "Those are good points. Who else has an opinion?"
- If the discussion goes off track, say something like, "I know we can talk more about this, but in the interest of time, let's move on"
- Don't try to answer questions to which you're not sure of the answer. Just say that you'll pass all the question to the right person. Also jot down the question so the participant sees that you're giving it attention.

- Often, when discussing communications, complaints will arise about existing communication gaps or flaws in your church. Just don't let the group dwell on them and move on to keep the meeting positive.
- From the focus group sessions, formulate more detailed questions for a full parish-wide survey.
- Following all focus groups, facilitators need to brief the communications coordinator, staff, committee or pastor on the results.

Sample Focus Group Questions

- What types of information do you need as a parishioner?
- In what ways would you prefer to get this information?
- On a scale of one to five, how would you rate our church's communication effectiveness with your fellow parishioners____, visitors____, outside local community?
- On a scale of one to five, how well informed are you on what our ministries and committees are doing?
- What do you need to know that you're not being informed of or kept up to date on?
- What communication vehicles to you are the best... and worst... (bulletins, brochures, newsletters, emails, website, etc.) for keeping our parishioners in touch?
- What information would you like to see from our pastor regularly?
- In what form (pastor's blog, bulletin letter, etc.)?
- What are the most essential items to be current about our church?
- What are your favorite parts of our church's website? What parts do you ignore?
- What form of communication motivates you to action and involvement the most (pulpit talks, blogs, letters, one-on-one meetings with priests and ministry heads, website content, videos, podcasts, etc.)?

- What is your overall feeling about our church based on its physical features such as landscaping, lighting, walkways, signage and note boards. Explain it.

Optional One-on-One Surveys

Using focus group type questions, you can sample members from your church's directory for interviews by phone or door-to-door. This can be a lot of fun and often draw out more candid responses than in focus group sessions.

The Parish Survey Form

- Design each form based on feedback from focus groups. Never use a boilerplate survey or one from another church as is, but only for ideas.
- Always begin with a welcome note saying something like, "Thanks for taking a bit of your time to complete this short survey on our church's communication methods. Your input is valuable to help us do a better job of communicating more effectively with our parishioners, visitors and outside community."

Sample Survey Questions

- For the following communication methods (listed), check how often you use them... Always___, Sometimes___, Seldom___, Never___.
- Please make any suggestions you have for improving any of the communications methods listed (Make three or four blank lines).
- What do you think are the strongest, and the weakest communication methods our church is using right now to keep you informed and inspired to become more active and involved on our church's ministries?
- What is your overall feeling about our church based on its physical features such as landscaping, lighting, walkways, signage and note boards. Explain it.

Develop additional questions from your focus group responses.

Assess the Findings

- Identify what the people want, but are not satisfactorily getting.
- Look for trends, such as how many people want the same information.
- Determine the best ways in which they want to receive information.
- Note the differences in preferences from one demographic to another (young vs. old, new vs. old members, active vs. inactive members).
- Determine the strengths & weaknesses of each communication vehicle.

Action Steps

- Develop recommendations for the communications ministry from the survey and focus group inputs.
- Create an enhanced communications plan for delivering information.
- Set new goals and objectives, and a new mission statement based on fresh survey input.
- Present the survey results and planned action steps to the people as soon as possible to assure them that their efforts were valued.
- Have an action plan to implement recommendations with purpose and outcome statements, and deadlines.
- Implement easy things quickly so parishioners can see the results.
- Then work toward more complex improvements as time allows.

Need Help with Your Communications Audit?

Email George Miller at byhisbook@gmail.com for additional information on conducting a productive parish communications audit.

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