



# LAUSD

## *Communications Audit Report*

By J Victor Abalos

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## Background:

The goal of this report is to provide the Superintendent with a review of current and previous communications strategies, the status of the Department of Communications with the eventual objective of providing a proposal for reorganization, an evaluation of current resources dedicated to the communications at LAUSD, and an evaluation of the challenges facing the District regarding communications and outreach. This Audit Report was instrumental in the development of *Getting Out of Beaudry*, a Communications Framework Proposal provided to the Superintendent and other members of senior staff in May of 2008.

## Research:

This report was compiled after conducting research that included interviews, report reviews, media market analyses, and communications and outreach campaign reviews including:

- Interviews with members of the senior LAUSD staff (8)
- Interviews with members of Board of Education (4)
- Interviews with members of the Department of Communications (6)
- Interviews with members of the news media who currently cover or have covered the District (4)
- A review of Communications Plans and proposals dating back to May 2005 (2)
- Communications and/or Outreach Plans by other large urban school districts (8)
- A Communications Review by The Raben Group
- Findings regarding internal and external communications included in the Final Report issued by Evergreen Solutions
- Communications reviews conducted by outside contractors and consultants (2)
  
- Evaluations of internal and external communications vehicles including:
  - Newsletters (11)
  - A review and evaluation of LAUSD's website, [www.lausd.net](http://www.lausd.net);
  - Discussions with staff and managers of KLCS-TV, reviews of station reports and planning documents and a review of the stations day-to-day operations



- Day-to-day operations by the Department of Communications including:
  - Daily news media contacts
  - News release strategies and tactics
  - Other news media event strategies including special events
  - Crisis communications strategies



### **Findings:**

#### *Tactics in Search of Strategies*

#### **Department of Communications**

The current process regarding communications at LAUSD, either internal or external, can be easily summed up as a series of tactics; news releases, news conferences, special events, etc.

which have little or no connection or coordination with a larger communications strategy or overall plan.

The District essentially is locked into a posture of “response and reaction” rather than initiating or directing District-wide or even small-scaled communications strategies.

Tactics are being executed without the context of measurable strategies.

While there were at least two Communications Plans found by current staff, neither the acting Director of Communications at the time this audit was initiated, nor staff, could provide any details of the plan. It did not apparently play a role in the operations of the Department of Communications.

When an effort was made to provide the then-Acting Director of Communications with direction, such as the development of a measurable communications plan, the Director subsequently resigned. The Department is bombarded with as many as fifty news media calls daily. That number fluctuates depending on daily crisis situations (campus crime, political events, or publication of a negative article in the LA Times) but seldom was that number influenced by internal strategies. In other words, when the District’s Department of Communications was able to execute a strategy or tactic such as a story pitch, that effort rarely generated significant interest or coverage.

After interviews with staff, interviews with some reporters who currently cover or have covered LAUSD and a review of the day-to-day operations of the Department of Communications this report concludes:

- The Department of Communications does not have sufficient staff to adequately develop and execute successful outreach strategies. On some days, it lacked the resources to simply respond to the demand by news media inquiries.
- The Department does not have staff that is adequately trained or has the skills to develop and execute successful outreach strategies. After several months of reviewing news releases, reports, web site content and newsletters, it is apparent the department lacks strong writers. Good writing is an essential skill set for Communications staff.
- There is no process to filter or prioritize news media inquiries. A call from a reporter in Australia is given the same time and consideration as a call from a reporter from the LA Times. Local news media must have a priority when addressing inquiries.
- The Department does not have a Crisis Communications Plan. When a crisis does occur, there is no systematic process to develop or execute any proactive strategies. The crisis is handled by responding and reacting to news media inquiries.
- Senior staff was not being provided with current or ongoing media training. This can generate problems when a crisis does occur. Different managers responded to news media or external inquiries with their own “talking points” so there was no coherent or cohesive communications response. This also impacts the ability of the Department to successfully execute any proactive media strategies.
- There is no evidence of an internal communications process. The Local Districts and schools apparently operate independently, disseminating their own materials and collaterals and executing their own outreach strategies. This also generates mixed and often conflicting messaging to external audiences.



- The Department operates “blindly” regarding events and activities in the Local Districts and at the school level. Because the Local Districts and schools generate their own communications strategies, the Department of Communications is often caught unaware of these activities. Again, this contributes to mixed and conflicting messaging.
- There is a lack of consistent leadership and direction provided to the staff of the Department of Communications. There have been 4 Directors of Communications in the previous 6 years.
- In spite of these and other challenges, the staff of the Department of Communications manages to conduct itself with an impressive degree of professionalism. There is a core within the Department that can provide a strong start to a reorganized effort. But leadership and training are keys to any reorganization effort.



### LAUSD’s Web Site

In order to be effective, any web site or other Internet strategy must operate by a Plan. This plan must include specific goals, objectives, recommended strategies, key messages, target audiences and measurement strategies. After extensive research and inquiries no such document was located. The lack of a cohesive plan is further evidenced by a detailed

examination of the District’s primary site, [www.lausd.net](http://www.lausd.net).

The site appears to be very comprehensive; it contains a wealth of materials such as forms; valuable information for District staff, students, parents and key stakeholders; and provides access for internal stakeholders such as teachers and district staff to access web-based email. But the site lacks a clear focus. There is no discernable strategy designed to engage users. The graphical interface lacks a specific or consistent style. The site is graphically uninteresting and very text heavy, minimally interactive, and often cumbersome to search through.

Also, it isn't clear who the important audiences are. While students and parents should be utilizing the site to access important District documents, it is difficult to maneuver through the site to locate these materials. Once found, the materials are not written in an engaging or interesting style that would resonate with key target audiences. The site contains a Spanish language "mirror" site but after review of the content it is apparent the text was simply translated from English into Spanish without any effort to "transcreate" it. It is now common practice in marketing, advertising and communications campaigns to "transcreate" text aimed at Spanish-language dominant audiences.

This process recognizes the importance of ensuring that messaging aimed at Hispanic target audiences resonates and connects and that the content is culturally relevant. Simply translating English copy into Spanish is no longer considered to be an effective or efficient outreach method. The web site also, apparently, fails to provide any primary messaging. It also appears to be static. There is no discernable program that updates the site on a periodic basis. Successful web sites must be updated frequently based on occasional surveys of frequent or target users. There is no indication the District has conducted research or surveys of web site users to obtain this information.

The site was utilized frequently during the communications crisis created by the implementation of the Better Tools for Schools software upgrade project. This could have provided an excellent opportunity to upgrade the site and incorporate new graphic design or at least new content strategies. But the only changes made to the site were to the front page, with the addition of a "button" and content changes for employees. The changes were not substantial enough to provide sufficient incentive to induce District staff to utilize the site more frequently.

#### Web Site Recommendations

The District's web site requires a substantial investment to develop it into a more useful and effective tool for outreach, both for internal and external audiences. It needs both architecture and design upgrades, in short a complete overhaul.

Before this is done, the District should develop a comprehensive Web Site Marketing and Outreach Plan. This should be a component of a long-term comprehensive Communications Plan.



This plan should be preceded by the execution of a District-wide Baseline Survey of all important audiences; teachers and other certificated staff, classified staff, students, parents, and other Key Stakeholders. This survey can also provide key research data to support the development of a comprehensive Communications Plan. The newly-created Office of Parent Engagement conducted several surveys of parents towards obtaining baseline data regarding their attitudes about LAUSD, the quality of their children's education and District efforts to reach out to parents. These surveys contain valuable primary research data that could be very useful for developing and conducting Communications Outreach campaigns.

## **KLCS-TV**

The television station owned and operated by the District is another key property that can provide LAUSD with excellent outreach opportunities to all audiences. But because the station has historically carried the brunt of several budget cuts in the past several years, the station operates with a severe lack of resources. And while the station did upgrade its signal and equipment to stay current with digital technology improvements, those budget cuts have undermined the station's ability to provide much outreach support.

The station produces at least five hours every week of locally-generated programming including programs hosted by the Superintendent. The station also commits programming hours to LAUSD special events such as the Academic Decathlon. KLCS also maintains and operates the District's digital education library that contains hundreds of educational and instructional programs made available through easy download technology to many of the District's schools.

The station has received awards and accolades over the years for both its original programming and for PBS programs that it also broadcasts. During its more successful years the station produced programs for parents, students and even special events programs on a larger scale. But budget cuts have taken their toll on the station. The station has cut its staff several times leaving a skeleton crew for both engineering, production and programming needs. This lack of staff has had a direct impact on the station's ability to generate new programs.

### KLCS-TV Recommendations

The station has already been identified as an under-utilized resource by other studies and consultants. The conclusions reached by previous reviews, including this report, agree the station has the potential of generating revenue for its own sustainability. But a plan needs to be developed to change the station's current reliance on the District, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and other grants for its budget. Involvement by External Stakeholders such as parents and the business community, particularly those with broadcast experience, would greatly enhance the success of this strategy.

Substantial investment into the station's infrastructure, such as field cameras and editing equipment that is consistent with current technologies, is also required to enable the station to become self-supporting. Most of the station's current field equipment is outdated. In addition, the station needs to add additional production staff such as producers, camera operators and digital editors.

These additional resources would enable the station to expand its production capabilities. This is vital to generating sufficient programming to induce sponsors to assist the District in turning the station into a self-generating or at least self-sustaining entity.

### **Other Communications Campaigns and Collaterals**

This report also reviewed the District's internal and external collaterals: Materials distributed by the District to various audiences including newsletters, both online and hardcopy; brochures; and parent or student materials such as the Parent-Student Handbook.



#### Newsletters

The District distributes directly or participates in the distribution of at least thirteen newsletters both internally and externally. The majority of these newsletters are produced as hardcopy (paper) collaterals that are passively distributed to recipients. Some are only delivered as e-newsletters. Sources include individual members of the Board of Education, The Department of Adult and Career Education, The Department of Risk Management, the Department of Student Medical Services, and the Human Resources Department, to name a few.



This audit contacted various District staff identified as “editors” or who were responsible for compiling, writing and publishing the newsletters but were reluctant to call themselves editors.

Conversations with these members of staff and a review of the newsletters provided this report with these observations:

- None of the newsletters has a clear target audience. While a newsletter may have a specific area of interest or topics, such as student health, the newsletter was designed to reach “everybody.”
- There is no coordination between staff producing these newsletters and members of the Department of Communications. Consequently there are no opportunities to coordinate District-wide messaging.
- There was limited opportunity for any other departments or divisions to provide content for these newsletters. Efforts to provide newsletter editors or coordinators key messages from the Superintendent’s Office, for example, regarding the budget crisis, did not produce any results.
- Very few of the newsletters were interactive. They provided limited opportunities for readers to provide input or to respond to content.
- Very few of the newsletters were released based on a schedule. Their production and distribution appeared to be relatively random, simply based on when editors or coordinators gathered sufficient content.
- None of the newsletters contacted incorporated any mechanism for accountability or measurement. There was no way to determine if the newsletter was successful in its mission.

- Few of the newsletters had a clear mission. Whether to increase awareness of the department's or division's profile, to ensure internal access to important news and information, or simply to inform or entertain staff or other readers, editors or coordinators contacted for this audit were not able to articulate a clear goal or objective for the newsletter. The most common response was the newsletter was initiated by a department head or director and staff was directed to write and distribute it.
- None of the newsletters utilized a style or "look" that was consistent with the District's style. Font styles, colors, graphical interfaces, language, size, even paper stock all ranged significantly. Viewed as a collection, it was difficult to see how they connected to each other or to LAUSD. The lack of a District Style Guide or similar document is clearly at fault for this. Any collateral produced by the District, whether by a department, division, local district or school campus, is not subject to any kind of review process.

#### Newsletter Recommendations

- In spite of the lost or inconsistent messaging opportunities created by all of these newsletters, they still represent a significant communications resource for the District. In order to utilize them more effectively, an effort must be made to coordinate the editors and other newsletter producers to agree to publish Central Office or Department of Communications material when submitted. These newsletters, after all, are utilizing District resources for publication.
- In addition, newsletter editors should be encouraged to provide a simple Plan or Outline that delineates their primary goals or objectives (increase awareness about the role of the Department of Risk Management, for example), focus their audience (Risk Management staff, K-12 teachers, Local District 5 administrators, etc.), and resolve to "publish" on a regular basis (monthly, quarterly, every Tuesday, etc.).

- The Central Office, through the Department of Communications, should, in turn, provide professional development opportunities for newsletter staff in the form of writing or photography workshops and other support.
- All newsletters utilizing District resources should be gradually, but firmly, brought back into conformance with District style guidelines. This would, of course, necessitate the development of a District-wide Style Guide.

### Parent and Student Outreach



For the purposes of this report, the communications audit was not able to include communications efforts by the newly-created Office of Civic & Parent Engagement. Although that Office should play an integral role in any communications effort, coordination with that office was unsuccessful through no fault of any Office of Civic & Parent Engagement staff.

This audit did review one of the central pieces of collateral delivered to nearly every LAUSD family, the Parent-Student Handbook. The Office of Civic and Parent Engagement, while involved, is not responsible for production of this vital collateral. In fact, it was difficult to ascertain which office was responsible. While staff from the Chief Operations Officer coordinated its publication, they relied on other departments to provide content, although there was no designated “editor” for this important publication. In fact, the Department of Communications played a minor role in this effort. The only District Department that apparently has significant influence in the editorial process for the Parent-Student Handbook was the Office of the General Counsel. While this may be important regarding liability and other legal considerations, from a communications perspective, this process generates a publication that fails to connect with two of the most important audiences for LAUSD.

Because of its reach and penetration, this publication is arguably one of the most important produced by the District, yet the research, writing, editing and publication process does not follow any processes normally associated with a traditional publication. It is assembled like a product manufactured in a factory. It is passed from department to department, where staff is expected to “add on” their relevant content, until it is deemed “full.” Then, after review by the District’s lawyers, it is sent to the publisher. This report found the Handbook to be one of the best examples of a lost communications opportunity. It fails to connect with either parents or students for a variety of reasons. It satisfies internal requirements by publishing information deemed necessary for parents and students but it does so in a fashion that does not resonate with either audience. Evidence of this can be found simply by asking almost any LAUSD parent or student. In fact, none of the staff interviewed for this audit found the Handbook to be useful. Yet, it continues to be published annually, without change. Efforts to change the Handbooks’ publication process by communications staff and consultants were met with strong resistance internally.



#### Newsletter Recommendations

The Handbook needs to be completely redesigned, both graphically and content-wise. While it must contain certain regulations and notices, there is no reason why this material must be presented in the dry and uninteresting form in which it is currently published. It should also be produced to reside as a downloadable file on the District’s web site so it can be found easily and referenced by students and parents. Hard copy forms of these types of publications are seldom utilized by other school districts anymore.

In addition, the cost of producing and publishing (if necessary) this document can be offset with the assistance of strategic partners. The Los Angeles businesses community would probably welcome the opportunity to insert corporate messaging and have access to such a large and important audience, in exchange for subsidizing the costs of production. This would save the District tens of thousands of dollars every year, and generate new and influential relationships with Key Stakeholders.

## **Overall Recommendations**

LAUSD, the second largest school district in the country, does not operate or maintain a communications effort worthy of a district of its size and importance in the community. It is an entity without media “capital,” in that any attention or publicity generated by or focused on the District is almost always negative.

LAUSD is an organization treated suspiciously by the local news media, hence, coverage is generally negative. This suspicion is based, partly, on the historical as well as political role LAUSD has played in this city.

But primarily, the District’s image is directly connected in the minds of most of LAUSD’s critics to the simple question: how well (or how poorly) are its students faring? While the District’s test scores have shown small signs of improvement, the high dropout rate continues to alarm parents and other stakeholders. And the fact dozens of LAUSD schools are currently in Program Improvement status under state and federal guidelines makes it difficult to launch or sustain any serious effort to improve the District’s image. There is also sufficient evidence that forces outside the District contribute heavily to efforts to discredit it in the court of public opinion.

Because the District does not, and has not in years, engaged in an aggressive and sustained effort to generate positive news flow, these outside forces will continue to enjoy success in reinforcing the District’s negative image. Nevertheless, there are many communications case studies that have reviewed similar situations involving large organizations or corporations. These case studies have proposed solutions to these types of communications challenges that are not complicated, nor, in the opinion of this report, unknown to LAUSD senior administrators or members of the Board of Education. They require an investment of resources, the hiring of qualified and competent communications professionals, sustained support for those professionals while they develop and execute short-term and long-range communications strategies based on a comprehensive and measurable communications plan.

That plan needs to be developed with the participation of key internal “players,” such as the Superintendent, the Deputy Superintendent, other members of senior staff such as the COO and the CFO, members of the Board of Education, leaders of some key internal and external parent groups, leaders of the larger unions such UTLA and SEIU, and some external stakeholders such as a panel of communications experts convened for this purpose.

A District-wide baseline survey should then be conducted in order to learn more about target audiences, develop recommended strategies, and test key messages. This survey should also be utilized to develop standards by which all future communications efforts should be measured. And lastly, the Department of Communications should be significantly reorganized in order to effectively execute this Communications Plan.

