



An introduction to the AB Acid Test Audit

Telling you something you don't already know

"Don't do a thing – don't pick up the phone, write an e-mail or organise a briefing – until you can honestly say that you understand your organisation's strategy. Not the strategy as written in the three-year plan, but the strategy inside the minds of those who developed it and those charged with making it happen."

Tim Buckley, managing director, AB



Why we created Acid Test

Every organisation is a collection of individuals. Whether you are the CEO or a frontline colleague, you have a view on the goals, priorities and challenges facing your company.

Successful internal communication can be measured by how far the views of these individuals converge.

Are the goals of the organisation, as articulated by your CEO, permeating through the ranks? Are middle managers focusing on a totally different set of issues? Do frontline employees understand what's on the mind of their leaders? Just as importantly, do leaders understand what's on the mind of frontline employees?

Acid Test gives you a privileged peek inside the minds of those running and working for your company. It enables you to diagnose Communication Gaps – where understanding is breaking down. Then it gives you solid, practical recommendations on plugging these gaps.



How does it work?

As a client, you want more than a diagnosis of what's wrong with internal communications. You probably have a good idea already. We see little benefit in playing back what you already know or assume. Our goal is to tell you something useful – something you *don't* already know – and to conclude with a practical action plan so you can start improving internal communications immediately.

Acid Test uses qualitative research techniques to produce hard data:

- It takes the form of confidential interviews where each person is asked a bespoke set of questions about your organisation.
- The exact questions are developed in advance with you. They usually include questions covering:
 - People's understanding of your company's strategy and their own role within it
 - The obstacles facing the business, both internal and external
 - People's vision of success for the company
 - An assessment of internal communication tools and channels, both existing and potential
 - The risks and obstacles associated with initiatives to improve internal communications
 - Whether people feel their voice is heard.
- Everyone, from the CEO to the most junior employee, is asked *exactly the same questions*.



- All interviewees give their responses anonymously. They are told to be totally frank and open. The interviews are recorded verbatim by hand. We protect the anonymity of all interviewees to encourage each one to be open and honest. Quotes used in the final report are never attributed to any specific individual.
- We start by interviewing the CEO or equivalent.
- Then we interview each member of his or her senior management team.
- Finally, we interview a representative sample of employees from middle management to the frontline.
- We collate and analyse the responses and produce a detailed report that identifies the most important gaps and weaknesses in communications and gives practical ways of plugging each gap.
- We look for the obvious gaps first. Do members of a senior management share the same strategic goals? Do they agree on the obstacles to achieving these goals?
- Then we look for the more subtle gaps. Do they place a different emphasis on different issues? Do they use the same vocabulary when talking about the business? Next, we look for gaps within and between all other levels.
- We make a series of recommendations – quick wins and longer term solutions – to plug each gap. This may necessitate developing clearer messages, developing existing channels, creating new ones or designing training.
- Usually, we work with you to produce a presentation for your management team. In our experience, senior executives find the results particularly illuminating because they have been personally involved in the process.



Why involve the senior team?

Acid Test works on the principle that, within the best performing companies, the senior team, middle management and the frontline know what's on each other's mind. They share a common vision of success, common priorities and a common language.

For us to test that understanding – and pinpoint where it is failing – we need to understand what's on the mind of the CEO and his, or her, leadership team. How do they articulate company strategy? What vocabulary do they use? How do they see the opportunities and challenges facing the organisation? What's their vision of success?

What's in it for me?

- You are given fresh and valuable insights, impossible to get through traditional survey techniques.
- You are given a series of quick wins to start addressing the most damaging communication gaps immediately.
- The time and money you spend communicating will be better directed.
- We can repeat Acid Test a year later and *prove* people's understanding has increased.
- We'll give you advice and guidance throughout the entire process and ensure genuine skills transfer.



What's the first step?

Before we start, we always produce a detailed timetable and estimate of our costs – and agree this with you before we begin.

We work with you to determine exactly what you want to test, and write the questionnaire accordingly. We discuss the right number of interviews to undertake – usually, we recommend undertaking enough interviews for patterns to start emerging.

We would also discuss how and when you and your team would like to be involved in the process. We like Acid Test to be collaborative – we never disregard the skills, experience and knowledge of you and your team.



Case studies – measurement, audits and creation of new channels

Creation of a refreshed suite of internal communications

For **Barclays Bank**, we undertook a major UK-wide channel audit, restructured its editorial function, established a new outsourced design team and launched a new suite of internal magazines – *The Barclays Globe*. During the audit phase of this project, AB uncovered more than 40 publications with an estimated cost of more than £1 million.

Having assessed each in terms of purpose, cost, brand adherence and quality, we then held a series of focus groups across the UK and developed a new suite of publications, together with templates and processes for project-focused and intranet publications.

We supported the creation of the new editorial Centre of Excellence, which had the task of delivering the publication suite and managing the Group's other channels. This was a significant change programme involving the introduction of new staff, roles, capabilities and working practices.

Our new suite of communications included a Group-wide magazine, produced in six editions for each division, plus a refresh intranet and templates for local paper and electronic communications.



Worldwide channel audit

For **Rolls-Royce**, we conducted a worldwide channel audit measuring the effectiveness of intranet, paper-based and face-to-face communications across several European countries. Our findings looked at the level of two-way communication and engagement across these different channels. The result was a new strategy for internal communication across the organisation.

AB Acid Test Audit

The British Red Cross wanted to overhaul its communication activities, create greater engagement among its 35,000 volunteers and communicate its goals and values for the 21st century. We conducted an AB Acid Test with a representative sample of volunteers, staff and senior personnel, including every member of the board. We produced a comprehensive report, containing findings and recommendations, which we presented to the organisation's management committee. The head of internal communications subsequently wrote his IC plan for the year ahead, implementing our recommendations in full.

Communication audit following an acquisition

Initially **Hallmark** approached AB to launch a publication – because all its internal attempts had failed. However, because of the false starts, we decided to carry out the AB Acid Test to identify what sort of publication should be launched into the organisation.

The audit findings showed some serious issues with very basic communication functions across the business – including the fact that after growth through several acquisitions and limited integration, there was little cohesion to the culture and processes in the business.



In our report, we recommended that the board sought to further integrate some of the basic day-to-day processes before trying to launch a company-wide magazine. Any publication launched into that environment would have failed, regardless of who was producing it. A year after the audit, and with more resource put into the internal communications function, a publication was launched by AB, which is still going strong today.

Want to know more?

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We'll be delighted to hear from you and discuss your requirements in person.