



# The Visitor Experience and Standards Alignment Audit: A Framework for Ombuds Programs

MARTHA N. PATRICK

## ABSTRACT

The Visitor Experience and Standards Alignment Audit is a self-assessment framework and process designed specifically for ombuds programs. The audit is grounded in the customer-focused service improvement principles of Jan Carlzon and draws from the theories of learning organizations developed by Chris Argyris and Peter Senge. The audit takes participants through a series of stages and exercises with two primary goals: understanding and improving our visitors' experience and increasing our fidelity to our professional and operational standards. The audit process is designed to be iterative and its insights to provide data needed for continual improvement.

## KEYWORDS

Ombuds, visitor, experience, standards, audit, assessment

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*“An individual without information can’t take responsibility.  
An individual with information can’t help but take responsibility.”*  
- Jan Carlzon

The Visitor Experience and Standards Alignment audit (VXSA audit) is a program assessment framework that I developed for use in my previous ombuds program. The VXSA audit was developed with the goal of understanding and improving the experience of ombuds visitors while simultaneously examining a program’s practices for alignment with key professional ethics and standards. The audit guides us in identifying and addressing the barriers and challenges our visitors might experience in understanding, accessing, and using our services — allowing us to strategically improve our service delivery to our visitors, the integrity of our practice, and our value to our organization.

## **BACKGROUND**

The audit is a tool for self-assessment — an essential component of reflective practice. I developed this framework six years ago during a period of rapid change in my ombuds program. Since its founding in 1970, the office had been directed by a series of faculty members serving three-year terms supported by one professional ombuds and an office manager. Between 2015 and 2017 we transitioned to a professional director and received funding to add a third full-time ombuds. With a new charter, new leadership, and a newly formed team, we began a strategic planning process.

I designed the audit for use in our planning out of concern that our program’s past practices and certain proposed new practices needed careful review and consideration. I had two main goals in developing the process: first, to ensure that we centered the experience of our visitors in considering any changes we would make; second, to systematically scrutinize our current and proposed practices for alignment with the four International Ombuds Association standards: independence, impartiality, informality, and confidentiality.

The framework for the audit is based on principles developed in the 1980s by Jan Carlzon, a Swedish business executive credited with the remarkable turnaround of Scandinavian Airlines. Carlzon’s revolutionary “Putting People First” principles, outlined in his book *Moments of Truth* (1989) have been further developed and utilized in a wide range of sectors to improve customer service or user experience. These principles are the basis for a variety of management tools including the “customer journey maps” popular in the retail sector and the “user experience designs” developed by technology companies (Kalbach, 2020; King, 2008; Luchs, et al., 2015).

The audit process is further informed by two theories from the field of organizational development. First, Chris Argyris’ (1977) pioneering work on continual improvement through “double-loop learning,” a learning process that requires us to look beyond and beneath our own practices to interrogate our underlying beliefs and assumptions. The audit also leverages the mindset and strategies of “learning organizations” as described by Peter Senge (2010). In Senge’s theory, learning organization members are encouraged to practice group inquiry, reflection, and innovation. The VXSA audit process incorporates principles and practices from both theoretical models.

## **BENEFITS**

In its initial stages the VXSA audit uses the principles of human-centered design, taking a holistic, outside-in look at a visitor’s experience when using ombuds services. By analyzing a visitor’s interactions with our program, we are able to identify known or potential barriers, frustrations, and



inconsistencies. We are further able to use the audit framework to check for operational alignment with our professional values, ethics, and standards. Using this information, we can devise strategies to improve our visitors' experience and address operational misalignments. While the audit examines our standards alignment as experienced by our visitors, we can and should also review our underlying practices and assumptions. The audit process promotes conversation, reflection, problem-solving, innovation, and a more deeply aligned mental model. The information and insights gained through the audit process provide us with critical feedback and strategic input for use in planning and prioritizing.

Trust and integrity are essential to our work as ombuds. Many of our visitors report feeling stressed and vulnerable and seek us out because they are grappling with sensitive, high-stakes situations. Being understood to be trustworthy is crucial to being effective in our role. In his book *The Speed of Trust* (2008), Stephen M. R. Covey writes, "trust is a pragmatic, tangible, actionable asset that you can create" (p. 2). The VXSA audit process is a practical approach that can guide us toward understanding actionable steps we can take in the development of trust. The benefits are many — an improved experience for our visitors, deepened fidelity to our ethics and values, and increased trust in our services — all leading to greater effectiveness for our visitors and our organization.

## PROCESS

VXSA audits can be conducted by any size ombuds office and in any number of ways. For example, solo practitioners can complete this exercise on their own by drawing from past observations, anecdotal feedback, and available data — and there is much to be gained in doing so. Ideally the audit process engages a team of program staff and uses data from a range of sources. It is important to engage all staff who have contact with visitors — including those responsible for outreach, reception, and data entry. In later iterations it might be useful to engage selected external stakeholders and cast a wider net for data to inform your process.

You might set aside a full day or more to conduct the audit as an immersive process or you could work over the course of several shorter meetings. There are benefits to both approaches. You might take turns leading the exercise or consider enlisting an outside facilitator. You should strive to create an environment that encourages open discussion, challenging questions, brainstorming, simulations, and role plays. To increase engagement, it can be useful to have each participant adopt a fictional persona representing a constituency served by your program as you move through the phases. It also helps to include options for written input to accommodate more introverted participants. During the process, you might use a whiteboard, sticky notes, or tech tools to capture information and ideas. I have provided a simple spreadsheet [template](https://bit.ly/3hhHF2D) (<https://bit.ly/3hhHF2D>) that you are welcome to download and edit for your use.

Process options:

- Time - plan one or more full days or several shorter meetings
- Participants - solo practitioner, program team, selected stakeholders
- Facilitation - designated participant facilitator, participants take turns, outside facilitator
- Tools - data analysis, brainstorming, writing exercises, personas, simulations, role plays, etc.
- Recording - designated scribe, white board, sticky notes, spreadsheet, etc.
- Product - audit spreadsheet, narrative, visual journey map, or other

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

The units of measurement in the VXSA audit are qualitative rather than quantitative. The audit looks at the many points where visitors might form an impression of your office or have a direct



experience with your services. These “touchpoints” could include a description of your services in a resource listing, the specifics of your intake process, or a post-service survey. The audit seeks to identify “pain points”: aspects of the visitor experience that might cause frustration or undermine trust. Other areas of audit include your professional ethics and practice standards. The following will be key elements of the audit:

- Ethics/Standards - independence, impartiality, informality, confidentiality, and others
- Touchpoints - points of impression, engagement, contact, or exchange
- Pain Points - negative impressions, barriers, frustrations, inconsistencies
- Experience - visitors’ experiences, needs, perceptions, or feelings at various touchpoints

#### Visitor Experience Phases

1. Awareness - how visitors might become aware of your program
2. Engagement - initiating contact and appointment-setting
3. Consultation - arriving/connecting, intake, consultation, and resolution services
4. Follow-up - closure, notes, surveys, etc.

### **STAGE ONE: STANDARDS FOCUS**

It is best to begin the audit process with a discussion of the ethics and standards adopted by your office. This discussion provides an opportunity for your team to develop and articulate a shared understanding of the core principles guiding your program and services. The International Ombuds Association’s ethical principles for organizational ombuds (independence, impartiality, informality, and confidentiality) should be your starting point. To these you can add other service standards that guide your practice. In keeping with Mary Rowe’s (2021) emphasis on the importance of ombuds in providing a “zero-barrier” option within dispute resolution systems, the fifth standard our office selected was “accessibility,” which we defined in the broadest possible terms. You may find that you want to refine or expand your list of service standards as you move through or revisit the process.

### **STAGE TWO: VISITOR EXPERIENCE FOCUS**

The next step is the outside-in work of inventorying visitor touchpoints, experiences, and pain points throughout each phase of the visitor experience. You would typically start by generating an exhaustive list of the various channels through which visitors might become aware of your program. This could include print materials, your website, resource listings, orientations, referring offices, and more. For my program, awareness touchpoints also included the mention of our office as an informal resource in our collective bargaining agreements and several campus policies. Once this list is complete, you will proceed with the same exercise, looking at your visitors’ touchpoints through the next three visitor experience phases: engagement, consultation, and follow-up.

Pain points come to light through a process of recounting visitor feedback, reviewing available data, and conducting simulations. A simulation can be conducted by assuming the perspective of a potential visitor with no knowledge of your program. The process might begin with a simple web search — either through a search engine using your organization’s name or through the search function on your organization’s website. In conducting the simulation, you might consider these questions:

- What search terms might a potential visitor use if they aren’t familiar with “ombuds”?
- What results do you get when using those search terms?
- Do you easily find your office? Do you find any outdated information or bad links?
- Does your homepage appear inviting and informative? Is it accurate and up to date?



Next you might try contacting your office, listening to the outgoing voicemail, leaving a message, and so on. The point of the exercise is to simulate, as accurately as you can, the experience of a visitor to discover what insights might be gained from assuming this perspective.

Other data about your interactions with visitors may be at your fingertips. For example, at the start of the pandemic in 2020 my office transitioned to fully remote operations. Visitors were only able to contact us by email or voicemail. In reviewing several early email exchanges it became clear that an excessive amount of back-and-forth was being required to set up an appointment. Our email review showed that all too often six or more emails were exchanged before an appointment was confirmed — clearly a pain point for our visitors.

Once you have documented your visitors' pain points you can begin to develop strategies to improve their experience. To address the pain point of excessive emails described in the example above, we drafted a boilerplate reply with information and instructions that significantly reduced the back-and-forth needed to set an appointment. Many strategies to resolve pain points will be within your control, but some may require working with other offices within your organization. For example, when our office stopped accepting walk-in visitors we posted this change clearly on our website. However, we soon discovered that we also needed to reach out to several offices that were continuing to send students to our door.

### **STAGE THREE: STANDARDS ALIGNMENT FOCUS**

In the third stage of the VXSA audit process you will begin reviewing your visitors' touchpoints through the lens of each of your program's ethics and standards. You will be looking for areas of misalignment or incongruence. How does the location of your office affirm your program's independence? How does your intake process align with the standard of informality? What does the stack of visitor files on your desk convey about your office's confidentiality? While some of these factors may not be perceived as pain points by your visitors, they can undermine your office's integrity — and your visitors' confidence and trust.

The audit also provides an opportunity to weigh operational dilemmas when our standards might appear to conflict with one another. For example, the concern for confidentiality might lead some ombuds to require that their visitors sign a "terms of service" agreement. However, this practice creates its own confidentiality concerns and clashes with our standard of informality. Similarly, eschewing email communication out of concern for confidentiality can create a barrier for visitors who are deaf or hard of hearing or who lack the privacy in their workplace to make or receive phone calls. For my office this practice would conflict with our commitment to being accessible. It is important to measure and weigh touchpoints and practices against all our standards, and to do what we can to try to ensure that one standard does not unreasonably trump or undermine the others.

It is important that we strive to bring our visible and behind-the-scenes practices into the fullest possible alignment with our ethics and standards. Covey (2008) writes that integrity is present "when there is no gap between intent and behavior" and that this congruence is what "will ultimately create credibility and trust" (p. 62). Having the trust of our visitors and our organization is essential to our role. By increasing our own awareness and putting our ethics and standards into practice we do the important work of protecting our program's integrity and becoming truly "trust-worthy."

### **PRODUCT**

The tangible output of the VXSA audit process can be captured in a simple spreadsheet. This data can then be turned into a narrative report, a visually engaging graphic journey map, or



something of your own design. Once complete, the spreadsheet or its visual representation should be displayed or disseminated so that all team members own the output and can continue to think about and learn from it. The important function is that the product captures the insights of the audit in a way that helps inform your decision-making and planning. Figure 1 provides an example of a VXSA audit spreadsheet.

**Figure 1**

*Sample VXSA Audit Spreadsheet*

PHASES	VISITOR EXPERIENCE FOCUS			STANDARDS ALIGNMENT FOCUS					
	Touchpoints	Visitor Pain Points	Pain Point Strategies	Independent	Impartial	Informal	Confidential	Accessible	Standards Alignment Strategies
<b>Awareness</b>									
	General	what is an ombuds?	develop descriptive tag line						
	Orientation								
	Website							concern	review for universal design standards
	Policy references	outdated information	change/remove		concern	concern			change/remove
	Resource listings						concern		update Title IX listings
	Brochures							concern	provide PDF on website
<b>Engagement</b>									
	Contact								
	Walk-ins	no longer taking walk-ins	sign, website, notify referral sources			concern		concern	consider offering Zoom-in hours
	Voicemail	no live answer	detailed message with instructions					concern	detailed message with instructions
	EMail	circular auto-reply	remove				concern		add privacy statement to signature
	Appointments								
	Available times	business hours only	offer other hours by appointment					concern	offer other hours by appointment
	Available modes								
	Ease of arranging	too many emails	facilitative boilerplate reply					concern	consider offering self-booking options
	In-person								
	Parking/Transit	parking fees	offer parking pass						
	Way-finding	confusing numbering	hall signage/email instructions						
	Location	for building employees	back stairs, phone, or Zoom				concern		offer alternate modes
	Reception								
	Teleconference								
	Connecting	password required	activate waiting room instead					concern	offer low-tech options
	Phone								
	Connecting	no caller ID	advance notice, office phone						
<b>Consultation</b>									
	Intake	confidentiality concerns	emphasize voluntary, offer anonymous				concern		emphasive voluntary, offer anonymous
	Conference	staff feeling rushed	book staff intakes for 90 minutes						
	Next steps/closure								
<b>Follow up</b>									
	Records/Notes						concern		scheduled shredding/email purge
	Survey	survey fatigue	explore alternatives		concern	concern	concern		discontinue survey



## **CONCLUSION**

The VXSA audit is both an iterative process and an organizational mindset. If you find this exercise useful, over time you might decide to revise or expand the audit's scope to consider new standards, data sources, constituents, or to get more granular in your analysis. You should plan to revisit your audit regularly, especially after making any significant operational changes. Doing so ensures that your program is regularly and systematically benefiting from the process — improving the experience of your visitors and aligning your practices with your standards.



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## AUTHOR'S BIO





**Martha Nelson Patrick** was recently appointed as the inaugural University Ombudsperson and Director of Ombuds Services at the University of Massachusetts Boston after serving for a dozen years as an Ombuds for the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus. Prior to becoming an ombuds she spent a decade as Community Relations Director at the Amherst campus, building bridges and resolving conflicts between the university and local communities. She has a B.A. in American Studies from Smith College and an M.Ed. in Higher Education from UMass Amherst. ( marnelpat@gmail.com)