



PEER REVIEW

PRINCETON PLASMA PHYSICS LABORATORY
COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH, AND
PUBLIC INFORMATION

Conducted by

INTERACTION COLLABORATION
MARCH, 2010



1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The InterAction Collaboration conducted a peer review of the communications, outreach and education activities at the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory on 15-17 March 2010 at the request of Stewart Prager, the laboratory director (see Appendix A), and the advice of the PPPL Advisory Board. To perform the review, the InterAction Collaboration convened a committee of seven members (see Appendix B) including communications and education experts from Canada, Europe and the United States.

After extensive presentations and discussion with PPPL management and communications staff (see Appendix C), the review committee delivered its final reports at a closeout that included Director Prager and Stewart Smith, the Dean for Research at Princeton University. This Executive Summary highlights the key findings, comments, and recommendations of the review committee.

An early discussion with Director Prager set the context for the review. The laboratory and the U.S. fusion community, he observed, are ready to “break out.” They are poised to advance to a higher level of performance and visibility within the global scientific community as fusion becomes a viable option for energy production. Hearing these ambitions, the committee delivered its recommendations based upon the core question of where PPPL will need to grow and develop to support these aspirations.

The laboratory already engages in a number of best practices that include informing the communications office about all scientific publications, implementing U.S. Department of Energy programs for science education, and collaborating with local communities for emergency response. PPPL also has a growing relationship in science communications and outreach with Princeton University, which is a powerful asset.

The committee recognized management’s clear commitment to internal communications and the use a variety of mechanisms. High morale among the staff illustrated the effectiveness of these strategies. PPPL has also initiated efforts across the U.S. fusion community to speak with a coherent, unified voice—a task that cannot be underestimated in value, importance, and challenges.

Absent from these internal communications, however, was a clear statement that proclaimed PPPL as a world-class laboratory, second to none for the research and development of plasma science. The committee urged laboratory management to craft and distribute this message. The committee also recommended that PPPL focus its internal channels of communications into a single “one-stop” Web page on the laboratory’s intranet.

On the topic of publications, the committee urged the laboratory to develop a visual identity with graphic standards. Communication staff should develop new publications with specific goals, targeted audiences and key messages in the context of an overall strategic communications plan. In order to obtain the best value for the money, these publications should expand from traditional print to the Web and social media.

The committee spent a considerable effort reviewing the external PPPL website and had a chance to examine the internal intranet. The initiative to hire a new Web developer is a key step forward and

should be commended. Much work remains for PPPL to develop a website that highlights the laboratory as a key player in the energy, fusion, and research arena. The external website presently has no coherent structure or strategic direction, and overall traffic is relatively low as a result. PPPL must become an active participant in discussions about energy and the environment, the majority of which occurs online. **Therefore, the committee recommends an overhaul of the website within one year of completing an overall strategic communications plan.** New graphic standards should be developed first in order to incorporate them into the new website. Additional entry-level or intern effort will be needed to complete and maintain a new website.

In terms of social media, the committee noted that PPPL has taken partial steps to developing a presence on facebook, twitter, and YouTube. **In order to fully deploy these tools, the laboratory should allow its staff to participate by accessing social media websites. Otherwise, these tools should be abandoned.**

The committee recognized that PPPL has many excellent examples of activities involving the local community, particularly in the area of outreach and science education. The laboratory offers unique opportunities for students and teachers, and the Science Education Laboratory is a vital resource. Consistent support of the science education program will continue to yield nationally competitive results.

In examining the overall organization, management, and resources assigned to communications, outreach, and education, the committee found PPPL well-positioned to advance to a higher level of impact and performance. **Efforts should focus on articulating a strategic vision for the laboratory and, within the context of an overall strategic communications plan, sharing it with the laboratory community, stakeholders and patrons.**

Three themes emerged from the committee's recommendations: (1) Address the need for a consistent visual identity that is commensurate with PPPL's ambitions; (2) Develop a strategic communications plan that makes PPPL known as a world-class laboratory in plasmas and fusion sciences and an active participant in the discussion of energy, environment and national competitiveness; and (3) Address the absence of dedicated communications expertise at the level of senior laboratory management.

The committee recommended that PPPL position itself as a catalytic partner for U.S. fusion community communications by seeking support from the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Fusion Energy Sciences to fund a 12-month, full-time staff position based at PPPL. This new hire would collaborate with other participating institutions to develop a strategic framework for U.S. fusion communications.

Full implementation of the committee's recommendations will take considerable time and effort. After discussions with senior management, the committee is convinced that the laboratory is receptive to these recommendations and committed to their implementation.

The committee concluded that PPPL has a bright future and a compelling story that the laboratory should broadly share.