

## Crafting a Statement of Intent

**In times like these, when both businesses** and business schools are being closely watched, it's good for all of us to embark on a little soul searching. Self-analysis allows an organization to take the first giant step toward setting out common goals and developing a clear sense of direction. Once a school or business distills its identity down to its essence, what it has left is a mission statement.

Most multinationals and many smaller firms already have mission statements, but not as many business schools have been as quick to follow suit. But I believe every business school benefits from writing a brief, clear statement of its values and purpose.

### Who Are We?

On a simple philosophical level, a mission statement answers the question, "Why are we here?" As such, it should be a succinct text that acts as a guideline for a school's directors, faculty, staff, students, and alumni. If anyone in the school's community is uncertain about which of two choices to select, the one that best reflects the mission statement should be the one that wins out. For that reason, a school's mission should be concise and easy to consult.

What a mission statement should *not* be is an excuse for more marketing. Some schools use mission statements as additional opportunities to trot out impressive figures and brag about their achievements. But these details have no place in a true mission statement.

I believe there are two reasons a school should develop a mission statement. First, it signals to the

outside world that the organization is clear on its identity and objectives. Such clarity is reassuring to business and academic partners; it allows them to understand instantly what kind of institution they are dealing with and what its values are.

Second, it helps administrators, faculty, and staff understand why they do what they do. As a result, those who contribute to the day-to-day activity of the institution benefit from a strong sense of belonging. Such a unifying message is particularly important during a period of crisis.

Yet some schools still have not formulated their own mission statement. Perhaps some administrators see these statements merely as gimmicks. Others believe that they and their colleagues don't need to formally state their common values because everyone implicitly understands them already. The worst-case scenario is that a school cannot define a set of common goals because it has not yet established its true identity.

However, I would argue that defining a mission is always a rewarding process. As business schools, we rarely take the time to analyze who we are and how we work. When this analysis is done within the framework of a formal, institutional exercise, the benefits can be huge.

### Audencia's Journey

The writing of the mission cannot be undertaken lightly. It requires the input and approval of many stakeholders, usually over a period of time.

At Audencia Nantes, we first defined our mission in 1998. Ten years later, we began an 18-month process of revision. Though our final

statement was succinct—102 words—its very conciseness meant every word had to be pondered and debated.

To begin the process, an external consultancy quizzed a cross section of the school's students, staff, and partners to find out what Audencia meant to them. Questions asked were varied and sometimes metaphorical. For instance: If the school were an animal, what would it be and why?

Answers were sometimes surprising, but always interesting and useful. Some respondents compared Audencia to a beaver, because of its constructive nature, or to a seagull, because it resides in an oceanside habitat and has the ability to cross the sea. One constituent likened the school to a show horse, because the school is in international competition, does things with elegance, and earns respect.

We found one animal that really represented Audencia—a chimp. Our close cousin is intelligent, communicates well, and uses tools. He is also non-predatory. Therefore, despite the fact that the school is in a competitive environment, it isn't viewed as an institution that guns its way to the top by eliminating others.

We used our annual staff seminar to share initial results with all personnel. Working together, we created another interim mission statement that added subjects and key words.

Next, a faculty member who specializes in ethics spent months interviewing 90 people affiliated with the school. The aim was to fine-tune the Audencia values that had already been identified, while taking into account the missions of other business schools. While we consider Audencia—and its mission—unique, we know that any serious provider of business education will share some



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of our traits. It is a fine balancing act to make the mission statement reflect one organization’s particular identity while also embracing the values promoted by its respected competitors.

Then, to make the mission statement more effective, we streamlined it. The old version was too dense to read easily. The new version used fewer words and reorganized the main ideas to make the whole statement clearer and more forceful.

Once all this work was done, we submitted proposed text to the school’s directors. This version went through much tweaking until a final statement was approved. The process was even more delicate given that the message had to be presented in both English and French.

### **The Old and the New**

About 90 percent of the rewritten mission was inspired by its predecessor, which allowed us to stress continuity. However, the altered 10 percent enabled us to reflect significantly changing times.

For instance, the original mission almost exclusively spoke of students as if they had no prior professional experience. Ten years ago, students with this profile were by far the most important to the school. Since then, executive education programs have expanded, and the average age of Audencia’s MBA students has increased. The phrasing of the new mission makes sure no particular student profile takes center stage.

Another key change highlights the school’s relationship to business. The old version assumes that Audencia’s graduates will “add value” to companies; the new version speaks of students “accompanying” firms on their journeys.

Where the school once considered itself to be supplying a service to business, and described that service in financial terms, it now emphasizes long-term partnerships with companies.

The former version also spoke of Audencia’s relationship with both companies and organizations. Significantly, the new text just cites firms. This reflects our belief that Audencia’s most important role is to work hand-in-hand with business.

### **Spreading the Word**

Once a school completes its mission statement, it must transmit its message. At Audencia, we made a presentation to all personnel, created

a dedicated page on our Web site, and inscribed the statement on a glass plaque in our main entrance hall. We made sure the mission takes its rightful place at the heart of the school’s activity.

So, was all the effort worth it? The new mission statement—and the process of creating it—has caused the whole community to focus on what it means to be part of our school. We have aligned ourselves with contemporary realities and made doubly sure we know where we’re going. Those rewards are worth a year and a half of soul searching. **Z**

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## **Audencia’s Original Mission**

Faithful to its history and to its territorial identity, open onto the world and other cultures, Audencia Nantes Ecole de Management is a School within society with the mission to educate women and men chosen for their high potential regardless of background or origin.

These students rely upon theory and fundamental knowledge in management in preparation for positions as entrepreneurs and managers endowed with human qualities and high-level technical and scientific competence capable of making decisions throughout their life.

Within their scope of action and decision-making, they have the capacity for vision, conviction, and innovation firmly anchored in humanism and a comprehensive general knowledge to enhance the added value of organizations as well as national and international firms.

## **Audencia’s New Mission**

Audencia Nantes provides education and personal development guidance to students who will assert themselves as responsible, highly skilled managers and entrepreneurs having a global awareness and a broad culture who are attentive to giving meaning to their decisions and actions. To do so, Audencia produces and diffuses management knowledge useful for academic disciplines, firms, and the classroom.

By recruiting men and women from around the world, chosen for their diversity and potential, and by making a commitment to educating leaders sharing its values, Audencia accompanies firms in their development.

Thus, Audencia contributes to expanding the influence of the territory that fosters its identity.