



Circum Network inc.
management and research consulting

74 Val Perché Street
Hull, Québec J8Z 2A6
(819)770-2423, ☎ (819)770-5196
service@circum.com
<http://circum.com>

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Assessment of the Government of Canada Communicators' Conference 2002

Final Report

Prepared for

Communication Canada

Heritage Place, 155 Queen Street, 5th Floor
Ottawa, Ontario
K1P 6L1

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

On April 22, 23 and 24, 2002, Communication Canada hosted a national conference for people specialized in communications and marketing within the Government of Canada. Some 891 people attended the conference. The program was based on extensive consultations conducted in the fall of 2001. This report presents an assessment of the conference from the point of view of participants and of exhibitors.

Methodology

The study draws upon data collected through end-of-session feedback cards, through a post-conference Web-based survey of participants and through in-person interviews of exhibitors. While the evidence is sufficient to portray participants reactions to the conference, limited participation to the participant components of the study dictate some prudence in the interpretation of results.

Results

From the point of view of participants and exhibitors, the conference feedback was generally positive. It should be noted that the 2002 conference appears to have attracted participants of a different type than the 2001 conference and participants with higher expectations. Indeed satisfaction was highest among participants who were also present in 2001; these participants indicated generally that they benefited more from the 2002 conference. Meanwhile, the overall 2002 results were not quite as positive as those obtained in 2001. Note that evaluations gathered at the conference were more positive than the ones collected later in the participant survey.

- Close to seven participant in ten indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with the conference.
- Four in ten have already used, in their work, a moderate or a large amount of the information gleaned at the conference; more than five in ten expect the same to happen over the coming year.
- 37% of participants achieved either completely or largely the purpose which brought them to the conference and an additional 37% indicated a moderate achievement.
- Four out of ten participants (39%) indicated they would be very likely to attend another conference.
- Individuals involved in management and supervision benefited most from the conference as did people looking for networking opportunities.
- Sessions involving more participants (plenaries and armchair sessions) received lower marks for the amount of information and knowledge gained than sessions involving fewer participants (toolbox sessions and workshops).

Exhibition component:

- The exhibition component, while still needing adjustments, performed well, with 64% of satisfaction.
- Exhibitors expect to come back for the next conference.

In preparing the 2003 conference, the following could be considered:

- Areas for improvements include:
 - a clearer delineation of the target audience for the conference and for individual conference events;
 - a clearer marketing of events according to the audience targeted;
 - the presentation of novel ideas which enable change;
 - the clearer demonstration of the applicability in participants' work environments of the ideas presented;
 - increased opportunity to make contacts.
- Organizers of future conferences may want to balance issues which are core to the communications profession along with those that are more time-sensitive.

- While the concept of the Market Place was appreciated, the delivery needs adjustments. Participants suggested that more space is required, better sound arrangements are necessary and seating arrangements must be improved.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

On April 22, 23 and 24, 2002, Communication Canada hosted a national conference for people specialized in communications and marketing within the Government of Canada. The conference took place at the Ottawa Congress Centre; some 891 people attended.

The conference targeted communications and marketing professionals of the Government of Canada. While the majority of participants were based in Ottawa, a significant portion flew in for the conference.

The learning objectives centred around three themes:

- building stronger ties within the communicators' community;
- discussing the Government of Canada's strategic approach to communications;
- fostering networking;
- reflecting on future societal issues.

The program was based on extensive consultations conducted in the fall of 2001. It is possible that key current communication issues at the time of the conference had evolved from the picture taken during the consultation.

The conference also featured 19 kiosk exhibitions from federal government departments and agencies as well as private and third party sector representatives.

Assignment

Conference organizers asked ***Circum Network Inc.*** to conduct an assessment of the conference focussed on the conference content, the conference process, the usefulness of the knowledge gained and, more generally, the outcomes of participation. Attention was also given to the information and training needs of participants, as well as their suggestions for improvements with a view to influencing the agenda and structure of the next conference.

The analysis is based on feedback obtained from participants through end-of-session feedback cards and a web-based survey; it is also informed by in-person interviews conducted with almost all exhibitors present at the conference.

Structure of the report

The study methodology is presented in Chapter 2. The main results are provided in Chapter 3 and conclusions in chapter 4.

Chapter 2

METHODOLOGY

The methodology comprised three data collection approaches: end-of-session feedback cards, in-person interviews with exhibitors and a Web-based survey of participants.

2.1 *End-of-session feedback card*

Feedback cards were distributed by conference organizers in each conference session except lunches and the Market Place, and collected on site. This card asked for satisfaction ratings on six aspects of the session and contained some open space to capture participants' positive and negative comments. The purpose of the feedback card was to obtain immediate feedback on individual sessions. In-depth feedback was handled via the Web survey.

The exact number of cards distributed is difficult to determine. Based on attendance and on the number of events, it could be as much as 7,000. In total, 1,459 cards were returned and their data captured, for a very approximate response rate of 21%. The pattern of participation does not

suggest a loss of interest in completing the feedback forms on the second full day of the Conference.

2.2 *Interviews with exhibitors*

In-person interviews were conducted with all exhibitors on the last day of the Conference. Nineteen people were involved. The semi-directed interviews included the following topics:

- satisfaction with the results of the presence, the booth space available, the conference location, contacts with other exhibitors;
- overall satisfaction;
- the most pressing suggestion for improvement;
- likelihood of attending the next conference.

2.3 *Web-based survey of participants*

A follow-up Web-based survey was organized. All conference participants (891 individuals) who provided e-mail addresses were invited, on May 9, 2002, to access a public Web site. They were handed a private access code upon entry to allow for stop-and-resume questionnaire completion. A reminder was sent on May 16, 2002.

As of June 12, 2002, 201 questionnaires had been completed in full while 290 questionnaires had been at least initiated. Based on all 891 participants, this corresponds to a 23% response rate. For the record, four people contacted the person responsible for administering the Web survey to indicate some problem. Three indicated that an English link was taking them to a French version of the questionnaire; a fix was implemented immediately.

The questionnaire was broken up into the following sections:

- satisfaction with 27 aspects of the conference content and logistics;

- appreciation of the different types of sessions and call for suggestions for another conference;
- results achieved at the conference and likelihood of returning;
- information and training needs;
- limited socio-demographics.

2.4 Data processing

Survey data were managed using VoxCo's StatXP software and SPSS. Data were edited to ensure conformity to the established response categories and to limit the distributions of unbound variables within reasonable values. Filtering logic instructions were developed to ensure that the reported data conform to the skip logic of the questionnaire. The data were not weighted.

2.5 Limits of this research

The results of this research are based mainly on a participant feedback exercise which produced response rates of approximately 23%. While the data collected are sufficient to portray participants reactions to the conference, there is a risk that people who elected not to participate do not share the exact same views as those who contributed to the surveys. The results of the study must therefore be interpreted more qualitatively than quantitatively.

Since the survey sample size is small, it is very difficult for observed differences among groups to reach statistical significance. We have noted differences that did not meet statistical requirements of significance when the pattern of differences could be substantiated by a logical argument.

Chapter 3

RESULTS

The following sections present, in point form format, the results of the study. The following topics are covered: the profile of participants, the purpose of participants' attendance, satisfaction with the conference itself, satisfaction with individual sessions, the results achieved through the conference, participants' training needs, the perspective of the exhibitors and indications for a forthcoming conference.

3.1 *Profile of participants*

- Of some 891 conference participants, 201 completed the Web questionnaire. This profile is based on survey participants.
- Two thirds (66%) worked in the National Capital Region; Atlantic Canada, Quebec/Ontario and provinces west of Ontario represented similar size groups (6%, 13%, 14%).
- One fifth (20%) of participants had been in their position for less than one year; one third (38%), for one to two years; 41% for three years or more.

- The area of work most represented at the conference was strategic communication planning (65% of participants); this was followed by writing and editing (53%). Three areas of work were shared by fewer than 10% of participants: public opinion research, marketing and advertising.
- Some participants declared an expertise in an area while working in another area. Three quarters of participants (75%) said they had "great" experience in writing and editing (the most frequent skill); at the other extreme, 3% declared such experience at public opinion research.
- 29% of participants indicated that they had attended the 2001 conference; this is a high turnover rate.

3.2 **Purpose of attendance**

How would you describe your main purpose in attending the Communicator's Conference 2002?	2002 % of participants
Professional development	59%
Keeping abreast of emerging trends	25%
Networking	11%
Other ¹	4%
Don't know / no response	0%
n	201

¹ Mainly multiple selections of the existing categories.
Source: participant survey.

3.3 **Satisfaction with the conference**

- Close to seven participant in ten (69%) indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with the conference.
- Satisfaction with the level of service (speakers, balance, pace, logistics) was high, at 92%.

EXHIBIT 3.1
Satisfaction ratings from the follow-up survey

Could you please rate your satisfaction with each of the following as they relate to the Communicators' Conference 2002?	% satisfied¹	average²	n
Generally, the level of service you received	92%	84	199
Generally, the conference facilities	85%	79	201
Generally, the results of your attendance	71%	70	200
Overall satisfaction	69%	69	201
Generally, the exhibition component	64%	68	190
The cost of attending the conference	33%	49	186
Plenary sessions	65%	65	185
Practical workshops and seminars	73%	73	186
The Market Place	47%	60	173
The registration procedures	92%	86	195
The courtesy of the personnel on site	90%	87	197
The availability of service in the official language of your choice	90%	86	194
The clarity of the program documentation	87%	80	198
Lunches and dinners	82%	78	188
The quality of the speakers	81%	77	200
The layout of the conference centre	81%	76	201
The time available for networking	79%	74	197
The pace of the conference	78%	74	199
The balance of private, public, academic and associative sector speakers	71%	71	195
The quality of the sound in the rooms	68%	65	200
The balance of French and English speaking speakers	66%	69	193
The information and knowledge you gained	66%	67	200
The extent to which the conference met your needs and expectations	65%	66	200
The variety of exhibitors	64%	68	192
The practicality of the content of the presentations	64%	66	199
The contact with exhibitors	63%	68	190
The information offered by exhibitors	62%	69	189
Simultaneous translation	61%	70	96
The contacts you made	61%	68	197
The novelty of the ideas presented	60%	64	198
The adaptation of the content to your context, by speakers	60%	64	198

¹ Percent rating satisfied or very satisfied on a 5-point scale. "Don't knows" are excluded from the calculations.

² Average score after coding "very dissatisfied" as 0, "dissatisfied" as 25, "neutral" as 50, "satisfied" as 75 and "very satisfied" as 100.
Source: participant survey.

- Facilities were rated at 85%.
- The results of attendance received a rating of 71%.
- The exhibition component performed well in 2002, rating 64% in satisfaction compared.
- Satisfaction with the cost of attendance diminished from 33% — notwithstanding the fact that the cost of attendance was reduced in 2002 in comparison to 2001.
- Of the three formats, workshops received the highest satisfaction ratings (73%), followed by plenary sessions (65%). The Market Place scored 47%; while the concept was appreciated, the delivery needs adjustments — lack of space, inadequate sound, etc.
- Different people react differently to the same conference content and context depending upon the expectations they have coming into the event.
 - Participants who treated the conference as a professional development opportunity appreciated the design of the conference (pace, time for networking), but were more critical than others about the exhibition program and the contacts they could make.
 - Participants who wanted to keep abreast of emerging trends were less satisfied with several aspects of the conference, but particularly with the conference meeting their needs and expectations. They tended to have more years of experience than the other two groups.
 - People focussed on networking had the highest level of satisfaction and the conference was very likely to have met their expectations — but they are the smallest of the three groups.
- 29% of participants attended both the 2001 and the 2002 conferences. They were more likely to find the 2002 conference more useful than the previous one (40%) than the opposite (19%). Attendees of the 2001 edition were more satisfied (79% vs. 65%) with the 2002 edition than those who had not attended last year; they were also more likely to have already used some of the knowledge gained at the conference (57% vs.

32%). These data suggest that the 2002 conference attracted different types of participants, with different expectations.

EXHIBIT 3.2
Satisfaction ratings from the feedback card

Dimension	2002 % satisfied ¹	2002 average ²	2002 n
Quality of speakers	89%	85	1442
Topics covered	88%	84	1434
Pace of the session	82%	81	1411
Information and knowledge gained	79%	76	1403
Facilities	68%	69	1388
Handouts	52%	64	502

¹ Percent rating satisfied or very satisfied on a 5-point scale. "Don't knows" are excluded from the calculations.

² Average score after coding "very dissatisfied" as 0, "dissatisfied" as 25, "neutral" as 50, "satisfied" as 75 and "very satisfied" as 100.

Source: participant feedback card comments.

- The overall satisfaction scored obtained from the session feedback card is higher than that measured through the post-conference survey. It is commonly observed that satisfaction with specific events (here, individual sessions) is higher than satisfaction with more generic situations (here, the conference as a whole).

3.4 Satisfaction with working sessions

- According to feedback card data, satisfaction with individual sessions varied widely (from 66 to 92 based on the average score of the six ratings offered for each session).
- Three sessions obtain average ratings above 85 points:
 - Tool box 3: how do you maximize your marketing strategies? (92)
 - Plenary session: crisis management (90)
 - Workshop 4: demystifying the world of consultation (87)
- The highest marks went to the quality of speakers (89%), followed by the topics covered (88%) — in essence, the core of the conference.

EXHIBIT 3.3
Reactions to working sessions

	% rating "satisfied" or "very satisfied"						Average of the 6 scores	n
	Quality of speakers	Topics covered	Pace of the session	Info. and know- ledge gained	Facilities	Handouts		
Toolbox #3: maximize marketing	99%	99%	97%	98%	79%	66%	92	109
Plenary: crisis management	99%	99%	96%	99%	71%	54%	90	187
Wksp #4: world of consultation	93%	93%	93%	93%	89%	95%	87	41
Toolbox #2: comm. with youth	97%	96%	97%	88%	74%	34%	83	68
Wksp #1: FPT relations	93%	80%	93%	87%	87%	50%	82	15
Wksp #2: relations with media	94%	92%	94%	88%	69%	30%	81	55
ALL SESSIONS	89%	88%	82%	79%	68%	52%	78	1459
Armchair: September 11	91%	89%	80%	72%	69%	35%	77	197
Armchair: a team effort	90%	90%	86%	81%	57%	50%	75	198
Plenary: address from Clerk	88%	80%	82%	63%	69%	35%	75	103
Plenary: the new comm. policy	81%	87%	74%	70%	76%	51%	74	101
Plenary: GOC new comm. policy	80%	81%	73%	64%	66%	68%	71	166
Wksp #3: maximizing impact	86%	85%	64%	81%	45%	12%	71	76
Wksp #5: on-line for Canadians	80%	58%	65%	58%	85%	22%	68	20
Toolbox #1: how to modernize	77%	82%	56%	72%	70%	21%	68	62
Toolbox #4: internal comm.	75%	68%	56%	54%	70%	10%	66	61
All Tool box sessions	89%	89%	81%	82%	74%	43%	80	300
All plenary sessions	88%	88%	83%	77%	70%	58%	79	557
All workshops	89%	86%	80%	84%	67%	56%	77	207
All armchair sessions	90%	89%	83%	76%	63%	45%	76	395
April 23, 2002	87%	85%	80%	75%	64%	56%	75	674
April 24, 2002	91%	91%	83%	82%	72%	45%	81	785

Source: session feedback cards

- The availability and usefulness of handouts was the subject of criticisms. This is not uncommon in conference evaluation.
- The four types of events (plenaries, armchair sessions, workshops and tool box sessions) received similar average ratings. However, sessions involving more participants (plenaries and armchair sessions) received lower marks for the amount of information and knowledge gained than sessions involving fewer participants (toolbox sessions and workshops).
- Ratings for the second day of conference activities were better than ratings for the first day.

3.5 Results achieved

- Some 37% of participants achieved either completely (5%) or largely (32%) the purpose which brought them to the conference. An additional 37% indicated a moderate achievement.
- Project managers (63%) were more likely to have achieved their objective than communication staff (35%) and other participants (41%).
- The level of achievement was slightly higher for participants looking for networking (51%) than for participants focusses on professional development (36%) or keeping abreast of trends (36%).

EXHIBIT 3.4
Use of the information

	So far, have you used, in your work, any information presented at the Conference?	In the coming 12 months, how much of the information presented at the Conference do you expect to use in your work?
No/None	26%	6%
A little	34%	32%
Moderately	31%	40%
A lot	8%	16%
Don't know / no response	0%	5%
n	201	201

Source: participant survey.

- Four in ten (39%) participants have already used, in their work, a moderate or a large amount of the information presented at the conference, more than half (56%) of participants indicated that they expect to use a moderate or a large amount of it over the coming year.
- Short term utilization was highest among people involved in management and supervision (60%) and lowest among staff involved with event planning (33%).
- People outside the National Capital Region, program managers, people involved in management and people who attended for the networking opportunities expect to benefit more from the conference over the coming year than others, in particular communications staff.
- Individuals involved in management and supervision benefited most from the conference (score of 57) as did people looking for networking opportunities (63).

EXHIBIT 3.5
Use of the information presented at the conference

	Achieved their purpose at the conference (largely or completely)	Used info from the conference so far (moderately or a lot)	Expect to use info from the conference in the coming 12 months (moderately or a lot)	Average of these three results ratings
All participants	37%	39%	56%	44
AREAS OF WORK				
Integrated comm. and marketing strategies	39%	34%	48%	40
Events planning	35%	33%	57%	42
Project management and evaluation	36%	42%	52%	43
Strategic communication planning	34%	43%	55%	44
Management and supervision	43%	60%	67%	57
Writing and editing	39%	34%	51%	41
Media relations	41%	34%	55%	43
New media	23%	46%	50%	40
PURPOSE OF ATTENDANCE				
Keeping abreast of emerging trends	36%	40%	54%	43
Professional development	36%	34%	55%	42
Networking	56%	65%	69%	63

Source: participant survey.

3.6 Training needs

- Training needs are high, with more than half of participants indicating a need for a moderate or a large amount of training in eight of the eleven areas tested.
- Training in integrated communications and marketing strategies was mentioned most often (66%) followed by public opinion research.

EXHIBIT 3.6
Amount of training required

How much training do you consider you should get in each of the following categories in order to perform your job optimally?	Ratings on a scale from 1 to 4 (from no training at all to a large amount)			
	% rating "moderate" or "high"	Average rating (100 is "large")	Average NCR	Average outside the NCR
Integrated communications and marketing strategies	66%	61	60	63
Public opinion research	63%	61	56	69*
Strategic communications planning and advice	60%	55	52	61*
New media	57%	59	57	62
Marketing	56%	56	53	62*
Management and supervision	55%	52	51	53
Project management and evaluation	52%	53	51	57
Advertising	51%	52	52	53
Media relations	47%	46	43	53*
Events planning	35%	40	38	43
Writing and editing	25%	32	31	36
n	201	201	133	68

* The difference is statistically significant at the 0.05 level
 Source: participants' survey.

- Generally, participants who work outside the National Capital Region expressed more pressing needs for training, especially in the areas of public opinion research, strategic communications planning, marketing and media relations.
- Training needs, as expressed by conference participants, also vary according to the professional background (Exhibit 3.7).

EXHIBIT 3.7
Particular training needs

Areas where particular training needs were identified	
AREAS OF WORK	
Writing and editing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • management and supervision • strategic communications planning and advice • project management and evaluation • media relations • events planning
New media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strategic communications planning and advice • integrated strategies
Media relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • marketing
Events planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • management and supervision
PURPOSE OF ATTENDANCE	
Keeping abreast of trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • marketing
Professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strategic communications planning and advice • project management and evaluation • media relations • events planning

Source: participant survey; only the categories with particular needs were listed.

3.7 Exhibitors' perspective

- **Booths.** Some exhibitors felt left out by the spatial organization of the booths. Last year's organization — where the booths were placed in a square manner with the coffee tables in the centre — was preferred by most exhibitors because it allowed for greater visibility. Exhibitors facing the walls felt isolated from the crowd. Most exhibitors were satisfied with booth size and location.
- **Traffic.** Most exhibitors were satisfied with traffic at their booth, but a few said they expected more from this event. Most respondents said traffic was good during pauses but unstable otherwise: exhibitors encountered huge rushes during breaks and dead time during sessions. A small group thought traffic and contacts were poor.

All in all, though, contacts were qualified as very useful. The audience was perceived as well-targeted although the definition of who a communicator is was not clear to many. Exhibitors would like such a conference to be an opportunity to meet a larger number of decision-makers and managers in order to generate business.

- **Number of exhibitors.** The number of exhibitors was not raised as a big issue. Some prefer to be the sole representative of a specific market to increase business opportunities.
- **Facilities.** Temperature in the exhibition room was found to be adequate, although unstable at times. Only one exhibitor indicated having faced difficulties with the Internet connection because of hardware compatibility issues.
- **Costs.** Many respondent could not comment on costs. Among those who could, most found costs to be reasonable although extra charges for tables and chairs (contrary to other events) were confusing to exhibitors.
- **Contacts with other exhibitors.** Contacts with other exhibitors were appreciated. Links were established and business opportunities may emerge. Some exhibitors thought there were too many government exhibitors and not enough vendors.
- **Missing organizations.** The Canadian Public Relation Society and PCO were expected to be exhibitors.
- **Measure of success.** Exhibitors measure success in various ways:
 - the number of visitors to the booth;
 - the number of brochures handed out;
 - networking opportunities, the number of new contacts made;
 - the number of qualified leads and sales;
 - visibility;
 - increased awareness.
- **General satisfaction.** Most respondents indicated a high level of satisfaction with the conference organization. Most respondents said they would participate again. More specifically, out of nineteen, two

respondents indicated that they were “somewhat unlikely” to participate again; four, that future participation would be somewhat likely; and thirteen, that they would certainly participate again.

- **Suggestions.** Exhibitors presented the following suggestions for improvement:
 - since there are few exhibitors, offer a one-minute plenary presentation to each early in the Conference;
 - promote exhibitors to participants prior to the conference;
 - provide a list of the participants to the exhibitors to facilitate follow-up;
 - organize overlaps in the schedule of conferences so the traffic is steadier;
 - send the schedule to exhibitors sooner;
 - hold the conference in different regions from year to year;
 - ensure more promotion of exhibitors;
 - expand the horizon, e.g., include the marketplace in the exhibit area;
 - have more private sector booths.

3.8 ***Towards another conference***

- Likelihood to attend another conference in 2003 is fairly high: 76% of participants indicated that they would very likely (39%) or likely (37%) attend another conference.
- Likelihood to recommend attendance to colleagues depicted similar patterns.
- Participants looking for networking opportunities were more likely to return and to recommend.
- E-mail promotion and word of mouth were equally important in publicizing the conference (44% and 42% respectively). The Web site wasn't an important source of information.

- Overall, the conference appears to still need "push" promotion in the some electronic form since it cannot rely on a regular audience for its Web site.

EXHIBIT 3.8
Method of information used

How did you find out about the Communicators' Conference 2002?	% of participants
Promotional material through e-mail	44%
Word of mouth and colleagues	42%
Other	10%
Promotional material other than in e-mail	2%
Web site	2%
Don't know / no response	0%
n	201
Source: participants' survey.	

Chapter 4

RECOMMENDATIONS

The observations made in this study suggest the following key recommendations.

- Conference organizers should more clearly delineate the target audience for the conference and for individual conference events. Communications regarding the conference should then market events according to the audience targeted. This would ensure a better management of participant expectations.
- Participants expect to be exposed to novel ideas which will enable change in their practice. Meanwhile, they also want the applicability of these ideas to be clearly demonstrated to them, in the context of their work environments. Hence, a future conference should be both cutting-edge in the themes explored and pragmatic in the treatment of these themes.
- While consultations such as the one conducted in the fall of 2001 are important to ensuring the relevance of such a conference, a balance must be stricken between long-standing issues and short term-concerns. Organizers of future conferences may want to balance issues which are

core to the communications profession along with those that are more time-sensitive.

- Participants value the opportunity to make contacts. Organizers should be attentive to maintain occasions for networking and to carve new ones.
- While the concept of the Market Place was appreciated, the delivery needs adjustments. Participants suggested that more space is required, better sound arrangements are necessary and seating arrangements must be improved.
- As of now, "push" promotion is required; the Conference has not built a body of visitors to its Web site.