

Webinar Q&A:

Where Perception Meets Reality: The state of association communications and recommendations to improve

Q: What is the best way to develop a content strategy in light of the information covered in *Association Adviser's* 2016 Communications Benchmarking Survey and Report, as well as the webinar?

A: The first step is surveying your members to see what they want, and that is as simple as working with an outside team to complete the survey or using online tools such as SurveyMonkey. Dig deep to discover what kind of content your members want as well as their preferred method of correspondence. If your members prefer email, you'll want to communicate with them primarily through their inboxes, but you'll also want to balance that out with other types of media.

The [Take AIM approach](#) is great. Make sure you have an opportunity to assess, integrate and measure what you're sending to members on a regular basis. Once you have completed the survey, I recommend getting your executive director, marketing, communications and membership teams—at the very least—together for a day of brainstorming. Then have your communications team compile that information into a plan outlining what vehicles you have in place, what vehicles you may want to add and who is charge of what. If you don't have existing programs for this purpose, simply search the Web for examples of "content calendars." You'll find tons of templates that are easy to modify and implement.

Next, focus on the frequency of your communications, considering different social media options. A planned content calendar will help ensure you are not inundating people with correspondence. Be sure to write out the strategy and then follow it as closely as possible. Things will come up, such as urgent legislative updates that need to be shared, and that's OK. Every month you should review your email open rates and click-through rates to see what your engagement looks like. If you have a digital magazine, you can identify what stories were the most popular with readers that month, and you can see how long your members viewed different online platforms.

As you make your plan for the following months and/or quarters, aim to do more of what is working based on your results, and less of what is not.

Q: How should associations encourage members to fill out surveys? In regard to the validity of responses, should associations “weed” through them based on how honest they seem?

A: It is interesting—you will have some association groups that just can’t hit that 10 percent validity rate and other associations with members who act as though it is their job to take surveys. If the association has the budget, a drawing for a \$100 or \$500 Amazon gift card can spur participation. The better the incentive, the more engagement you will get.

It also helps to make sure participants understand that their voice counts. Say, “We are doing a survey because we want to hear from you. Your voice matters, and we want to provide you with what you want. We are here to help you!” Let them feel a sense of ownership in the association and use communications channels to get them excited.

Keep your survey simple. This can be difficult, because you want really specific, drilled-down results, which are hard to achieve with fewer than 25 or 30 questions—but do your best. Ask your association’s champions to call their friends and get some of your more engaged members to participate and tell their friends.

In regard to the honesty question, surveys are the best way to go, because feedback is anonymous. You might receive responses that are over the top in the blunt department, and that might not be what you, as the executive director, want to hear. But you should worry most about the people who do not say anything. Overall, I believe that people are pretty honest on surveys. They are really good tools for collecting the feedback you don’t always want to hear, but need to have to make improvements.

Q: Do you think it is better to segment members by newness to the association, where they are in their career, or both?

A: When you talk about “young professionals,” you almost have to say “new to the profession.” Individuals who make a career change may not be “young professionals,” but may fit into the “new to the profession” category. You have to make that distinction. So, I would say segment by both, until you hear otherwise. I project that segmentation is going to become a necessity, and not just something that associations with a large communications staff can take on. I think people are really going to start to weed out what they don’t want to see, so associations will have to be more careful about what they are sending members.

Q: If you are starting a new publication, what type of budget allocation should you make for staff, printing, online and distribution costs?

A: It all depends on whether you plan to send the publication to all of your members or to your members *and* prospective members—for example, if you have a large database of individuals you’re courting for membership. If you’re going to send the publication to 5,000 members, you need a quote tied to printing costs. You’ll also need to factor in whether you’re going to have your current staff produce the content or hire someone for that role.

That doesn’t necessarily mean starting from scratch and writing all the content. You might have members or product and/or service suppliers who can write, and you just have to make it very clear to them that you’re not printing advertorials. They may be the expert on a particular topic, so you may need to rely on them for content that you then massage so it doesn’t sound too “salesy.” Set very specific guidelines for contributors.

You'll also need to determine how large the publication will be and how much content you will need. If you have a good supplier network (often identified by the number of exhibitors at your conferences) you should consider reaching out to a third-party provider in the association communications marketplace. They may be able to offset printing and production costs through advertising sales—meaning that a robust publication may cost you nothing.

Q: Do you have any advice on how to get more advertisers into a publication?

A: You need a value proposition, meaning a strong media kit that outlines the facts and figures of your industry. Why would a specific company want to be in front of your members? Specifically, for example, why would a tire company want to be in front of your trucking association members? Provide demographics about your membership. Supplier members and their advertising agencies want that data, because they want to know who the audience is. Define your membership and their buying power. Associations and professional societies also can consider locking in a sponsor for their magazine, rather than advertisers.

Sell the power of your association and highlight how you're reaching a targeted audience compared to a generic B2B publication, where information on subscribers and what makes them worthwhile to advertisers may be unclear. An association has the ability to place an ad in front of a very elite group, and should use that to their advantage. This backing can help in larger ways as well, such as supporting the association's legislative initiatives.

If you have further questions, please contact Jill Andreu at jandreu@naylor.com.

*To download **Association Adviser's 2016 Communications Benchmarking Survey and Report**, which data from this webinar was produced from, please click [here](#). The survey platform is available year-round, so don't hesitate and see how you stack up against your industry peers [here](#).*

Please note that the answers contained in this document reflect the views of Naylor Association Solutions, and are not necessarily the same views held by all industry professionals.



October 2016