



Future Focus Trends in membership marketing

**Association Forum
of Chicagoland**

10 South Riverside

Suite 800

Chicago, IL 60606

312-924-7000

312-924-7100 fax

www.associationforum.org

By John E. Kasper, PhD, CAE

In this day and age of shrinking member retention and dwindling or stagnant new member growth, how you market membership in your association is critical. In this article, we will try to define the parameters of a solid marketing process, identify trends that we have seen within that framework, and briefly discuss some case examples of how the principles we suggest have worked in real life.

The first phase that membership marketing efforts need to address is understanding who the association's members are and what their needs may be. It is important to develop an objective set of data defining the association's members, their needs, and evaluating through their input a "basket of benefits."

The use of online surveying tools such as Zoomerang and SurveyMonkey is driving this trend. Many associations are beginning to develop credible sources of data from which they can draw a better understanding of their membership and their needs.

Another trend in membership marketing is the growing understanding of the impact of generational differences within associations' memberships. We need to consider how the generation in which the association's members belong affects the way that they receive, assimilate, and react to our communication efforts, including the message we wish to communicate, the way we communicate it, and the media with which we communicate.

Matching missions to member needs

Next is understanding the mission of the organization in the context of who your members are and what they need. A growing number of associations are asking that very question, trying to determine if their mission is still consistent in today's context, and whether adjustments need to be made to that mission in some way.

Then associations must define the message(s) that will be used to help members and

potential members understand the purpose of the association. It is important to communicate what the association can do for them, and what involvement in the association will bring members.

Once the message(s) are defined, the next phase in the overall membership marketing process is choosing the best media with which to communicate that message in an efficacious fashion.

Remember, it is important to consider the way in which different cohorts of your membership receive, assimilate, and react to messages, so you may want to evaluate your message with what the literature has begun to identify as key differences in the generations within your population. Of course, you will also need to evaluate key differences between subgroups of your membership based on the demographic differences within those specific groups.

At some associations there is a trend towards attempting to substitute electronic communication for more traditional media (paper, for example) across the board. And, why not, you might ask. It is difficult to pick up a professional journal these days which is not touting the virtues of the new technology, the ease with which one can use it, and the long term "cost efficiency" of its use. However, is electronic communication the sine qua non for us, as association professionals, in our pursuit of ways to better market our communities?

While electronic communication will likely occupy an important part in our near and long term marketing efforts, we would urge caution at its wholesale substitution for some of the more traditional marketing efforts.

Further, while the literature suggests that the majority of "Baby Boomers" (born between 1946 and 1964) are relatively comfortable with technology, it also suggests that these like to use a variety of association networking and information venues, from print to electronic.

Be mindful of generational differences

A good example of how generational differences potentially can affect marketing decisions can be seen in two of our clients. The first is a mature organization with a fairly stable membership base. This association has a significant number of members in the "Silent Generation" and at the more mature end of the "Baby Boom" cohort. It faces the issue of how to best maximize service to its current membership base while at the same time trying to develop ways to entice younger prospects to join. It has decided to continue to use some of the more traditional methods of membership marketing (brochures, mailings, peer-to-peer networking), while at the same beginning to weave in electronic communication methodologies (blast e-mails and listservs) at a more controlled pace.

The second association client has a much younger membership base that is far less stable. It came to us with a retention rate of approximately 26.8%. Working with this association, we have increased its retention rate almost 45% in 18 months. There are those within the association that believed electronic communication was the only way to go with the population of members that typically joined the association. However, in working with the association, we found that even though electronic communication was a much more important vehicle in this case, a solid mix of written and electronic marketing and communications was the better approach, with more emphasis on the electronic side for this group

The next phase of the marketing process is to determine good ways to obtain feedback in regard to the efforts. Of course, the most telling way to measure those efforts is to take a look at the number of members in the association.

However, associations are beginning to use technology effectively to help complement their efforts to retrieve such feedback. They are using the online tools alluded to earlier in the article; electronic "suggestion boxes" on their Web sites; e-blast communications, etc.

Hopefully we won't see a slavish devotion to only the electronic, with significant reductions in the use of voice-to-voice or face-to-face opportunities to market the

association and receive vital feedback to its efforts. While being cognizant of the importance of electronic tools associations must remember that they are about interpersonal relationships, a feeling of cohesion and belonging, and a need to communicate with our peers. In the future, associations must remember those guiding principles as they use more and more elaborate tools to market the association to its members.

The final phase of the marketing process is to use that feedback to reevaluate all that you have done, and ensure that the association's marketing efforts are consistent with the existing context.

John E. Kasper, PhD, CAE, is president of Solutions for Associations, Inc., an association management consulting firm in the Chicagoland area. Dr. Kasper may be reached at (630) 351-8669 or via e-mail at jkasper@solutions-for-assoc.com.

Copyright © 2009 Association Forum. All Rights Reserved.