



Association communications in the new millennium

Association Forum of Chicagoland

10 South Riverside
Suite 800

Chicago, IL 60606

312-924-7000

312-924-7100 fax

www.associationforum.org

By Greg Jiede and John Kasper, Ph.D., CAE

The Internet has emerged as a viable and cost-effective communication channel for associations—not only improving communication to and from members, but also facilitating member- to-member communication. When used appropriately, Web and e-mail based communications aid associations in their quest to provide "binding member benefits," as well as work toward fostering a sense of community among their membership.

Numerous strategies and tools are being used by associations to enhance communications and, certainly, there are common pitfalls any organization should strive to avoid as well.

Enhancing communication to members

Among other things, associations serve as a comprehensive knowledge resource for their members. In fact, members commonly measure the value of an association by the quality and quantity of information offered by the organization. Associations are quickly adopting new technologies that allow them to increase the amount, type, and timeliness of communications.

Becoming a news resource

Many associations dedicate a portion of their Web site to informing members of the latest association and industry news. Today's Web-based applications enable associations to regularly update their news items and calendar listings through easy-to-use Web forms. Using content management and portal solutions, press releases and articles can be copied from any word processor, pasted, and posted with a click of a button. The cost and delay of using an HTML markup expert is eliminated. Plus, some applications even archive listings based on expiration dates or other user-regulated settings. The archives then become searchable, historical documents on the Web site.

Conference events and information

Similar to the news center, event calendars can be quickly updated to display upcoming committee meetings, regional/national gatherings, conferences, or educational seminars.

Chapters, committees, and other authorized users can add events with "button-click" approval by staff to maintain content control. Associations are using these versatile applications to share news of industry events as well as promote attendance at conferences and seminars. Registration can be handled online along with event reservation and real-time seat availability tracking.

Be alert to the passing of time. Communicating time-sensitive content requires your commitment to keeping up with the times. Though technology can ease maintenance of this area by archiving articles and events automatically, you are still responsible for locating relevant news and events items to post. If you fail to keep these areas current, you risk not being relevant to your members.

Broadcast e-mails

Associations are discovering that e-mail is a more efficient and cost-effective means of communicating with members. Regular mailings are being supplemented by broadcast e-mail lists that transmit member news, legislative updates, and urgent bulletins quickly. HTML e-mail can include graphics and hyperlinks to the association Web site resulting in more content-rich communications than older, text-based e-mail.

Be alert to your membership's technological limitations. Yes, believe it or not, some of your members may not have e-mail or regular access to a computer. Be aware that you could isolate some members by not making alternative provisions for them to receive vital communications.

Be alert to the limited lifespan of an e-mail address. E-mail addresses are frequently changed or discontinued. To use e-mail effectively, actively maintain your e-mail list.

Be alert to being mistaken for a spammer. Watch the frequency of communications to members. More is not always better. On the same note, show sensitivity for your members' time; be brief and to the point in your e-mails.

Be alert to legal issues. Stay apprised of legislative efforts to regulate broadcast mail. At least 22 states have regulations pertinent to broadcast e-mail and there are seven federal bills pending. All require "opt-out" measures, while some require "opt-in" and other permission-based regulations.

Migrating paper-based publications online

In an increased effort to share professional or industry knowledge, associations are creating online libraries of current and past newsletters or journals. Some are publishing online what were once paper-based communications. Members benefit from this easy access to information, and associations can experience a reduction in the operating costs. Paper hard copies of books/journals can be converted to digital files placed on the Web and key word indexed for search capabilities. One association has placed more than 10,000 volumes of past journals online with a 3.2 million key word search index.

Be alert to your membership's technological limitations. Make sure the electronic format of your documents is accessible by your membership and doesn't require special software/skills to view. Be conscious of the size of your documents; members with slow Internet connections may become frustrated with long download times.

Be alert to the individual needs of your membership. Though electronic distribution and storage of documents is advantageous in most circumstances, if you intend to eventually phase out paper-based communications, this transition must happen over time so that the membership has ample time to adjust.

Be alert to your members' need to find information quickly. If you implement an online document archive, make sure your Web services provider incorporates an efficient search function so members have easy access to the knowledge they need.

Be alert to the respective communication benefits of the Web versus print. The Web creates expectations of fast, immediate, and usually brief information, along with the ability to scan and search quickly. Print allows more depth of information and more flexibility in layout. In addition, some associations are moving daily stories and information to the Web, then reviewing traffic statistics to identify the most interesting items. This knowledge then guides future story development as well as determines what content translates to their print magazines or journals.

Educating your members on e-learning

Due to reduced registration caused by travel budgets, an inability for members to get away from their jobs, and general concern about travel since 9/11, a number of associations are using Webinars, Webcasts, and other electronic means to distribute

educational information.

Creating online versions of presentations, meetings, seminars, and classes members can access from the safety and convenience of their home or office eliminates both the cost and risk associated with travel. These can be real-time events with live audio/Web slides, streaming audio/video, or digital recordings distributed through the Web or CD-ROM.

Be alert to legal concerns. Make sure all speakers' legal releases are reviewed to permit use of this technology.

Be alert to budgets to offset possible production or streaming costs. Consider creating policies that maximize the revenue stream for these materials.

Be alert to the availability of online testing/validation. If CEUs or other verification of "viewing" is required, look into online testing and validation methods to determine if they meet association criteria.

Enhancing communication from your members

Communication is a two-way street. As vital as it is for associations to communicate to members, it is equally important to provide the means for members to communicate with the association. Placing "mail-to's" in strategic places on a Web site allows members to communicate with the click of a button.

Remember to keep it personal. If possible, try to identify the e-mail recipient by name so members know they are communicating with an actual person.

It's also important for associations to create realistic expectations of how soon the member will receive a response and ensure these expectations are fulfilled. Generally, an association should not take longer than one working day to respond to simple inquiries. If the response to the inquiry is complicated, the association should provide an initial response indicating a realistic time frame in which the members should expect an answer.

Surveying your membership

Many associations survey their membership annually in order to keep abreast of member concerns, interests, and priorities. Often these surveys are paper-based and require hand-processing of results. Soliciting member opinions and feedback online through a Web-based survey reduces postage costs and frees up internal resources previously dedicated

to manual survey creation, distribution, and tabulation.

Be careful not to ask for any information that could be considered too personal or an invasion of privacy. Second, if the survey is too long, the chance your busy members will complete it is less likely. Finally, make certain you interpret the reported statistics with appropriate assumptions and statistical measures.

Providing member service

Answering repetitive, routine member and/or public inquiries absorbs staff time and increases administrative overhead. Posting answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) on your Web site can eliminate frustration experienced by both your association and its members. Content management applications allow authorized staff to post answers quickly—using only a Web browser. Organize the information in a helpful way; use "jump to's" (hyperlink questions directly to their answers), and incorporate site search utilities that help members find answers fast.

However, don't fall into the trap of using this as a substitute for human contact. It should be viewed as a supplementary service, designed to benefit your members, allowing them quick access to simple answers.

Increasing communication between members

Bridging the distance between members using interactive tools enables them to share information and experiences. This creates greater value to association membership. An association is a community and, like all communities, benefits from the active involvement of its members.

Online discussion groups

Implementing online discussion forums in which members can regularly exchange views and ideas allows members to benefit from an assimilation of association knowledge, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Many associations host multiple forums with designated topics where members can give voice to their opinions, air their grievances, or find answers to their questions. The benefit to the association is that the forums offer an inside view about member concerns, helping them make more informed decisions on behalf of their membership.

E-mail discussion groups

Similar to a broadcast e-mail list, listservs allow members to send one e-mail to a designated address and have it forwarded to all subscribers of the listserv. Like forums, listservs usually have pre-determined topics. For example, a medical association might implement a listserv for emergency care providers and the topics addressed would be those of interest to emergency room staff and paramedics. Keep an eye on monitored versus unmonitored forums and listservs. Associations must decide whether they are going to monitor the postings to listservs and forums prior to their distribution in order to eliminate the chance of unprofessional communications or conduct.

Another area of caution is listserv etiquette. The association, through its volunteer members, staff, and legal advisors, should provide members with a straightforward, understandable description of what is and what is not acceptable behavior for these communications.

Member, chapter, or vendor locators

Whether you are a local or national association, your members are geographically distributed. Some associations have their membership databases online allowing members to search for colleagues, chapters, or vendors by location. This increases communication among members, and also gives them a chance to network regarding work or employment. A number of associations have created two lines of inquiries into their databases; one for the public, where search results include only basic information; and a second secure search for members with more detailed results.

Be cautious about protecting member privacy. Don't list any member information that may be too personal to be displayed online. Members should have the ability to "opt-out" of the listing or request that only specified information be displayed.

Decide who should have access to the information. Usually the best place for an online membership directory is in a members-only area of the Web site.

Be sure to keep membership records up-to-date. It should come as no surprise that members become frustrated if their attempts to reach other members are unsuccessful due to outdated contact information.

Once basic address information is up on the Web, it may be misused. To deter this,

consider controlling the way search results display. Create a generic results list first, where users click on specific names to display additional information. This discourages unauthorized individuals from collecting member data for the sole purpose of creating mailing lists.

Sharing employment opportunities

Especially applicable in today's economy where employment can be tenuous, associations are winning member loyalty by aiding in members' searches for employment and/or helping member companies find job candidates. With an online searchable job listing service, job seekers and potential employers receive universal, just-in-time access to a database of current employment opportunities. This valuable member resource can boost membership by attracting new members who want to tap into this qualified resource.

You must commit your organization to maintaining this resource. Old postings of jobs no longer available are of no benefit to anyone. Make sure your job bank application provides you with a means to update this area in a timely manner. Many solutions include automatic e-mail reminders sent periodically to users asking them to either renew or delete their listing.

What's right for you?

As you can see, there are many ways to use the Web/Internet to improve or enhance member communications—especially if you avoid common errors. And though every association is different, most can benefit from the technologies detailed in this article.

Gregory E. Jiede (top) is president of Synergistic Networks, Inc. in Elmhurst, IL. He may be reached at (630) 993-0460 or gjiede@syn.net. John E. Kasper, Ph.D, CAE is president of Solutions for Associations, Inc. in Bloomingdale, IL. He may be reached at (630) 351-8669 or jkasper@solutions-for-assoc.com.

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