

Effective Association Communications: Plan, Focus and Achieve Results

Association Management Competency Standards developed by the Canadian Society of Association Executives (CSAE) call for association executives to:

- Understand various types of communications and processes used.
- Seek out and listen to messages from members.
- Evaluate current member communications efforts and develop, implement and manage a member communications plan.

Jim Pealow, CAE, managing partner of Association Management, Consulting & Evaluation Services, says some associations fail to set specific objectives and allocate resources to their communications efforts. Pealow believes that failure to recognize communications as a distinct activity puts an association at risk. Some associations approach their communications activities in a helter-skelter fashion, placing little focus on ensuring their strategies are aligned with association objectives. A communications plan, in Pealow's view, is an absolute must.

It is important to remember that communication is the tool used to build positive relationships with stakeholders. It is a means to an end. A formal communications plan requires associations to identify stakeholders, and prioritize those stakeholders in terms of their importance to the association. For each key stakeholder the association needs to identify their desired strategic positioning with the stakeholder, select the messages that will help achieve that positioning, determine the devices/techniques/practices that will be used to convey messages, identify performance indicators to measure activity, and, determine frequency. "Having a formal communications plan," says Pealow, "will increase the chances of success."

CSAE's Association Management Education Program (AME) reinforces Pealow's point of view, and proposes six reasons why associations should establish a communications plan.

- **Objective Setting:** Planning helps an association clearly define objectives toward which communication/relationship-building activities should be directed. An important aspect of the objective-setting process is to achieve consensus on what the priorities are and what can be achieved given resources and other factors.
- **Message Development:** Planning also helps an association decide what key messages it wants to convey.
- **Audience Definition/Segmentation:** The planning process compels association staff to define what messages they want to deliver to what audience segment.
- **Strategy/Tactic Development:** The planning process also encourages discussion about the kind of strategies/tactics required to ensure that key messages are delivered effectively to various audience segments in a manner consistent with overall program objectives.

- **Resource Needs Identification:** Planning helps to identify the kind of human and financial resources required to execute strategies and tactics in support of communication objectives.
- **Effectiveness Measuring:** Finally, planning allows for the development of an agreed-upon approach that an association will utilize to assess performance in meeting its communication objectives.

Retail Council of Canada has identified three key stakeholder groups: internal (members and non-members); consumers and the public in general; and, governments and others (including universities and other educational institutions). According to Diane J. Brisebois, CAE, President and CEO, Retail Council of Canada, a wide range of benefits will accrue to associations who consistently deliver a clear and concise message, in an appropriate and timely manner, to each identified association stakeholder. In addition to strengthening and promoting the association's cause, an effectively managed budget is achievable as messages are targeted to specific stakeholders rather than the entire world. "And," notes Brisebois, "well targeted messages can be easily measured."

Measuring performance is a critical element in any association communications plan, yet it is often overlooked. In these days of dwindling resources and continued calls to "do more for less", it is imperative that associations know how effective their strategies have been. What communications approaches work the best in your environment? What approaches are the most cost-effective? Are your messages getting the results you intended?

Retail Council of Canada has a communications department consisting of a vice-president and three other staff members, whose day-to-day activities are guided by a clear mission and a detailed set of objectives. The department has responsibility for press releases and press conferences, publication of magazines and newsletters, web site design and content, and promotional endeavours. Many associations in Canada don't have the benefit of a communications department - the typical CEO in the association sector shoulders the responsibility for actualizing association ideas, intentions and plans through their communication initiatives. "In the small association environment," Brisebois suggests, "choose a staff person with good writing and marketing skills to serve as gatekeeper for everything that leaves your association office."

A communications plan may well result in the identification of competencies currently not available to the association executive. Pealow says, "If there is a competency gap, it is the responsibility of the association executive to acquire the required knowledge or skill for the organization. This can be accomplished through engaging in relevant learning, allocating an individual to the task who possesses the desired competencies, or acquiring outside expertise."

Executives in smaller associations need not be overwhelmed - there are many resources available to help you ultimately win with words. The Canadian Society of Association Executives has a Best Practice Exchange on their web site (www.associationplace.com) - the site provides communications practices that can be used to determine how your association measures up

against other associations. Network with other association executives and use benchmarking. "You do not have to reinvent the wheel," says Pealow.

Brisebois also urges association executives to conduct an audit of their existing communications vehicles - examine everything from simple letters to publications and promotional pieces. Look for duplication. Look for weakness. Determine where your money was spent and what return you experienced for that investment. Be honest. Confirm that your communications efforts actually reached your target stakeholders - don't extend yourself if it isn't truly in your association's interest to do so.

CSAE plans on developing templates and resources for specific association functions, including communications, in the near future - a wide range of new resources will be added to the web site resulting in easy access.

Bob Hamp, CSAE's Communications Manager, is responsible for internal and external communications and media relations. In addition to his day-to-day responsibilities at CSAE, he is a willing and able advisor to CSAE's membership. "If any CSAE member needs advice, a sounding board, or information to assist with their communications practices," says Hamp, "I'd be more than willing to help." Don't hesitate to call CSAE if you're struggling with an issue.

When evaluating your association's communications activity, put yourself in the shoes of your targeted stakeholders, keeping in mind that the average Canadian is bombarded with over 2,300 promotional messages of some nature each and every day. Which of the 2,300 messages you receive each day do you absorb and respond to?

"Too much crap lands on people's desks," says Brisebois, "most of which is untargeted and poorly written." Retail Council of Canada has found that their most successful communications initiatives have been timely, to the point, smartly written (in as few words as possible) and get to the point in the first paragraph. Again, if your message is not directed to the appropriate public, it will not, no matter how creative and succinct it is, achieve your objective.

"Know your customer before you write or send anything," states Brisebois. "That's the key!"

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